

A FATED-MATES CAPTIVE ROMANCE



GIFTED  
TO  
THE BEAST

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
ALISON AIMES



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**GIFTED TO THE BEAST: A  
FATED-MATES CAPTIVE  
ROMANCE**

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PROTECTIVE MONSTERS IN LOVE

ALISON AIMES

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## GIFTED TO THE BEAST BLURB

*Sometimes it's the monster who saves the girl—after he captures her, of course.*

For centuries, I've been dreaming of revenge.

Trapped in a frozen realm I can't escape, I'm a monstrous beast forced to do someone else's bidding.

Until one day, I'm set free.

Liberated by an innocent female who, in danger and alone, summons me, unknowingly unleashing me on her world... and her.

So I make her mine.

She thinks I'm a monster. She's not wrong.

But sometimes it takes a monster to vanquish an even darker nightmare.

Now I just need to convince her our demons are a perfect match—before I'm dragged back to my icy prison and I lose her forever.

*Gifted to the Beast: A Fated-Mates Captive Romance* is a dark fantasy romance novella with and a protective, possessive

hero who happens to be a monster. The story also has a not-so-innocent heroine, action, demons and angels, unexpected twists, and a dash of humor. There are also references to Christmas and the kind of spice that will put you on Santa's naughty list.

“If you find someone whose demons play well with yours, do whatever it takes to make her your own.”

-Klawz

“Not every damsel fears the monster; sometimes, he’s her only hope.”

-Holly

## H<sup>OLLY</sup>

“YOU’VE BEEN NAUGHTY, LITTLE ONE.” His icy rasp sends a rush of heat between my thighs. “That means you don’t get to sit on my lap like a good girl and tell me what you want.”

Big hands—clawed hands—flip me over, positioning me on my belly. “Instead, you’ll take your pleasure *over* my lap.” A massive palm squeezes my bottom. “I’ll be the one choosing what wishes of yours to grant—and when.”

Panting, I shift across his hard thighs, the soft fur against my nipples so decadent it makes me moan. My wish list narrows to one item: *possess me*.

“Open those thighs wider.”

I do as I’m told.

“Good little one. As pretty as a snow crystal. You melt in my palm just like one, too.” His calloused finger trails over the lips of my pussy to the crease of my ass. “I’ll have you dripping over my fingers and cock soon enough.”

I shiver. In shame. In pleasure. In fear.



He's so big—and the rod prodding against my belly is as massive as the rest of him.

There's every chance he'll rip me apart.

*I don't care.*

I want him to splay me wide, shape me just for him. Make me his vessel and use me as he wishes.

The pad of his thumb circles my aching clit. “Fucking sunlight after a long solstice.” The finger of his other hand presses against my rosebud. “Let me in.”

“Please.” I jerk in his hold, need surging through me. It might be sinful, but I want it so badly.

“Yes. Beg, little tribute. Beg for the sharp bite of the gift only I can give.”

Heaven help me, I do beg.

I want every dark, depraved boon he promises to bestow.

He's raw and hard. Primal and animalistic. Primitive even. Yet, he somehow makes me feel merry, bright, and treasured.

The scent of frost and pine, of wild forests and icy tundras, of pleasure and power beyond my wildest imagination surrounds him, lighting me up like a Christmas tree and leaving me glowing with need.

“You please me, little one.” Wings sheltering us from view, his finger surges deeper, stroking the tight channel while his other rubs my clit. “Once you've shown me you can take your chastisement like a naughty, good girl, I'll put you on all fours and unwrap you like the sweetest of gifts. Use my tongue, claws, tail, and fangs—”

I bolt upright.

Back pressed to the flimsy headboard, I clutch the rough sheets while blinking red and green holiday lights on the motel sign flash across the walls.

I had the dream again.

Only this time, it felt so real.

I grip the motel sheets tighter, my nipples pebbled against my thin t-shirt, my simple white cotton panties soaked.

My skin tingles as if the imprint of those huge hands lingers, the soft brush of fur against my belly softer than any silk. My core aches from the deep, rumbling heat of a commanding voice that left me helpless to do anything but obey.

Except that voice is too deep to be human. Those hands larger than any man's. Those claws... straight out of a horror movie.

Part beast, part man, and one hundred percent arrogant monster, the creature in my twisted fantasy has massive horns that jut from his skull and curve upward. He also has leathery ears, the snout of a bull, the chiseled upper body of a man covered by the softest reindeer pelt, the tail of a beast, the thick, furred thighs and hooves of the devil, and crooked, bat-like wings that span as wide as he is long.

And he insists I'm his. His blood sacrifice. His gift.

Yes, the stress of my current mess has officially tipped me over the edge.

*Bam! Bam!*

The flimsy door to my motel shakes, the doorknob rattling. "You in there, little prey. It's Santa, ready to cum in your chimney."

They found me.

Thank goodness I slept in my clothes.

I shrink back against the headboard as the chair I shoved beneath the lock totters on its front legs.

Crude laughter echoes outside.

I recognize one of those voices: the disgusting Clyde from the bus.

“Come out, come out. It’s time to spread white Christmas magic—all over your virgin titties and ass.”

I flinch at the crudity of his words.

Another deep voice chimes in: “I can’t wait to light you up on my big tree.”

Finally, I find my voice. “Leave me alone!”

Laughter echoes back. “Sure. We’ll leave you alone. Right after you give us a little ho-ho-ho holiday cheer—and that virgin pussy to bloody on our dicks.”

“I’ll call the police.”

This time there’s no laughter. Just sneers. “Try it. Unless they’ve got a sled and fucking reindeer, you’ll be fucked six ways to Sunday before they even shovel off the sidewalk.”

I press my lips tight and force back tears.

They’re right.

A massive ice storm has paralyzed the city.

No one is coming to help me.

No matter how much I wish there was a protector about to come down the chimney and grant my wishes, there is no such person in my life.

All I can hope for is to survive and endure. Like always.

Still, I try. “Just leave. Please.”

“Oh, you’ll please us all alright, girlie. All night long.”

*Bam!* The door bows in.

I scramble off the bed, wishing with all my heart I’d never gotten on the bus this morning, foolishly believing I could follow my dreams.

Because, instead, I’m about to have the worst Christmas of my life.



# H<sup>OLLY</sup>

*EIGHT HOURS EARLIER....*

I PRESS TREMBLING fingers to the glass and wipe at the condensation, revealing a smudged blur of white-covered buildings and jacketed crowds whizzing by the bus window.

I'm almost there.

The big city.

Okay, it's more of a mid-size Kansas town, but to a farm girl like me, it's huge.

The start of a new adventure. A new year. The chance to figure out who I am and what I want. All my possible futures as fresh and exciting as the falling snow and the smell of pine in the air.

This is going to be my best Christmas yet.

I can just feel it.

At least that's what I tell myself, even if there's a small pit in my belly, the pungent scent of overcrowded bodies, tuna, and stale cologne around me, and my nerves bounce inside me faster than the shocks on the old, highway bus.

It doesn't help that the sight of the tall buildings only underscores how insignificant I am in comparison. How untethered. Alone.

I smooth my pleated white and red plaid skirt over my thighs and remind myself I'm fine on my own.

It's been that way my whole life.

"Sure looks nice and clean when it snows." A big body plops down in the seat next to me, crowding close.

Startled, I shuffle to the side.

My new seatmate doesn't seem to notice.

"All the filth hidden out of sight." Two blackened teeth greet me as he grins, though the laughter never reaches his eyes. "But we know it's there, don't we?"

"I-I guess so." I smile and nod to be polite.

Mr. Joseph brought me up to be courteous to my elders, and this wiry male with pockmarked skin, cold gray eyes, and the start of a comb-over is at least twenty years my senior.

"You sure are a pretty thing. Such golden hair. You look just like an angel, except so"—his gaze flickers to the thin cardigan sweater I'm wearing—"ripe."

I huddle deeper into the wall and subtly hunch over. The sweater is from a few seasons ago, and probably too small, but the Josephs' funerals were expensive and there wasn't a lot left by the time the bank, funeral parlor, and tax men finished picking over what was left.

Still, I don't know what to say in return.

I want to be charitable like I was taught, but I get the sense this male is not a good person.

His nails are dirty, his shirt stained, the chain around his neck more green than gold, but it's the way he's looking at me that makes me feel weirdest of all.

He's watching me the same way some of the farm hands did before Mr. Joseph chased them off with a shotgun and declared we'd work the land ourselves.

That was around the same time he gave me a long lecture about being a good girl and staying off Santa's naughty list by keeping my legs closed and my face turned upward.

I honestly never understood what one thing had to do with the other, but I did my best to follow his instructions.

It was the least I could do. After all, the Josephs took me in when I was a baby.

I was found at the church sometime during the winter wrapped in a blanket. Since they had no children of their own and were looking for some extra hands to help with chores, they volunteered to foster me and, as soon as I was able, I pitched in as best I could. In return, they fed and clothed me.

If I'd occasionally wished for more, well... that was a secret between Santa and me.

It doesn't matter now, anyway.

At nineteen, I'm on my own and *finally* going to see the places I've always dreamed of exploring. Hopefully, along the way, I'll find myself.

"You meeting up with someone, angel?" The stranger leans closer, the rancid heat of his breath hitting my cheek.

My mouth goes dry. “Y-yes.” I channel my dream lover’s intimidating she’s-mine-and-no one-else’s vibe to sound as convincing as I can. “He’s waiting for me. To celebrate the holidays together.”

“Oh, yeah?” My seatmate’s eyes narrow, his gaze tracking over my stockingless thighs.

Can he tell I’m lying?

I tug my skirt hem lower, and watch, cheeks heating, as the stranger’s stare shifts to my scuffed white sneakers and the small, beat-up backpack that holds my meager possessions. It’s currently serving as a foot rest since my toes barely scrape the ground.

“You sure?” My seatmate sounds skeptical. “Cause you look like you could use a friend?”

A sharp sting lodges inside my chest, his question blasting through me with the force of an arctic wind.

I *could* use a friend.

Someone to care about, who would care about me too.

I’ve never had that.

The Josephs treated me as more of a housekeeper and farmhand than a daughter. They preferred me silent and respectful. Still, I was happy enough caring for the animals and being outside and, though it’s a little embarrassing to admit, never lonely thanks to the appearance of my imaginary protector right around my sixteenth birthday, my own dream angel—though his actions were definitely more devilish.

Overall, it wasn’t a bad life. I was safe, fed, clothed, and I had a place to sleep.



Though, sometimes, I did feel a little restless. As if I was missing something... or *someone*.

Then, without warning, at the first hint of winter, a freak snowmelt caused a flash flood. The Josephs, who were working the fields, were swept away with most of their crops.

I'd been scrubbing floors at the house and was helpless to save them.

Or keep the farm running by myself.

The vultures came quick, the bank taking everything but the clothes on my back.

A story as old as time.

I'd been determined to fight anyway, until the sweaty bank manager with the unscuffed cowboy boots slid his hand down my back, palmed my bottom, and assured me we'd "work out a quid pro quo agreement."

I decided then and there it was time to stop clinging to a life that was gone and had never fit quite right anyway.

So, here I am, rolling up to the closest town three days before Christmas, with the last of my savings—and, yes, I am desperate for a friend.

But not the kind my seatmate is offering.

"I'm fine, thank you." Spine straight, hands folded primly in my lap, I turn my nose once more to the glass and do my best to dismiss my seatmate without appearing too rude.

The bus slows its pace and more details outside the window become clear: warm yellow lights, families wrapped in thick coats, evergreen trees lined up, a father pulling a sled weighed down by three little kids.

I press my fingers to the window and smile as two mothers, holding packages and children's hands, pass by next, all of them making tracks in the snow. The bus overtakes a billboard sign dusted in white powder: *At Christmas, all roads lead to home.*

My breath rushes out.

It's all so beautiful.

I've definitely made the right choice.

A home. A *real* home. Something I've also always dreamed of having.

"That's too bad." Bony fingers dig into my shoulders and squeeze, ripping me from my pleasant thoughts. "'Cause I make a good friend." My seatmate's grip turns punishing. "And you make a terrible liar."

My heart jackrabbits inside my chest. "I-I don't know what you mean."

"Such a fine, fresh, little wisp of a thing. Pure, sweet, angelic innocence. Out here on your own. That's what I like to call prime meat."

A wave of dread coils up my spine.

He's talking about me the same way Mr. Joseph spoke about his cattle.

"I-I told you. I'm not alone." I try to puff myself up and appear older and more intimidating.

I'm not sure it works.

"Oh, yeah?" My seatmate still hasn't released his hold. "Too bad. Thought you might be in need of some work. Or food."

My belly rumbles. I could definitely use some food. I had to skip a few meals for bus fare.

Could I have misjudged the man?

I've never felt more aware of my thin ribs pressing against my cardigan and making my chest look even bigger. Like I could topple over.

But I won't.

Because I'm stronger than I look. "Work?"

"Hmmm." He hums as if pleased, his fingers moving slightly toward the neckline of my sweater—and bare skin.

I shiver with revulsion.

"Busy time of year," he says at last. "It's not just kids who want their wishes to come true. I think you're just the ticket to making a lot of stressed-out daddies and my boss happy. A real little angel, able to give 'em a genuine white Xmas." He chuckles to himself. "Sticky, white everywhere."

I don't get what's so funny, but something about his tone tells me I won't like the joke. "I'm not sure. I'll have to talk to my boyfriend about it."

"You'll meet the boss." He speaks as if I haven't. "He'll put you right to work."

The bus rolls to a stop, the screech of brakes loud enough to be heard over my pounding heart.

Relief slams through me.

The ride is almost over. I can get off and move away from my seatmate. Start fresh.

"No, thank you." I desperately want food and work, but every cell in my body warns not to trust this man—and even

more troubling for my sanity, I can almost hear my dream lover growling and snarling and telling me to get the hells away from this stranger.

I intend to listen. “I think this is my stop, if you’ll excuse me.”

I grab my pack and stand. Or try to.

Cruel fingers slam me down onto the seat, the stranger’s body blocking the exit as he shoves his face close to mine. “You’re not going anywhere without me.”

Stunned, I clutch my backpack strap tight. “P-Please.”

“Yes. Keep saying it, just like that.” He yanks me from the seat. “I plan to start my Christmas a little early. A pre-celebration before I hand you over to the boss.”

“No.” I try to backpedal. My gaze whips to the side in search of aid.

Everyone is too busy pulling luggage from overhead or staring at their phone to notice.

I don’t even know if they would care if they did.

I’ve never been to the big town before.

“Come on.” My seatmate jerks me forward, the sound of my sweater tearing only adding to my panic.

I’m barely able to keep hold of my bag as he marches me down the aisle.

“Stop, please.”

“Quiet.” His hold twists and I whimper, afraid he might break my arm if I don’t do as he says.

I stagger along until we pass the bus driver. “Easy now, Clyde.”



At the first inkling of aid, my gaze rises from my feet to lock with kind eyes—and for one heartbeat, I have hope that the man whose spoken might save me.

Until my seatmate snaps, “Shut your yap, Anton, and keep your opinions to yourself. Would surely be a shame for your family to celebrate this holiday without you.”

I gasp, and it finally sinks in just how much trouble I’m in.

The bus driver is trapped like me.

No one can help. Not unless they want to end up hurt too—and that’s the last thing I want.

“Move it.” My seatmate hustles me down the steps and onto the cracked, icy ground.

I barely have time to take in the dingy bus depot and the few strings of half-burned-out holiday lights that circle the building before I’m dragged down a dark alley.

I fight, trying to shake my seatmate off.

He only laughs, shoving me forward so that my arms pinwheel and I stumble deeper into the dead-end alley littered with dumpsters stuffed with trash.

The only exit? Blocked by him.

Finally, he releases me.

*I...I can't breathe.* I back up a step, my bag clutched in front of me like a flimsy shield.

He smirks. “Now, girlie. Here’s what’s happening. I’m going to give myself a little treat. ‘Tis the season, after all.”

My back hits the alley wall.

He stalks closer, his fingers shoving inside the waistband of his pants. “You’re going to give me the merry Christmas I

deserve. First with that pretty pink mouth. Then your cunt.”

The bitter taste of fear floods my throat. No one’s ever spoken like that to me before.

He closes in.

I dart to the side.

His hand tangles in my hair and yanks. Hard.

I scream.

The force of his grip shoves me toward my knees.

*No, no, no.* I’ve tried all my life to be good. To do as I was told. My only sin: my dreams of him.

I shouldn’t be punished for that, should I?

I can’t bear for this stranger with the cruel eyes to be my first.

*I will tear the naughty apart. Rip them into tiny pieces. Gorge them with my horns. Crack their bones and drink their blood.*

The clarity of the voice shocks me—and though I know it’s not real—the familiar, growled rasp renews my strength. The message of vengeance and protection makes me feel less alone. Less paralyzed. Imbued with a power I’ve never felt before.

“Stop.” Lurching upright, I lock my knees and yank at the hand in my hair.

*Crack.* Clyde slaps me across the face.

The wind roars. Or maybe it’s the voice in my head.

I scream once more, but this time in fury, not fear.

I struggle harder. Then, I have the sudden realization that tugging against the hand in my hair isn't doing me any good. So, I drop my bag and shove both palms against my attacker's chest.

Whether it's pure luck, a holiday miracle, or simply a well-placed patch of ice, it works!

Clyde totters off balance. His hold on my hair releases as he fights to stay upright, his arms flailing.

His efforts fail, his feet giving way on the slippery ice. He slams onto his ass.

I wonder if maybe I have an angel watching out for me after all.

I don't hesitate.

Seizing my bag, I dart around the creep and run out of the alley, even as Clyde struggles to rise, slipping again as he calls out threats behind me.

A burst of wind pushes me to go even faster.

I pump my arms, using all my years of hard work on the farm to fuel my escape, indifferent to the cold tearing through my ripped sweater. Uncaring of the stinging of my bare thighs, or the banging of my bag against my leg, I sprint past the parked bus and down another street.

I run as if there are reindeers carrying me.

As if I have wings.

As if the bright lights of the North Pole are pointing me toward safety.

Panting, desperate, I run until the footsteps behind me disappear.

Then and only then, throat and nostrils stinging from the cold, do I risk a glance over my shoulder—and sag with relief.

My attacker is gone.

I've done it.

*Good girl.* The voice comes again, deep and gruff.

I don't even bother being stressed about its reappearance. Instead, using my bag as a barricade against the wind, I tell myself it's just a defense mechanism. Nothing to worry over.

Slipping and sliding, I sprint down several alleys until I turn onto a main street.

Heart slamming against my ribs, I peer left and right. I don't see the bus depot and have no clue if my mad dash led me back towards the station or farther away.

But I see no signs of Clyde—and that's a good thing.

Though he could still pop out of the next alley and seize me.

I need to find shelter.

My gaze catches on a Rudolph the Reindeer statue beside a motel. In its window is a blinking sign: vacancies.

Maybe I'll get my Christmas miracle, after all. Maybe, finally, I'll be safe.

Cold and desperate, I rush inside.



## K<sup>LAWZ</sup>

MY FANGS PIERCE the heart of the Polaris, sweet liquid hitting the back of my throat, aggression on overload.

Dark stains splatter the ice, my armor, and the tip of one unfurled, twisted wing.

I barely notice, even as the frosty winds high atop the temple dais whip at my skin, drying the sweat and blood on my bare chest.

The hunger twists inside me and I gorge. However, all too soon, the creature disintegrates in my grip, ash and snowflakes whipping around me like a mini-cyclone.

My empty hands transform into two rageful fists.

Nothing soothes.

Nothing sates the craving.

Nothing exists but endless shadows of black and white.

*I want more blood. More pain. More violence. More vengeance.*

*More something.*

And my jailers know it.

It's what they're counting on.

“The beast is hungry!” A robed figure standing on the other side of the barrier raises his palms skyward. “Judgment is near. Bring the next sacrifice.”

I want to refuse. Tell them to fuck off.

Instead, ravenous beyond bearing, I shove to standing, my crystal throne toppling behind me with a crash. It slides across the platform and slams into the invisible perimeter of my prison, coming to an abrupt stop.

But my thirst for blood and vengeance does not cease. Those impulses only grow.

It's why my enemies deprive me of food before opening the temple gates. It's why they offer me no bedding, basic comforts, or privacy. It's why they shove shock sticks through the barrier when the temple is closed to worshippers. It's why they mind-fuck me every chance they get.

Because, after centuries of the same torture, it works.

The ice cracks beneath my hooves as I clomp to the edge of the dais and roar.

The deep, primal, bull-like bellow bounces off the crystal walls of the wasteland temple.

Stalactites hanging from the ceiling rattle and, while my robed jailers show little reaction to my outburst, those forced to stand in the line that snakes past the altar drop to their knees.

No surprise.

I'm a monster. More animalistic beast than man. Scarred. Hideous. Huge.

Each loss of control, each undeserving death at my hands, has etched itself on my skin, making me more twisted and hideous. Good for one purpose only: to shed blood.

And a ravenous monster is a dangerous thing.

I bellow once more.

At one time, such roars rumbled across the land from leader to the next, from family member to fellow kin, from alpha to mate.

Now, there's only me.

The sole of my kind left alive. A chained animal performing tricks for its audience.

I was once the fiercest predator around, imbued with the power to render judgment and smite the unworthy, feared the realms over as the harbinger of punishment and pain, an instrument of vengeance and redemption.

Now, I'm bound to this frozen wasteland and these robed bastards by a spell that neither brute strength nor violent fury can break, the translucent barrier immune to my fists, claws, hooves, and horns no matter how hard I try to rend it in two.

And I've tried a lot.

I feel another roar coming on.

I tromp down the steps to the very edge of the invisible fortification.

The temple guards drag forward two supplicants laden down with offerings.

They don't come to me though. No, the robed bastards relieve the worshippers of their token atonements and then usher them out a side door.

Those two were lucky—and likely wealthy.

Most waiting in the line will join those roped together at the far side of the temple, an area already filled with at least a hundred wailing figures restrained by chains I could break apart with a simple flick of my wrist.

That is the section reserved for those whose gifts displease the robed figures. Pitiful souls who will soon become offerings... to me.

I'll fight the hate and the hunger as long as I can, but eventually—I know from experience—I'll lose.

“Great One.” One of the robed temple guards approaches the barrier, dragging another leashed braying Polaris. He shoves the animal through the barricade. “We worship and celebrate you on this day, and always.”

Lie.

My snout wrinkles. I barely resist the urge to thrust my claws at him rather than my appetizer, but I've tried before—many times—and I know the outcome.

My fist will bounce off the barrier as if I'm nothing more than a specter or a dream.

After centuries of this existence, I've become exactly the nightmare they wish me to be.

Snarling, I seize the terrified animal and sink my fangs and claws deep, ripping tissue and sinew from bone.

“There are more gifts to come.” This time it's a different robed figure who inches close enough to the barrier that I

glimpse pale skin and a square jawline.

Their kind may be beautiful, but they're corrupt beyond measure.

"Accept our offerings, Great Beast." The second robed figure gestures toward those begging for mercy. "They are all unworthy. All deserving of your judgment."

Another lie.

But soon it won't matter. Soon, my jailers will poke and poke, chant their spells, practice their deceptions, and stir my hunger and rage until the urge to punish indiscriminately is all I know. Until I lose control.

Then, when my power explodes, they'll steal it for themselves, channeling it to serve their selfish gains, and smite whoever stands against them.

I've tried to fight their tricks and treachery. Tried to prevent the cycle from happening.

But my power is the spark they need to carry out their dirty work and they know just how to douse the kerosene.

Which is why once the second Polaris disappears in my grasp, my hunger still high, the robed leader gives the sign and the guards drag the poor chained souls from the doomed section of the temple closer to the barrier—and me.

So close that the stench of their terror slips past the perimeter and singes my nostrils while their cries for mercy and unspoken secret wishes flicker through my mind, the latter a consequence of my power.

All too soon, their damned wishes trigger my own.

I see my baby sister Clementia's teasing, fanged smile across the dining platform. She's stealing a morsel of meat

from my platter while my youngest brother Bonel knocks over a goblet of honey mead and my eldest brother Mercael lectures us about decorum as the fire crackles in the hearth. It's rowdy and loud, all twelve of us talking at once—and it's home.

I'm grinning, laughing at Bonel's exuberance, ready to grab my missing meal back from Clementia when it hits me that this scene is not real.

It's nothing but a fanciful illusion triggered by my enemies.

Nothing but a memory of a past that's dead and gone.

I'll never get this wish.

I'll never sit around that dining platform again. Never see Clementia's smile. Or watch Bonel grow out of his awkward stage. Or hear Mercael's sage wisdom.

My brothers and sisters, and all of my kind, will always be dead—and I'm the one to blame.

I roar once more, pain and hate ripping through me, fraying more of my control. Just as my jailers intend.

"We worship your might and fury, O' Great Beast. All we ask in return," chants my robed tormentor, "is that you honor us with your judgment and deliver punishment to those who conspire against us on this sacred day of judgment."

Another roar erupts. My wings snap to their full, crooked span, casting the supplicants in shadow and yet, as useless as ever.

All they ask?

Through the haze of rage and hunger, I faintly recall a time when my power was my own. This ritual, sacred. Used by my kind for justice and vengeance and to deliver punishment to

those who truly deserved it. Balance was achieved, and the realms thrived.

But that era is gone—and I know it's only a matter of time before these bastards win.

Worse, I fear that, at this juncture, it might be for good. My rage and hate so great I won't be able to find my way back and my power will become theirs to use unchecked anytime, anywhere.

*Please.*

My chin snaps up, my gaze scanning beyond the robed figures, long hair whipping back and forth so that it smacks my cheek.

That voice.

She's back.

The faintest of tantalizing scents follows her arrival: golden amber, moonlit jasmine, fresh pine, and succulent, sweet holly. In all my centuries, I've never scented another who smells like that.

Wings rippling, the hunger inside me grows.

My fangs flash, whiskers bristling as I huff—and then breathe deep once more, trying to draw more of her into my lungs.

*Please.*

She wants something from me. Her kind always does.

Fury, and something darker, slams through me.

In my more lucid moments, I plot vengeance against all those who imprison me here, but especially her.

For over three years now, she's tormented me.

Her tactics are more subtle than my current jailers, but effective nonetheless.

Unlike the rest, she slips in without warning, like the softest breeze, sneaking past the barricade and my defenses. Whispering in that soft honeyed voice, bedeviling with that strange scent, offering illusions of hope, affection, and acceptance that are as false as those of my family returned to me.

Yet, she is always out of reach.

Always melting into nothingness before I can find her. As if she's a dream rather than the nightmare I know her to be.

Fists clenched by my side, I bellow once more, sparked by a rage so deep, so rabid, it pummels at my insides like clenched fists.

The column to my right cracks. Crystal stones cleave from the temple wall.

Shrieking, robed figures scoot out of the way, the bitter stench of fear overpowering all their false perfumes. Utter chaos and panic.

Still, I feel no better.

*Leave me alone!* The tinkling voice comes again.

Nonsensical, it shimmers out of reach, like the stars in the night sky outside the temple grounds.

But never have I heard it sound so clear. Or so... desperate.

“Quiet!” I roar at my jailers before tempering my tone to demand of her, “show yourself, fiend.”

Silence falls.



Then...

*I-I'll call the police.*

My horns twitch as my forehead wrinkles.

I've heard the word before, but it's been so long, I can't quite dredge up the memory of which realm. But I sense some kind of threat.

Still, whatever this *poleeze* is, I am not concerned.

If they come into my temple prison, if she thinks it will protect her and keep me from her, I will show her how wrong she is.

I will eviscerate this *poleeze* and leave it as ash.

Then, I will dispense judgment against her as well.

*Just leave. P-Please.*

Another roar rumbles from my throat, her taunt like the sting of ice against already blistered skin.

“As if I can, female! Don't you think I would if I could?”

She will be punished for her disrespect.

“Show yourself, hellion!” Another roar explodes from me. So loud, another column shakes, its middle cracking.

More screams erupt from those in the temple. Stalactites along the temple ceiling rattle, too. One huge icicle, in existence almost as long as me, cracks and splinters, crashing to the ground—just outside the barrier.

Shards of crystal tumble across the ground, making almost a perfect X.

I barely notice.

My gaze is transfixed on what's within the shards.

There!

For the first time in centuries, something tugs at me from beyond the barrier.

She's there.

Not cloaked. Or dark. But a shining, golden glow, refracted a thousand times in each shard. Yellow, pink, red. A blaze of colors.

Brighter even than my northern star.

Only she's not alone.

Five hornless creatures creep toward her.

Rage plunges like a fist through my ribcage, squeezing my two hearts.

They dare to touch what belongs to me... to punish. They dare to defile what is mine... to judge and sentence.

They will die for that.

Snarling, I bound forward, my body naturally bending, my misshapen wings dragging behind as I gallop on hands and hooves like the beast I am, palms and claws cracking the temple floor with each strike.

I rush the barrier.

Like I've done a million times before.

Only this time, my thoughts are not consumed with escape, but with her.

Reaching her. Getting to her.

And *only* her.

Which is why I barely hear the shocked gasps of my jailers as, for the first time, I slip easily through the barricade and

vanish into thin air.

# H<sup>OLLY</sup>

“STAY BACK!” I brandish the lamp from the motel bedside table.

All five men laugh, an ugly sound that terrifies me more.

“This ain’t your neighborhood, bitch. This is ours.” Clyde stalks forward, his face disfigured by a black eye and cut lip that wasn’t there before.

“The boss is not happy his little Christmas surprise got away.” A taller, dark-haired guy with a thick, ropey scar that slices from the middle of his chin to his ear follows right behind Clyde.

Six more men slink into the room, the last one shutting the door behind him.

Eleven against one.

The lock clicks shut.

*I’m in big trouble.*

“Think of us as your little elves, come to wrap you up and take you for a ride.” The third guy to speak has beady eyes and a potbelly that shakes as he laughs at his own joke.

Clyde dabs his bloody lip. “So unless you want that lamp lighting you from the inside out, you’ll put it down. Now!”

“Never.” I’m not going down without a fight.

“Big mistake.” A fourth guy, a bald guy with dead eyes, pulls a knife from his pocket. “Time to redecorate in virgin red and white.”

The men laugh again.

I raise the lamp higher, the terror inside me whipping into a frenzy—as if the snow and ice from outside is pumping directly into my veins.

My attackers advance. One wave in front, the next close behind.

Two menacing half-circles, smirks on their faces, the scent of rot and cheap cologne invading my lungs.

With a grunt, I swing.

Potbelly and Scar Face dart back. The lamp connects with the fifth guy’s shoulder.

He grunts. Stumbles.

But there’s no time for satisfaction.

Rough hands grab me. Cruel fingers dig into my skin. “Got ya!”

“Did you honestly think a little thing like you could stop us?” A knife presses into my throat as Baldy yanks me against him, his hand squeezing my breast. “Time to learn your role, slut.”

Clyde knocks the lamp from my grasp, sending it crashing into the wall.

Bodies rush me from all sides.

I can't breathe. Can't even scream.

Hands tear at my skin, my clothes.

Even with the knife to my throat, I fight, ignoring the sting and the too-sweet scent of my blood as the knife presses deeper.

I buck and claw as my mind drifts... to him. To the only times I've ever really felt safe. Treasured.

"Throw her on the bed," growls the guy I hit. "Time for payback."

I need a miracle.

But there's only me. "Let me go!"

My struggles have no effect.

Hair flying, my body hits the mattress.

Before I can rise, cruel hands pin me down. Pinch and grab. Pull my legs apart.

*Crack.*

A violent splintering rends the air.

Jagged shards fly in all directions, imbedding into the walls, the cheap, torn blinds, the arms and legs of my attackers — and, most shocking of all, Potbelly's throat.

Eyes wide, the man grabs his neck, red bubbling from the sharp crystal lodged deep in his flesh.

A scream builds in my throat but I have no idea if it slips out or not.

Gasping, Potbelly hits the mattress, then topples to the floor with a thud.

The others barely notice his fate.

“What the hell is that?” Scar Face’s gaze locks on something in the center of the room. “Where did it come from?”

“Take it down. Whatever the fuck it is.” Clyde’s voice is high and shrill as he draws a gun from his waistband.

Wide shoulders block my view, but I know it can’t be good. My attackers are brutal men and they sound terrified.

I scramble back until my spine hits the flimsy headboard.

Through a gap between the men, I get my first look at what captured their attention and killed Potbelly.

It’s... snowing in the middle of the room. Small, perfect snowflakes swirl and dance in a whirling circle suspended between the floor and the ceiling. At its center is a sheet of ice so glossy and smooth it looks like a mirror, and yet it isn’t reflecting the horror of the dingy room or Clyde and his gang. Instead, the edges reveal a blurry outline of a glittering, ice world like something out of a fairytale—and in the middle of that is a huge, jagged black hole.

A hole soon filled by a huge, hulking form.

*Oh, my god.*

The creature that unfolds to standing is like none I’ve seen before.

It’s so huge its antlers scrape the ceiling and its twisted wings drag along the floor, its wings span so wide each tip almost reaches a side wall.

*Antlers? Wings?*

“Oh, shit.” Baldy’s shout rips the other men from their shocked state.

I blink too, trying to process what I’m seeing.

Part beast, part man, the creature resembles something out of myth, or a nightmare. He’s at least seven feet tall. With tangles of braids in his long midnight hair threaded with silver, horns that curl upward, pointed ears, the flattened snout of a bull, bat-like wings that look like they’ve been broken in a fight, and a tail that snaps through the air like a striking snake.

He wears no shirt or pants, only a thick armored belt and a loincloth. The lack of clothing showcases a massive, ebony, muscular chest and a chiseled stomach that would make Adonis jealous, along with bulging arms as big as my thighs.

Strange red and silver armor covers his shoulders and forearms and his sculpted lower body is furred and ends in hooves. Nevertheless, he moves upright with ease.

He can’t be real and yet...there are all too-real icicles on his mane and wings—and a dusting of snow across the fur at his shoulders.

Power and command radiate from him.

And, despite the fact that the creature is absolutely terrifying, I’m not immune.

The urge to drop to my belly, to prostrate myself before him, to lick him like a candy cane, is overwhelming.

Equally alarming, even before he speaks, I recognize him.

He’s the beast from my dreams.



The scent of him: frost, frankincense, myrrh, and sugar cookies hit my bloodstream hard, sliding down my belly like a caress, making the bud between my thighs slick and swollen.

The shape of his skilled hands—now only a few feet away—are so familiar I ache for their weight on me, their roughness against my skin, kneading, molding, holding me to him as he takes me however he wants.

I know this is wrong. Madness.

Still, I shiver, my thighs pressing tight, my body squirming as if I'm already desperate to sit on his lap.

As if he can read my thoughts, his gaze finds mine, his eyes bleeding from the dark gray of the arctic to blood red. "You!" His stare narrows as his nostrils flare. "Why did you summon me here? Whatever your intent, I can promise you it won't go as planned."

I have absolutely no idea what to make of that.

"What is that thing?" The men are shouting at once. "Jesus Christ!"

"No, not GeeZus Cryst." The beast speaks once more, his voice a deep accented rasp. "Great Beast is my usual title." His stare bores into me. "But you may call me Klawz—or Lord and Master."

Another dark shiver rolls through me.

Klawz... like Claws? Or Santa Claus?

It can't be, and yet...

He sweeps out one massive arm. "Bow down and worship me. Judgment Day has come—and this time, it's on my terms."

Silence.

No one knows how to respond.

Clyde's the first to recover. "Kill it!"

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

SHOUTS ERUPT AROUND ME.

I barely notice.

“Do not bother running.” The creature’s stare is still locked on me. “There is no escape from me now, little foe.”

*Foe?*

I wrap my arms tighter around myself.

I want to be back in my happy place. Pretty golden lights, frosted shop windows, a fresh evergreen strapped to a family car, and pristine, glittering snow blanketing it all, making everything beautiful.

*Not this. Never this.*

This is not my Christmas dream. Not my once-in-a-lifetime, grand adventure.

Out of nowhere, there’s a rush of air at my back. A pillow from the hotel bed flies past, nearly grazing me. Then, the framed picture on the wall careens by my shoulder. Both items

just miss the creature and soar into the void—and don't come out the other side.

They just... disappear.

How is that possible? How is *any* of this possible?

I risk a glance over my shoulder, searching for another threat.

There's nothing but the headboard. More madness!

"Close the portal." The creature staggers backward, his braids fluttering behind him as his wings attempt to open and close but can't.

For a moment, I hold on to the hope that he'll be sucked back into the void along with the pillow and picture, and all this will be nothing but a bad Christmas nightmare.

But his tail curls around the dresser leg and he stands tall.

"Close it now, female, or there will be consequences. For you all."

Not. Good.

"Shoot it!" Clyde's gun rings out.

Several others follow. The sharp rap of *pop, pop, pop* fills the room. Plaster shatters and holes appear in the far wall.

But the creature remains upright.

And the bullets? The bullets bounce off him as if they've been shot from toy guns.

"Holy shit!" The panicked screams of the men escalate.

Two break, running for the door.

In a heartbeat, the beast is in front of them. He bats one to the side. "I warned you."

The man's body whizzes through the air, his head crashing into the door. The collision is so violent, the man crumples while the door bends, hanging by a single set of hinges, the outside visible through the new gap.

The beast's claws tear through the other male like wrapping paper.

Though I know it's neither nice nor good, I can't help a sharp stab of satisfaction. Those men were going to hurt me.

More shouts erupt from Clyde and the others, even more panicked than before.

"Did you see what it did to Jesse?"

"What the hell is that thing?"

"Kill it! Aim for the head! It has to have a weak spot."

"A weak spot? None." The creature stalks forward, his braids and wings flapping behind as if pulled by an invisible force—and yet he prowls forward with ease. Too much ease. "Prepare for judgment."

More bullets fly, mostly because I suspect the gang members have no idea what else to do.

Not that I have a clue either.

Like before, their weapons have no effect.

The beast just keeps coming—until he freezes, an arm's length away from the men still standing between me, the bed, and him.

Why has he stopped?

I sense the other men holding their breath, waiting.

Just like me.

The creature's nostrils flare, his gaze shifting from me to Baldy's hand.

His scowl deepens.

I don't have the slightest idea why until the creature's stare narrows on the knife, now coated with streaks of red.

"Your kind dares to spill her blood?" His outrage shakes the room. "That is my job."

Nothing about his words is comforting.

Nor does it escape my notice that he *smelled my blood*.

*Oh, god. Oh, god.* He might have aided me by taking on Clyde and his men, but I'm not any safer with him than with my attackers.

"You," the creature points a clawed hand at Baldy, "will be judged next—and it will not go well."

Moving as fast as the wind, his huge hand wraps around the male's throat.

He lifts Baldy as if he weighs as little as a snowflake, raising the squirming, terrified man until they are nose to nose.

The creature inhales deep, drives his huge neck forward, and sinks six-inch fangs into Baldy's throat.

Blood splatters everywhere as the creature growls.

Except this is no simple animalistic growl. It's a sound imbued with power, with omnipotence. It's inexplicable, mystical, and sublime. The tips of the creature's wings turn the same white as the dusting of snow on his shoulders.

His deep hum fills the room.

Despite absolute horror at what I'm seeing, the sound leaves me terrifyingly, strangely, disturbingly... breathless.

My nipples stiff and achy.

Baldy's reaction is different.

The man shrieks as his legs kick furiously and his skin glows a shocking, flickering violet. Then, suddenly, his feet and calves disintegrate, tiny flakes of skin floating on the air like ash. They mingle with the whirling snowflakes and disappear through the jagged hole in the middle of the ice sheet.

His knife clatters to the ground.

Soon, Baldy's thighs and chest disappear as well.

Oh. My. God.

*I need to get out of here.*

But there are bodies everywhere. Worse, the creature stands between me and the door.

"Bullets don't work," shouts Clyde. "Use your knives. Chairs. Whatever you can. Just bring it down."

Several of the men launch themselves at the creature.

Even with half of Baldy still in its grip, the beast fights back. It slaps away the attacking men as if they are nothing more than irritating insects.

One attacker, the monster gorges with his horn. Another, he tears into with his claws.

Everyone he touches dissolves, hands, feet, and wide-open mouths crumbling into dust and floating through the air, swirling and whirling toward the void in the ice sheet.

I snap my mouth shut.

This whole thing is... incomprehensible.

But it's happening. Men are dying and disintegrating and—I realize with a start—the creature's attention is elsewhere.

*Now's my chance.*

I need to get away before it spills my blood, too.

There's the strangest faint voice in my head whispering to run toward him, not away, but I ignore it, wisely dismissing it as more proof I'm at the edge of sanity.

I scramble off the bed, my gaze on the gap in the door as I skirt the fighting, the disintegrating bodies, and the sheet of ice suspended in the middle of the room.

I'm almost there, agonizing screams echoing behind me, when rough hands tangle in my hair.

My neck jerks painfully. My body slams backwards.

“Where do you think you're going?” Clyde snarls in my ear. “You're not getting away from me so easily, girl. I just lost half my crew because of you, but you'll make it up to me. Someone's gonna pay top dollar to defile an angel like you.”

“No!” I kick back—only to hit air.

“Let's go. Before it notices.” Scarred guy seizes my arm, hemming me in and making it even harder to escape. “We can't enjoy ourselves if we're dead.”

I fight, but they drag me easily toward the doorway. A third attacker crowds close.

I wanted out of this room, but not like this.

Behind me, I hear the shouts of dying men and the deepening growl of the beast.

I'm so tired of being afraid. Of being hurt. Preyed upon.



“Move it, you stupid slut.” Clyde’s grip tightens in my hair.

A haze of red descends, my terror and rage sharper than before.

Behind me, a terrible roar fills the room. “I warned you not to try and flee.”

“Oh, shit.” Clyde shoves me straight into the two other men.

I stumble. They grab hold before I can get free.

“Stay back.” Scarred man yanks me to him, using me as a shield.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Clyde slip out the door. But my focus is on the massive beast heading straight for me—and the brutal fingers digging into my skin, anchoring me in place.

Suddenly, the rough hands on my body vanish.

Horrifying shrieks ensue.

A blizzard of swirling white light blinds me as my mind blanks.

For what could be one heartbeat or a lifetime, I drift in a state of peace, shielded by a soothing haze.

Then it’s over, the light fades, and my eyelids fly open.

I take stock of my surroundings and realize I’m standing exactly where I was.

Only the walls are painted red, my attackers are gone, and the air is even thicker with swirling flakes of crystal and ash.

More importantly, the creature from my dreams is looming right in front of me, bent so close his snout is inches from my

nose.

His peppermint breath wafts across my cheek, his blood-red gaze even with my own.

“Hello, little one.” His hand snaps out and wraps around my throat. “Finally.”

A burst of adrenaline and stark terror roars through me.

But what echoes the loudest in my brain? The words: *yes, finally!*

As if I’ve been waiting for him too.

K<sup>LAWZ</sup>

I STALK TOWARD THE BED, my wings dragging behind me.

The crunch of bones beneath my boots—justice rendered to those who deserved it—is nice, but nothing compares to the sensation of holding the squirming captive in my grip.

*Finally.*

After centuries as nothing more than a voyeur behind a barrier, my grip is solid, her pulse a frantic flutter against my palm.

It's disorienting, but glorious.

I intend to take full advantage. To revel in every bit of the corporeal savagery and tangible revenge denied me during my imprisonment.

She might not stink of rot like the rest of my tormentors, but that only inflames my hunger.

*More blood. More pain. More violence. More vengeance.*

*More something.*

My fangs flash. She definitely smells good enough to eat.

I toss her onto the mattress.

My kind always like to toy with their meals first. And I plan to play with this one for a long time.

She hits the bed, bouncing twice before landing and staying put.

“W-What do you want?” My little gift lurches to her elbows, her voice honey soft and a little husky, like the blending of a hundred song birds.

It’s the first time I hear it without the distortion of the temple barrier and it flows through my veins, wrapping around my cock and gripping tight.

Suddenly, I’m inclined towards a different kind of blood-letting.

“Why did you summon me here?” I growl instead.

“What?”

I stare down at my captive: golden hair tousled around her gorgeous face like a halo, cheeks flush, pretty, blue eyes glistening with tears. The colors of her, so bright after so much bleak white and gray, are almost vivid enough to burn my retinas.

She’s the picture of sweet innocence and untarnished goodness.

But her kind is good at deception, and I already know monsters come in all forms. Case in point, she didn’t close the portal as commanded—and that was naughty, indeed.

Since she created and controls the gateway used to summon me, my ex-jailers can’t travel through it as I did, but

they'll find another way to get to me. Even now, I can feel the wasteland void pulling at me like greedy, wrenching fingers, trying to drag me back.

They haven't found a strong enough spell yet to countermand her summons, but they will.

Unless I'm faster.

"Th-This is not happening. This can't be real." My captive's trembling voice pulls me from my musing.

"It's very real."

"Are you going to kill me too?"

"No." The guttural denial rips from me, instinctual and primitive.

I startle at my response. *What in the hells?*

She brought me here for some purpose—and I won't be used again. Of course death is the only way this clash between us ends.

So why does the idea cause my stomach to contract?

"Not yet," I amend. "I want answers first."

She tries to scramble up the bed.

I wrap my hand around her ankle and jerk her back in place.

What does she think? That she can summon me to do her bidding and I will be easy to tame because I was foolish enough to become imprisoned before? If so, she's made a grave miscalculation.

My wasteland temple jailers sacrificed thousands to create a spell strong enough to bind me. Alone, she will never achieve such a feat.

“Not yet,” she repeats my response, the way her full lower lip trembles rousing a strange tightness in my chest. “So you mean to hurt me in the end?”

The words emerge before I can think better of them. “You know as well as I that you’re the one who opened the portal and summoned me. I can’t kill you without breaking your spell and sending me right back to my old prison—so death at my hands is clearly not imminent. But neither will I allow you to use me.”

Now, she no longer looks crushed, just confused.

I am too.

Why did I attempt to soothe? Now that I’ve removed the threat of immediate death, she’ll be even more difficult to defeat.

“S-So you’re not going to hurt me?” She peers up at me through eyes too pretty to be anything but trouble.

“I didn’t say that.” I don’t have time for foolish softness. Or gentleness. “Close the portal.”

False tears make her eyes glisten.

My fury grows. “I might not be able to kill you, but that doesn’t mean your time with me needs to be pleasant.”

“Th-This is not possible.”

I don’t have time to waste. “Time for your punishment.”

“Punishment?” She rears upward.

I push her back down with a single finger. “Obey my command or suffer the consequences.”

“Please, I don’t understand what you want from me.”

“I want so much. Information. Submission. Penance. Tears. Blood.” Instinct takes over and I cup her between the legs, my voice a growl. “But first this.”

A gasp spills from her lips, her golden hair rippling across the pillow, her glow so damned bright I have to blink to keep from being blinded.

But I manage. I’m a monster. An instrument of vengeance—and the sooner she understands just how far I’m willing to go, the sooner she’ll give in. Do as I demand.

She tugs at my wrist. “S-Stop.”

I don’t. Instead, I slip my hand beneath her shirt and skim it up her belly, watching her skin flush, goosebumps dotting her skin.

She’s white-hot heat and carnal temptation and, for the first time in a long time, the hunger inside is provoked not only by rage and revenge, but dark need.

My tail twines around her ankle, locking her in place. “Close the portal.”

“I-I can’t.” She tries to push away my hand once more. “Don’t do that. It’s not right.”

“Right?” I scoff. “What does your kind know of such things? You twist everything to serve your purpose.”

“That’s not true. I-I’ve always tried to be good.”

“Hmmm.” I lean in. “You think I can’t hear those wishes in your head, female? Detect every depraved thought?”

Her eyes open wide.

“Splay me wide, shape me just for you.” It only makes me more of a bastard but I purr aloud the desires I hear echoing in

her head. “Make me your vessel. Use me as you wish.”

She gasps.

“Corrupt me. Unwrap me like the sweetest of gifts.” I revel in every filthy craving inside her pretty little head.

“T-Those are not my thoughts.”

“What a little liar. Those are *your* wishes.” My palm reaches her lush breast, my thumb gliding over the taut nipple. “I’m going to make them come true—though perhaps not exactly as you’d like.”

She whimpers and attempts to shove my hand away.

Evading her efforts with ease, I cup the soft, full mound, kneading slow.

She squirms beneath my hold, the sweet bud swelling against my palm.

Her breath comes hard and fast.

No surprise. Her kind is always very responsive.

“Last chance to close the portal—before you get that pretense of innocence fucked right out of you.” I pluck the tight bud.

Her back bows, her eyes dropping to half-mast. “Oh, god.”

“Klawz.” I pinch the nipple in warning. “You will call out my name and no other.”

I won’t be one of many she worships. I intend to be her only deity.

Her only *everything*.

Lesson just beginning, I strum the little nub, pleased at the way her body melts beneath my handling.



She acts innocent, but her true nature is rising to the fore.

Exactly as intended.

But I need it fully set free. I can't close the portal without it.

“Klawz...”

Her whisper vibrates through me, tilting my world on its axis and muddying my intent.

Over the centuries, the occasional supplicant has uttered my name, but it never sounded like this.

It's been a long time since I wanted to reward as well as punish, but with her body pliant beneath mine, old instincts stir.

Protective, softer impulses I thought died with the rest of my kind.

I shove them aside and keep my hand busy playing with her gorgeous tits while the other slides to the hem of her skirt.

I wrench it upward—and am rewarded with another sweet whimper.

Or was that me?

The sight of creamy golden skin and plain white cotton almost brings me to my knees.

So pure and clean. So in need of debauchment—and I am the monster for the job.

I trace the seam of fabric at her hips with my claw, a promise and warning she clearly understands because she's gone still.

“Breathe.” I slide the pad of my finger downward.

She sucks in a sharp breath, finally obeying.

This pleases me so I rub firmly over the damp spot.

Hips jerking, her eyes flutter, glazing over.

“You like that.” I don’t ask. I know.

Her breath hitches.

“No lies.” I tap my finger against her folds in warning, my wings stretching to cast her more fully in my shadow. “Tell me.”

Her gaze shifts away, her fists curling tighter into the sheet by her head. “I-I never knew it could feel like this.”

“Look at me.” I despised my jailers’ stares, but I find I’m greedy for hers.

When she obeys, my cock grows harder, the knot at the base throbbing with ferocity.

“Now my touch is all you’ll ever know.”

My threat emerges more hopeful than vengeful and I curse myself even as I fondle her through the cotton, relentlessly, firmly, working the fabric so it twists and rolls with just the right amount of friction over her needy, little clit.

She writhes beneath my hand. “I-It’s too much.”

Another lie. “Give me the truth.”

“I don’t... I don’t want this.”

From my jailers the evasions and deceptions irritate, but from her... it’s unacceptable.

I flip her over.

Her soft gasp vibrates straight to my balls.

Then I catch sight of those firm little butt cheeks, half covered by the plain white cloth that demands to be shredded by my claws.

Instead, I run my finger along the edge where the thin material bisects her perfect bottom, following the curve from the outside of her hip to the tempting, secret crease between her thighs.

She rears up, trying to escape.

I hold her down easily, careful to retract my claws, my hand so big it spans the width of her dainty spine. I like that too.

“Now, now, female. Close the portal or take your punishment as any naughty girl should.”

“I don’t know anything about this portal. I don’t even know what you are.”

My anger returns. “My patience is wearing thin.”

“I-I...”

*Smack.* I bring my palm down on that perfect globe.

Her squeal echoes through the room—and straight to my cock.

“Stop.” She wiggles beneath my hold.

“Who am I?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know.” *Smack.*

Her tiny fists curl into the sheets as her bottom cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink. The pulse at her throat flutters like a caged little bird.

*Surrender.*

I like it. Maybe too much. But her kind responds best to force and correction. My cock grows harder.

*Smack.* “Who am I?”

“Th-The creature in my dreams,” she shouts the words, her voice frantic.

I know why. My adversary likes her chastisement more than she wants to admit.

“The one who passes judgment.” The truth trips from her lips now that her bottom is warm and nicely pink. “The one who puts me over his lap when I’m naughty.”

Now we are getting somewhere.

I reward her by holding her more firmly so she understands she is subject to my will while my other hand slides from her round little bottom to between her thighs, forcing her legs to spread wider.

It feels natural, the sharp bite of satisfaction surging through me as I make real the illusions she tormented me with over the years.

I bite back a groan at the sight of the wet spot on the thin, white cotton. As pretty as a present.

“Tell me more.” My thumb ghosts over the fabric.

She sucks in a sharp breath. “I-I...please.”

“Yes, beg me.” This time I apply a firmer touch and chuff with satisfaction as her hips lift the tiniest bit.

She likely doesn’t even know she’s done it, but I do.

I notice everything about her. Revel in every detail. Nothing is too small, too minuscule, when it comes to her.

Because she's the key to my freedom. At least, that's what I tell myself. But something inside me whispers that's not the reason at all.

"No more lies." I make my expectations clear. "If you are naughty, you will be knotted here." I tap her tiny rosebud with my thumb.

She freezes.

"Behave," I rub the pad of my thumb firmly over the little nub, the coarse fabric aiding my effort, "and your wishes will be met in ways you might even like."

I've switched my tactic yet again, adding not only the promise of pain, but pleasure into the mix, but I don't give a damn. Especially when she keens, her body trembling beneath my hold.

I have never felt more like the instrument of justice I am, dispensing rewards and punishments to a soul in need.

Only, for the first time in my existence, I am the one receiving a gift. Because I may not want to admit it, but watching her surrender to my dark demands is its own kind of miracle.

And I've been waiting a long time for one of those.

"Tell me more of what you know."

Unable to help myself, I caress her tight asshole with the tip of my tail, over and over, until her breathing is a frantic rasp. Until her body strains as she spreads wide all on her own, yielding to my dominion and the twisted chastisement of the beast.

"You're th-the punisher of the naughty." She pants through each word. "Th-The one who knows what I crave."

I reward her truths, pinching her clit.

The swelling of that sweet nub beneath my fingers makes me hard as steel.

Suddenly, it's not just her pleasure or her pain, I'm after. I crave everything she has to give and more. "Come for me, little hellion. Show me just how good you can be."

She jerks beneath my hold—and comes hard.

The perfect supplicant, finally.

Exquisite.

I fucking know it's a betrayal of my family and my kind, but I revel in the way she thrashes beneath my hold. Even though it's wrong. So damned wrong.

The concept of her kind and mine bringing each other anything but misery is an unholy secret I plan to take to my grave—and hers.

Which is why I don't wait, her breathing still heavy, her muscles not yet fully slack, before I lean over and remind her of exactly her current predicament—and what it means for her kind to be the plaything of a beast.

Pressing her into the mattress with my weight, I whisper in her petal-like ear. "I am all those things you conceded, little foe. But, above all, I am your judge, your deliverance, and your destiny."

I expect her to flinch. Perhaps shudder.

Instead, her head lolls to the side and her gaze finds mine. "I think you're right."

"What?" My question emerges as a puff of dumbstruck exhalation.

“I won’t deny you scared me when you first arrived, but... not anymore. That was incredible. You really *can* hear my wishes.”

Her breathy words and easy acceptance shock me.

She inhales and I brace, somehow terrified and desperate to hear what she says next.

“I was praying for help and you came,” she continues. “I know *exactly* who you are. You’re my savior and my guardian angel.”

I rear back as if struck.

She has to be mocking me, but her tactic is as sharp as a blade, slicing right to the heart of me.

For centuries, all I saw from the other side of the barrier was terror, disgust, and smug greed. But this tiny slip of a female is staring up at me with awe and wonder and it actually seems real.

Not an illusion. Not an empty wish. But a genuine reaction.

It’s too much. Too wrong. And not at all what I expected.

I’m no one’s savior.

I proved that centuries ago when I allowed myself to be trapped and my power used to kill my kind, starting with my family, and then thousands of innocents.

Dispensing one good orgasm and chastisement to a greedy, lying little hellion cannot make up for that. Nothing can.

There is no absolution for someone like me.

It’s another empty illusion—like the ones of my family, sparked by others of her kind—and she wields it well.

Anger rushes through me.

She's even more formidable than I suspected, sneaking beneath my defenses, finding the weaknesses I boasted didn't exist.

But I won't be manipulated again. All I want is my freedom. All I need is revenge.

Not connection. Not redemption. Not the responsibility of failing someone else.

I'm done playing around.

"You've gone too far now, female." Rearing back, my wings flap once in warning.

I flip her over, my thighs against the edge of the mattress keeping her legs spread wide. "I far prefer sinning to saving—and you're about to learn exactly why it's unwise to mess with a beast."



H<sup>OLLY</sup>

I STARE up at him in shock—and renewed fear.

I'm not sure why my words angered him or how to fix it, but I think I see fear in Klawz's gaze too. As if maybe he's even more afraid of me than I am of him.

“I am not your savior. Take it back. End the deception.” He snarls the words at me, fangs flashing while his nostrils flare wide and his red eyes glow.

My heart beats fast.

He looks so fierce. So terrifying. So... other.

Yet I only have to recall the way he handled me and the fear lessens. He's my dream lover and protector. He's kept me safe for years. Now he's upset and agitated and needs me.

It gives me courage.

“I'm not lying. I was very scared at first. This whole situation is... hard to accept, but I'm adjusting. If you need time too, that's fine.” I would normally never be so bold, but

Klawz is clearly not playing by the usual rules of decorum or physics, so why should I?

I feel free as I never have before.

Everything is upside down and I'm untethered from old expectations—and this new Holly is greedy for more.

Suddenly, being polite and well-behaved seems like a weight I no longer wish to bear.

“No one has made me feel what you have. Touched me like you did.” I rub a palm over my breastbone. Underneath the skin there, it's like a warm cocoon, as if Klawz's monstrous arms hold me close even there. “I'm so glad you finally found me for real.”

“Don't.” A muscle tics in his jaw.

I don't really understand his hesitance, or this whole hot and cold thing he's doing. He's the one who crashed into my motel room and grabbed me. But maybe this whole movement from the dream world to reality is also a shock for him.

*I hope he's not disappointed.*

Yes, he's brusque, coarse, bossy, and very intimidating, but I spent nineteen years with the Josephs and always felt like a stranger in their presence. After only a few moments with Klawz, I feel seen as I've never been before.

I'm hungry for more.

“I know it make little sense,” I confess, “but the truth is I think I've been waiting my whole life for you.”

He sucks down a sharp breath and I suspect no one has told him such nice things before. Who knows how monsters usually get treated where he's from?

But maybe, like me, he's secretly wished for such praise, even as he fears it might not be true.

"Plus," I speak fast, shyness and nerves making me trip over my tongue. "You killed those men *for me*. No one has even stood up for me like that before."

He jolts at my words. "You think that violence was meant to avenge you? Wrong. For centuries, I've been destroying souls even as they beg for mercy. It's what I do."

I shake my head in denial, even as doubts creep in.

He would never have touched me like he did if I didn't mean something to him, right? This can't be just the best orgasm of my life muddling my brain. We've been connected for years.

Plus, he whispered in my ear that I'm his destiny and I sense it too.

There's a reason I could never find what I was looking for before. It wasn't on Earth—until now.

I've been dreaming of Klawz. Longing for him to be real.

Maybe a part of me always knew he was.

Because after the shock and the initial terror, once his warm palm closed around my throat and his threats came to naught but exquisite pleasure, fear is no longer my dominant emotion.

White-hot need is. Along with the certainty that he might just need a guardian angel, too.

"Whatever you were before doesn't matter." I raise a tentative, trembling hand, seeking connection, wanting him to see I'm unafraid. "You found me when I needed you most. I can help you too."



KLAWZ

RATHER THAN BAT her hand aside, I dodge her touch—and it doesn't escape me I've restrained my worst impulses. That only pisses me off more.

Her pretense of stubborn courage shouldn't please me but it does.

Her fake sunny optimism should infuriate me. Instead, I find myself wanting to believe the worshipful look in her stare is real.

"I..." At my rejection of her touch, her hand drops, those perfect winter sky eyes now shadowed by uncertainty.

That's better.

Almost as good as the sight of those pink, wet pussy lips peeking out from the white fabric.

The words *made just for me* drift through my mind.

I can't tear my eyes away from where my mouth, fingers, and cock crave to be. Deep within her body, heart, and mind. Surrounded. Enshrined. Anointed.

I shove the impulse aside.

"I am not your fucking savior and I'm not looking for one either. You're a means to an end. Nothing more."

She sucks in a sharp breath, hurt darkening her blue eyes. "I know you don't really mean to hurt my feelings."

I freeze.

She's miscalculated, finally. Her lie is the reminder I need.

*All I do is hurt others.*

"Your mistake." My finger slides the white fabric to the side, exposing more of her as I raise my hand, the flat of my palm hovering inches from her wet, swollen snatch.

I know it will make a shameful squelching sound when I dispense more judgment—and some part of me can't wait to hear it.

"With a little more punishment, I suspect you'll drop this pretense. You know exactly what you are to me—and what I'm capable of."

"Wait." Her pleading gaze finds mine. "I..." Her voice quivers. "I already know who I am to you. I'm your naughty, good girl."

Five simple words. Yet they stir something inside me, burning away centuries of rage, of careful defense, of hatred for all of her kind.

I like her admission more than I should.

My naughty, good girl. *Mine.*

She's better at this damn illusion game than her predecessors ever were.

"You want to play with a monster, little foe?" I nudge her legs wider with my hooves as my hand slips beneath the band of the white cloth, the rough pad of my finger—finally—circling her slippery core. "Prepare for the consequences."

She's panting now.

If I'm honest, my cock is aching and hard as the ground in frost.

As if I need what's coming next as much as she does.

My tail curls up her leg, slipping beneath the fabric near her bottom to prod-oh-so gently between her little pink cheeks.

I can't fucking wait to penetrate every tight hole.

But first...

I push one finger inside and she's so slippery wet she doesn't cry out in pain, but moans in pleasure as her hips lift and she rocks against my hand and then my tail.

"Ooooh." Her back bows as her neck arches and her legs spread wider. "That... that feels so good. It is meant to feel so good?"

"I don't know." The confession rumbles from me. It's been centuries since I touched someone, much less rutted. I barely remember, though what I do recall of sex comes nowhere close to this experience.

It's so fucking good with her, I almost forget it's an illusion she's creating to imprison me. Or that I have another purpose beyond dispensing judgment... until my lungs detect the faint scent of another essence mixing with golden amber, moonlit jasmine, fresh pine, and creamy female musk.

Blood.

On my finger.

Another illusion? It has to be. But I don't care. I fucking want it to be real—and not just to serve my ultimate aims. I want to bloody her. To be her first and her only. To claim every one of her virgin holes.

Over the roar of lust, the chants of my ex-jailers grow louder through the swirling void, and I gain renewed clarity.

It's a race now and they can feel it too.

But I'm already out in front.

Except... the scent of her blood, the illusion that I'll be the first to spill it, the way she surrenders so sweetly to my beastly demands draws me back in.

Which is why, despite myself, I ratchet up her pleasure, and distract from the pain, as I pull the soaked fabric further to the side and work my finger deeper into her tight cunt, her tiny legs spreading as her back bows, her snug channel stretching to take even that one thick digit.

A digit now stained with more of her blood.

Because by some fucking miracle that, at least, is proving to be genuine.

There's no time, however, to wonder how that's possible now.

“Such a good, fucking naughty girl. A creamy little temptation with a hellion's soul.” I mean every word. “Give that virgin blood to me. Give me my due, my payment, my sacrifice.”

I push deeper inside, my finger filling her so completely it ripples against the outside of her belly too, revealing an imprint of me claiming her from the inside out.

It makes me so fucking hard and desperate to rut, I barely notice as my claws drag against my hip as I shove my leathers past my hips, spilling blood.

My cock springs free. I fist it, tugging hard, my gaze never wavering from where my finger thrusts, a tiny smear of pink virgin blood glistening among the dewy folds.

I never thought I'd say this of her kind but she's heavenly.

Her hips jerk faster and faster, her toes curling as her arms spread wide and grip the blanket. “Klawz!”

The sound of my name tips me over.

We come together.

Her body shudders beneath my palm as ropey liquid spurts from my cock onto her creamy thighs, her pink little snatch, and, most depraved of all, the white fabric wedged between her soaked cunt lips.

The climax goes on and on. Wave after wave battering at us both. A storm of white-hot bliss.

Until her body goes slack and my legs threaten to give out.

“That was... beautiful.” Her whispered words, said more to herself than to me, are full of wonder.

They arrive like an ambush. A frozen stake straight to my hearts.

Because she’s right.

I meant to punish. To make her fear the monster and expose her deception.

Except that was no punishment. It was pure pleasure. Sheer beauty.

It was connection.

It was my blood spilled along with hers.

It was me worshiping her while she pretended to give me everything in return—and I fell for it.

Just as she predicted from the start.

I’m stripped bare. The frost around my hearts melting. Nothing left to protect me from the sting of my failures and,



even more terrifying, the protective, possessive feeling this tiny female brings to the surface.

As if I ache to be her savior. Her salvation. Her protector. To bring her joy and light. To give her hope and new beginnings. No matter what it costs me.

It's too much. Too dangerous.

Too close to a past that only ended with failure.

Her kind cannot be trusted.

That she was untouched is not a good enough reason to fall for the rest of her deception.

In fact, it's cause to be more suspicious, revealing just how much she's willing to sacrifice to draw me in. And the damned portal is still open, the pull of my old prison growing stronger.

All I've done is prove I might be a monster and a beast, but I still retain some weaknesses of the male within.

That ends now.

I need to purge these destructive impulses she inspires or I'll never be free.

Fangs flashing, claws extended, I drive my hand toward her.

**K**<sup>LAWZ</sup>

WITHOUT WARNING, I tear the flimsy white cloth from her hips and, though it's already coated in my essence and hers, I smear my finger onto the fabric, ensuring remnants of her blood are there too.

I don't stop when I hear her gasp.

I don't hesitate as I step back and leave her spread on the bed.

I stalk to the sheet of ice suspended in the room.

Then, with the soaked, torn fabric gripped in my hand and held up like a prize, I rub it along the edges of the jagged void as I chant.

It's now or never—and I have my own wishes to deliver

Since she won't close the portal, there's only one option left.

I don't stop chanting even as I feel her eyes boring into my back.

I don't hesitate even when I feel the tingling beneath my skin and the throbbing in my broken wings and know she's feeling the same uncomfortable sensations too.

Even as the discomfort turns to pain. Then excruciating agony.

“What’s happening?” A low, terrible moan resonates behind me. “W-Why does it hurt so bad?”

I turn back—and freeze.

She’s curled in the middle of the mattress, her arms wrapped around her middle, her jaw clenched tight. Nothing about her looks like an instrument of vengeance or a selfish, deceiving spell caster out to warp my power for wealth and power.

All she looks is vulnerable.

The pain grows worse, her voice slipping to a whisper as she calls for me. Pleads for my help.

It has to be more lies. Even after all I threatened, after all I’ve done, she can’t somehow believe I will keep her safe.

My stomach constricts, my claws jutting free.

Because I’m not her savior. I’m the reason for her suffering.

I always will be. Her kind is the enemy.

I square my shoulders as I stalk to her.

Still, my hand can’t resist brushing a stray strand of golden silk from her cheek. “It will be over soon.”

*Hells.* I’m weaker than I thought.

“Why is it happening?” She’s practically sobbing—and my throat is oddly tight too.

“It’s the essence spell, winding through us, tying us together.” She should know this, but I explain anyway. “I made it strong, but the worst of the pain should lessen soon.”

“Y-You did this to me?” Her words are so soft, they’re barely more than a flutter against my skin, but I feel them to my core.

And it hurts.

But I’m well used to it. Her kind has been dishing it out against me for centuries.

“Since you would not do as commanded, it was the only way to close the portal. I—”

A massive breeze whips through the room, and the hole shrinks, the sheet of ice disappearing.

My plan works. The portal vanishes, our combined essences temporarily sealing it tight.

The blockade won’t hold forever, but for the moment, I’m free.

For the first time in centuries, my wings retract, my power temporarily untainted by the corrupt hold of my ex-jailers.

The pain lessens.

For me.

For her, it has only begun.

Because now she is tied until death to a monster.

I have centuries now to master her and turn that pretense of surrender and submission to reality.

Face ghostly white, she turns accusing eyes to me. “What have you done?”

“Bonded us.” Unlike her, I don’t lie.

“What does that even mean?” She rubs at her chest and I know she feels the new weight there, the drag of my presence, a thorn that can only be dislodged one way.

“Why do you persist in playing ignorant? I cast a binding spell and now our fates are as melded as our essences. My pain is yours. Our destinies one and the same.”

She flinches. “Are you serious?”

There’s no reason for her to continue to play the innocent. The deed is done. We battled. She tried to addle my brain with lust; I won instead. “There is nothing more serious than a soul bond. It’s a matter of life and death, a beginning and an end, a melding of the sacred and profane.”

If the knowledge that she’ll never form a union with one of her own kind sends a rush of possessive satisfaction thundering through my veins, I dismiss it as another sin for which I’ll need to atone.

I’m racking up plenty.

“You want me to believe all of that happened because you waved around my panties and chanted?”

“I did more than that. I melded the essences of death and life, blood and cum, to bind us and our powers.”

Her eyes widen. “Did you just say that?” She shakes her head. “Never mind. You did.”

I watch her closely. Even for her kind, she’s unwavering in her deception. “You know the consequences as well as I. That’s why our kinds rarely uses lust and fucking as weapons for our battles.”

“Oh, my god. We didn’t!”

“Not to completion, but you allowed me inside.” I’m brutally honest because she refuses to be. “You let me spill your blood and you came all over my fingers.” Even now the memory of it stirs my blood, hardens my cock. “Lost to your base desires, you gave yourself freely. You weakened, and I won. Because, only when given freely, is it possible to use essences to create a magic strong enough to forge a soul bind.”

When she says nothing, I push on.

“Your capitulation also enabled me to hijack your power and temporarily close the portal. Shutting it permanently, however, will require more power from us both.” I force myself to admit the rest aloud. “I can’t do it alone. My power has become too warped, and it’s not what it once was. But it’s more than enough to deal with you.”

Her face grows paler.

I remember my centuries of agony, the death of my kind. I remind myself she’s one of them. “My vengeance has only just begun.”

Buoyed by familiar rage, by centuries of waiting for this moment, I bask in smug triumph. “There’s no way now for you or anyone else to use me for your twisted purposes. Nor is there any way for my last jailers to drag me back to the frozen temple without taking you as well.”

Her mouth falls open, but no words emerge.

Silence. And not just because she doesn’t speak.

I can’t hear her wishes any more.

The litany of sweet and filthy whispers that were in her head are gone. Denied to me.

I want them back

Then, I recall my broken wings, the screams for mercy from all the innocents I could not save, and I continue. “So whatever your reason for summing me here, you’d best forget it and focus on saving yourself by closing that portal permanently. Accept I’ve beaten you and submit. Otherwise, you’ll be stuck with me for all eternity and I’ll use every moment of that time to work out my thwarted revenge on you.”

“I—I thought you liked me.” Her whispered words, so simple, so direct, cut me off at my knees.

I stagger on my hooves. “What?”

“I thought you liked me. Not at first obviously. But then... the way you looked at me. Touched me.” She crawls up the mattress until she’s huddled against the headboard, her arms wrapped around her bent knees, and it takes everything inside of me not to leap forward and drag her closer. “As if you definitely felt the connection between us.”

She shakes her head, those big blue eyes filling with genuine-looking tears.

*Snowblind’s curse.* The pressure on my chest increases.

“I’m so stupid.” She mutters to herself, but I hear every word. “I-I thought you saw something in me and it didn’t matter that we looked so different or that this felt so unreal.”

She sniffs and then lets out a laugh that doesn’t sound happy at all.

“Sure you were mad, and you said some mean things, but what do I know of monsters? Every time you issued a threat, you followed it up with the sweetest of pleasures. Made me acknowledge all those urges and impulses I’ve been too afraid to admit were inside me. I was so sure that, instead of being

disgusted by them, you had them too. That we were a fit, and I'd finally found what I was searching for all along, dreaming of all along."

Every word lashes through me like a whip.

Mostly because they sound so real. Plus, the reminder of her blood on my finger is surging to the forefront of my mind once more.

I think... I think maybe I've made a mistake.

"But you don't care at all." She curls deeper into a ball. "You were just playing some kind of sick game, trying to best me. You don't like me or my *base* desires. Nor is there any actual connection. I hear you loud and clear now. You were just using me to get what you wanted. Just like the Josephs. Just like Clyde wanted to do."

"I—"

Suddenly, she stiffens, shooting to her knees. "Take it back. Get rid of the bond. I can't help you."

A menacing rumble merges from my chest. I don't like her demand. At. All. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. Not without dying."

*And I fucking won't.* She's mine.

"What does that mean?" Her shriek rings in my ears.

She should know this too. "Breaking the bond is an ending and therefore requires death magic."

"D-Death? You mean one of us will have to die?"

"Yes."



“Th-that’s... not good.”

“I already told you I’m not going to kill you.”

“Right. Not yet, at least.” She backs away, her spine hitting the headboard. “First you’re going to use me, fuck me, and make me feel like a fool.”

I growl low. “Do not say such things.”

“No? You don’t enjoy hearing that?” She scoffs. “How about I hate you?”

I enjoy these words even less.

This is strange, new territory and I’m not sure how to proceed. I’ve never cared if her kind despised me before. Never for a second wondered if one of them was capable of anything but deception and lies or questioned if my actions toward them were wrong.

But, despite these strange reactions, I know we’re not meant to bring each other anything but pain, and there’s only one way forward now.

She hates me. The damage is done.

“You will complete this task.” With nothing left to lose, I behave exactly as monstrously as she expects. “Or you will spend eternity trapped in the wasteland temple, punished right alongside me.”

“Jerk!” She rears upward and I notice her eyes are no longer arctic blue.

Now, they’re blood red and a blinding white light shimmers around her, her sweet voice thickened with otherworldly power. “I should never have trusted you.”

A blast of wind slaps my skin and I know what that means. The tips of my pelt rise. “Calm down.”

She doesn't.

“I-I thought because you called me yours, I wasn't alone anymore. But now I see I'm more alone than ever.” Her hands lift skyward. “You want revenge? Punishment? A battle? Fine, I'll show you what it's like to hurt.”

*Uh-oh.* Looks like I'm not the only one whose demons have finally come out to play.

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

“CALM DOWN, LITTLE ONE.”

There’s a voice, far off in the distance, and it sounds like my dream lover, but it’s hard to know for sure.

In fact, it’s hard to register anything past the haze of blinding white light, the roaring in my ears, and a strange pressure in my chest and at my shoulder blades, as if something is trying to break free.

“Stop this now.” There’s more urgency than before. “You’re hurting yourself, damn it.”

The concern in those words acts like a slap.

The haze lifts.

I blink—and then blink again.

*Oh, my god.*

The beast is halfway up the wall. Pinned to it like a bug. His arms outstretched, his wings nowhere to be seen. Several

craters approximately his size dent the ceiling and the walls, as if something huge slammed into the plaster.

Just as terrifying, his muscles are bulging, veins popping, tail whipping back and forth, as if he's battling some foe.

But there's no one there.

And I... I don't feel right.

"Klawz?" I sway as his name emerges as a rasp, my throat sore, though I can't imagine why.

Or how I even got to standing.

The last thing I remember was standing by the bed...

*Oh, right.* My chest pinches. It's coming back to me now. Part of me wishes I could forget again.

I've secretly dreamed of belonging to someone for so long. Finding a partner who could be my shelter, my home, just as I'd be theirs.

When I was lying on that mattress, sticky and replete, floating on a sea of pleasure, every muscle lax, I thought maybe I'd found that after all.

He might look like a beast, but he'd handled me like a god.

It felt like destiny. Like magic. Like he and I were fated, and this was some kind of unreal, beautiful fairytale.

Then, he betrayed me.

*Crash.*

Klawz's big body slides down the wall and slams into the floor as if some invisible hand slammed him into it.

He hits hard enough that a dent appears in the floor.

I'm definitely not getting my security deposit back now.

Even more alarming, my knees wobble and give out, my spine and butt throbbing so painfully, I can't stay upright.

“By the icy abyss!” Klawz bounds upward and makes it across the room in the next heartbeat. He sweeps me into his arms before I hit the ground. “Wish for the pain to lessen.”

I should fight the betraying bastard's hold, but I can't. It hurts too much.

“Do it!” He barks. “Make the damned wish.”

*I want it to go away.*

Nothing. No, that's not true. The pain worsens.

“Don't wish for it to go away,” he growls. “I can't deliver the impossible. Wish for the pain to lessen.”

His words seem ridiculous, but I'm susceptible to the command beneath, to that foolish part of me that, despite all evidence to the contrary, still sees him as my dream lover and protector and instinctually wants to please.

Before I even realize it, I'm repeating his words in my head, molding my wishes to fit his.

“Good girl.”

Instantly, the pain lessens.

But his false praise stings in a different way.

I slam my palms against his chest. “Let me go!”

I honestly don't expect my actions to have much effect. He's humongous and I'm not.

But Klawz goes tumbling across the room and slams into the wall.

I fly in the other direction, crashing into the headboard before my butt hits the mattress.

More pain, but not at my shoulder where I landed. Instead, the throbbing radiates down my spine.

“You’ve got to stop throwing me around.” Eyes glowing red, he shoves to standing and stalks toward me. “It’s only hurting you.”

He’s angry again. That should terrify me.

It doesn’t. I’m too mad and reckless to be cowed—and so sick of being scared and helpless.

What’s more, since he touched me, there’s a defiance sizzling through my veins. I don’t feel like being so good or polite anymore.

“Don’t come near me.”

He freezes. A look I can’t read flits across his face before his lips tilt upward, as if he likes my spirit. “You want to play, hellion? Bring it.” He crouches as if preparing to fight, his wings springing from his back, leathery sinew dragging along the ground. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Fury spikes through me. So much so I can feel stupid tears threatening again.

A few short hours ago, I was a simple, lonely girl on my farm. Now, I’m facing off against a huge beast with horns who keeps accusing me of summoning him and refusing to close some stupid portal.

Worse? I forgot all the Josephs’ lectures and let him touch me, spread my legs eagerly, and got used just as they warned I would.

I swallow down the lump and the embarrassing impulse to start balling.

The Josephs also said tears were a weakness—and I refuse to show this jerk of a monster that his callousness hurts—almost as much as him calling me *his* good girl, when that’s clearly far from true.

I bound from the bed, hands on hips.

“Ugh, I wish I was your size.” I glare at him. I don’t know where I find the courage, but what else do I have to lose?

My pride is gone.

As for my life? Well, he’s likely going to kill me when I’m no longer of use. If I understand half of his bizarre explanation, it’s the only way to break the bond and be free of me—once I’ve done what he wants, of course.

“If I was, you wouldn’t find me so easy to push around then, you big bully.”

I expect him to match my fury. His brow wrinkles instead. “Why do you need to be my size? You’ve pushed me around plenty in the last few moments.”

“Stop mocking me. Do you think I like being this weak?”

“You?” He eyes the closest dent in the wall. “If you were any less puny, the wall itself would have crumbled to smithereens.”

“What?” The word emerges as a squeak.

“How about those two males who tried to drag you away from me and out of this room?” He’s warming to his subject, his frown disappearing as what looks almost like admiration takes its place. “They certainly didn’t think you were weak as they screamed for mercy while you tore them to pieces.”

“What?” This time I whisper.

Because that woozy sensation is back.

And worse? What Klawz is saying is actually sounding vaguely familiar. As if it *did* happen, like in a dream except... the crack of bones and the screams are a little too vivid.

“That... that can’t be.” I shake my head as if I can cast aside this madness, too. “I don’t do that sort of thing. I-I can’t. I’m just a silly, stupid girl.” *At least that’s what the Josephs said.*

Frowning, his gaze sweeps from the frantic pulse at my throat to the fists twisted in my skirt.

“Hells, you’re not actually lying, are you?” He swallows hard and answers his own question. “None of this is a deception or an illusion. You mean every word.” His nostrils flare as he mutters what sounds like another curse. “This complicates things.”

“No, it’s very simple. You’ve made a mistake and now it’s cleared up. I’m nothing special and things like this don’t happen to someone like me.” My voice is getting higher and shriller. “I’m just a girl from Kansas, trying to find her way. That’s all.”

“Just a girl? Nothing special?” His braids flutter as he shakes his head. “Not just anyone can open and close a portal, Holly.”

I have no idea how he knows my name and I like even less how the sound of it sends a sinful shiver through me. But I have larger concerns to address.

“I didn’t open any portal.”



“You did.” He takes one step closer. “You brought me here. You summoned me.”

*This again.* “I did not.”

“You did.”

“You’re wrong.” But I remember thinking of him right before the sheet of ice appeared and then exploded.

“I’m not wrong.” He takes another step toward me. “What’s more, the blood and cum of a simple Kansas girl can’t create a soul bond.”

“Stop.”

But like always, Klawz doesn’t stop. “Only the blended essences of an angel and a demon can seal a portal.”

*What did he just say?*

“Stop talking.” My thighs hit the back of the bed.

He keeps coming. “A simple girl could not pick me up with a thought and toss me around the room in her fury.”

“No.” I shake my head in denial.

“Or crack the bones of two males and send their blood splattering across the walls before she turns them to ash.”

“N-no.”

“Yes. The sooner you accept what you are, the sooner you control it. You have power, Holly. Far more than you ever realized.”

A strange tingling rushes through my veins as if called to life by his words, the pressure at my chest and shoulder blades greater than before.

“I thought you knew. I thought you summoned me here on purpose, but now...” He clears his throat. “It doesn’t matter how we got here. What matters is that you need to tap into your power and close the portal permanently—before I’m pulled back into my old realm and you’re dragged there with me.”

It’s too much. Too ridiculous. This talk of angels and demons and portals and me the last straw.

“No. I don’t have any powers. Go away.” I lift my hands to ward off his words—and Klawz goes sailing across the room once more.

He crashes into the wall and leaves an even bigger dent than before, plaster flying everywhere.

*Oh, my god.* I might not just be a simple girl from Kansas.

My throat goes tight, my breathing ragged. “I didn’t mean to—”

Before I can finish, there’s a blinding light, a horrific roar, and another swirling void appears in the middle of the room.

Only this one is pitch black.

And it’s dragging me toward it.

“Klawz!” I grab onto the bed sheets for an anchor, tangling my fingers in the fabric, fighting against the strong pull.

“Snow’s blizzard!” Across the room, on the other side of the void, Klawz struggles to rise, fighting the gale wind, his braids flapping, his fur flattening against his body as his wings snap back like a sail. “You need to calm down, Holly. The portal’s existence is tied to your emotions.”

*Calm down?*

Two more pillows fly by my head—and vanish in the inky void.

That can't be good.

*Rip.* The force of the wind tears the bedsheets from the bed and, left without an anchor, I tumble toward the hole.

I try to fight it. Try to turn my body and run in the opposite direction. To spread my arms wide and grab for anything I can find.

But there's nothing to seize hold of.

Everything that was up is down. Everything I thought I knew has been tilted on its axis.

All too soon, I'm inches from the swirling hole.

“Nooo—”

A hand clamps around my wrist. “I've got you.”

My head snaps up and I see Klawz. He's holding on to me, corded muscles at his neck and chest straining as he grips me tight, his tail wrapped around the foot of the nearby dresser.

He's got me. He's my anchor.

Then, the dresser buckles and flies through the air, and we tumble alongside it right through the void.

Klawz holding me close.

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

WE'RE FALLING FAST, my mouth open on a silent scream.

We crash into something hard. Careen off it, tumble, and keep plunging.

“Use your wings.” I scream the words at him.

“They don't work.” His response is strangely calm, even as he curls his big body tighter around me.

He's trying to bear the brunt, his arms holding me so tight I can barely breathe, but since he did whatever he did and our fates are now tied, I'm feeling everything he does.

And it hurts.

I curl my fingers into the straps that hold his armor to his chest and pray.

We keep dropping—until we stop.

My body jolts from the impact, but thanks to Klawz and whatever we've landed on, it's not as bad as expected.

“Are you okay?” The words come tumbling out. Now is not the time for grudges.

“I’m fine. You?” Klawz’s grip hasn’t loosened. In fact, he might be holding me even tighter.

“Fine, too.” It’s a miracle, but I’m in one piece. Yes, there are more than a few bumps and bruises, but I’m alive.

*How is that possible?*

“It’s possible because you’re you. Nobody special would have died in that fall.” It’s not until Klawz answers that I realize I asked my question aloud—and that he hasn’t given up on his earlier message. “But you’re not just anybody, Holly. Not at all.”

*Huh.* For the first time, this whole insane mess sounds kind of cool.

I’ve always felt powerless and a lot less formidable than those around me. The idea that I might not be as weak as I thought makes my spine go a little straighter.

I might even be a bad-ass. *If* it’s true.

I’m still not sure what to believe. I am definitely not trusting Klawz’s sudden gentleness, or forgiving him for what he’s done.

But I’m still breathing and, what’s more, I survived a fall that would kill most.

There’s also no ignoring the fact that Klawz held me close the whole way down.

“Where are...” My voice trails off as I take stock of our surroundings.

In the next heartbeat, I scramble off Klawz, inadvertently making him grunt.

“Look at this place.”

Massive, shimmering silver pine trees spread out as far as the eye can see. Each one at least as tall as the skyscrapers I’ve seen in city landscape photos.

This is definitely not the motel room.

I peer at the tree towering above and can’t see the top, only glimpses of a clear purple sky peeking through silver needles.

It’s beautiful.

Each conifer is a perfect, oversized Christmas tree and at the bottom, tucked amidst the silver, fallen needles that litter the ground, are glittering red and silver flowers as colorful as wrapped presents.

“We need to leave.” Klawz’s no-nonsense voice yanks me from my happy daze. “Everfrost is unsafe. Summon the portal to return.”

*Bossy as ever.* “Umm, right. As I mentioned before, I have no idea how to do that and...” I finally catch sight of Klawz, who’s now towering over me.

A totally inappropriate sound erupts from my throat.

I slap my hands over my mouth, but I can’t stop the next giggle, either.

The big, bad, terrifying Klawz is covered in glitter.

The same silver dust that covers the needles on the trees now coats him like a sugar dessert. There are even sparkles on his horns, the tip of his snout, and his wings.

“You... you...” I can’t get the words out.

The single rise of one heavy brow pulls another giggle from me.

He looks down at his arms and chuffs like a bull, as if affronted that glitter would dare stick to a terrifying monster like himself.

He gives a firm shake.

The shimmers fly everywhere. Then settle right back where they were.

It's the last straw.

I erupt.

It's all so absurd. Him. Me. This whole unreal scenario. All the built-up tension, all the fear, all the hurt and anger and shock and disbelief, explodes out of me. Along with an even greater sense of gratitude to be alive.

I can't stop laughing.

I curl over, my stomach hurting, breathing difficult. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes. It's a glorious release. Almost as good as the kind Klawz gave me on that motel mattress.

I can't stop.

Until finally I see a pair of hooves in my line of vision and I realize I need to breathe.

I suck down air, my giggles lessening and then fading away... and I remember where I am, who I'm with, and that I'm acting like an idiot.

"Oh, yikes. I am so sorry. I..." I look up mid-apology, my words deserting me.

Klawz is staring at me.

But not with anger or disgust. Not even with the impatience the Josephs showed when I was too loud or too unmeasured for their liking.

No, the expression in Klawz's eyes is something else. It's a look no one has given me before.

Like I'm something extraordinary.

Like I'm an unexpected gift that showed up under his Christmas tree.

Like maybe I'm something to be treasured, after all.

Heat warms my cheeks.

I duck my head, suddenly shy. "That was... I don't know what came over me. I—"

A firm hand grips my chin and tilts it upward. "You have nothing to be sorry for." His husky rasp is even deeper than usual. "I haven't heard true laughter in... centuries."

My chest constricts at the thought.

He removes his hold on my chin, but only to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "And yours is beautiful beyond measure. Never apologize for it."

My knees go weak, some of my hurt and resentment melting away.

Then the pad of his thumb sweeps across my lips. "You're covered in glitter too, little one." He pauses slightly. "Though you sparkle with or without it."

Is this the same guy who recently called me nothing but a pawn and threatened to punish me for eternity? The words are so sweet, they whisper across my skin and settle deep in my belly. "Klawz."



His eyes darken, the red so deep it's almost black. "Holly."

I want him again.

He hurt me and I'm still raw from it. Still untrusting because he's made it clear he wants something from me and, until I deliver, he's stuck by my side. But I can't fight the draw to him.

For three years, he was my dream lover and my protector, making me feel less alone. Those feelings aren't just vanishing, despite his recent cruelty.

I know I shouldn't soften, but he's showing me a world I never imagined and parts of myself I never knew existed, and some greedy, wild new instinct wants to drink it all in.

Every. Part. Even the most monstrous.

Far off in the distance, there's the gentle sound of ringing bells and I can't help thinking it's perfect. As beautiful as this moment.

Until Klawz's head snaps up. "We need to go."

My heart slams against my ribs. "Why? What's wrong?"

The tinkling bells grow louder.

"You need to summon the portal and get us out of here and back to your realm." He pushes me behind him and backs us up against the closet tree trunk.

"Why?" I try to peer over his shoulder but he's got me lodged so tightly against the tree, his body blocking the way, that I can't see anything. "What's out there?"

"Kringle Wylvven."

He might as well be speaking a different language. "Excuse me?"

“A pack of vicious predators.” Still covered in glitter, he snaps off a branch as wide as me and, claws springing out, starts sharpening the end to a vicious point. “That jingling is the bones from their recent meal. They like their food fresh so they don’t kill it, at least not at first. Instead, they start with the limbs, suck out the marrow while their prey is still alive, and wear its bones in their fur while dining on what’s still alive.”

Oh, no! *Portal, come here now.*

Nothing.

Surprise, surprise.

“Believe me, after hearing that, I want out of here immediately, but I have no idea how to bring back the portal.” I try to sound as calm as Klawz, but there’s no question my voice emerges higher than usual.

“If history is any indication, high emotion, fear, and anger seem to trigger a summons.” He crouches down, those glorious muscles in his back bunching and flexing as he drives one palm flat into the snow while the other holds his new pointy spear aloft over his shoulder. “All of which you’ll likely be experiencing very soon.”

Then, he turns back over his shoulders and winks.

Winks?!

As if this is the time to grow a sense of humor and charm.

I don’t realize I’ve spoken aloud until he chuckles. “There hasn’t been a lot to be amused about for the last few centuries, but now...” He cracks his thick neck from side to side, his wings spreading as wide as their crooked state allows. “I’m free, at least for the moment. I’m killing the deserving for once after a long while. I’ve got the scent of the sweetest little pussy

burned into my lungs and heavenly laughter in my ears. I'm better than I've been in a long time."

Warmth spreads through me, and despite myself, my lips twitch upward.

"So, I'm going to enjoy this while I can." He turns back around, the thin, leathery skin of his wing grazing my cheek, and then he cocks his head to the side, his ears twitching. "Plus, it sounds like a smaller pack, only twenty-five or so. We'll be fine."

Twenty-five or so? Fear roars through me once more.

Which, I guess, could be a good thing given Klawz's theory, but it's not making me feel any better. "I can't do this. I'm a farm girl from Kansas. I—"

"Listen to me." Klawz's spins around and, stabbing his spear into the pine needle ground, wraps his hands around my shoulders. "You can do this. You *will* do this. I will hold them off as long as I can."

"I'm not sure I can."

He gives me a single shake. "You have a will of ice and steel. You fell from a terrifying height and laughed about it. You took on two bigger males who were going to harm you. You tossed me around like a chestnut. You've survived your whole life not knowing what you were capable of. Now you know. Don't waste another moment. We're in this together and I'm not going anywhere."

My breathing slows. Best pep talk ever.

*Okay.* I nod. "Right. We've got this."

"Damn straight." He yanks his spear and whips back around, resumes his bad-ass crouch position, his wings

shielding me.

The wind whips up.

The tinkling bells grow louder.

The ground shakes, the shimmering needles on the floor swirling as if we're in a snow globe.

I am doing everything I can to picture the portal when, between one blink and the next, they appear: white streaks, moving faster than my eye can perceive.

“Brace!” With a roar, Klawz throws the spike, and then, without pause, he's swiping out with his claws, his body a blur.

It's all happening so fast and wings keep getting in my way. I can't take in anything more than smudges of white fur, flashing teeth, and Klawz's roars—until the furry bodies start to pile up.

The tusks protruding from the lower lips of the Kringle Wylvven are huge and their pointed claws each the size of a machete. Bones of all shapes and sizes are tangled in their matted fur and their eyes are an eerie white.

Even in death, they're terrifying.

But Klawz is more so.

He's breathing hard, but it's his enemies' bodies littering the ground.

I guess I can trust him to keep me safe in this regard, at least.

Of course, I want to help by channeling the same power I used to toss Klawz into the wall, but I'm terrified I'll end up

hurting him by accident. What's more, I know he wants me to concentrate on the gateway.

*Here, portal, portal.* I call for it like I summoned our old hog when she didn't want to come in for the night. Then, I try being bossy. *Come here, now!*

All the while, I hear Klawz growling and grunting while that sick sense of powerlessness creeps over me.

He's doing his part, but what about me? I don't want to be that silly, stupid girl who could never quite live up to expectations.

A wave of helpless frustration rolls through me.

The same sensation that rushed through my veins when Clyde and his men attacked me.

The same sensation that wound through me when that bank manager left me no options with the farm.

The same sensation that pressed down on me every time the Josephs told me I wasn't doing enough.

The same sensation that sliced through me when Klawz tied my fate to his without asking.

Helpless. Vulnerable. Impotent.

I hate it.

Hate it enough that I refuse to feel that way anymore.

In fact, I won't allow it. I'm nobody's pawn. Nobody's fool.

*Crack.* The lower branch of a nearby tree breaks from its trunk and sails through the air, taking out one of the Kringle Wylvven in the process.

The branch disappears in the next instant—into the void.

I've done it.

The portal is back.

It tugs at me even now, my feet skidding along the ground.

“Klawz!” The wind is a roar, silvery needles pricking my skin as they twist and twirl, a blizzard of white and silver that makes it impossible to see.

But apparently not everyone has that problem.

“Hold on.” I'm tipped over in the next heartbeat, my belly slamming into something hard as my head and feet change places.

I'm over Klawz's shoulder, his soft leathery wing brushing my cheek. The perfect vantage point to see the Wyylven leaping toward us.

“Here we go.” Klawz charges the void—and jumps.

A weightless sensation takes hold, relief too.

Until I realize I have no idea if the portal is taking us back home or not.

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

*SPLASH.*

Water soaks the tips of my hair as we land with a jarring bump that travels up my spine, me still over Klawz's shoulder.

Still, it's far from last time's terrible landing.

But unless the portal dumped us in the motel shower, my portal skills are once more not up to par, and I've transported us someplace else.

Pressing one hand flat against Klawz's back for leverage, I avoid his wing as best I can and push myself up, rubbing the water from my eyes.

The sky is a swirl of pink, orange, and gold, the beach a fine purple sand, and the rippling water a sparkling gold. Palm trees with fan-like fronds wave gently in the faint breeze. Though instead of brown trunks and green trees, these trunks are a deep blue and their leaves range in color from deep purple to lavender.

It's literally the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

*Oh, no.* “What have I done?”

“Relax. We’re fine.” Klawz strides towards the shore, the water only up to his calves as I swivel and frantically scan what I can see of the coastline.

“I don’t think so. This place is even more gorgeous than the last—and you know what that means? Something horrifying is lurking nearby, ready to suck out our marrow and wear our bones as decor.”

He chuckles as if what I’ve said was a joke and sets me on the sandy, purple shore. “There are no Kringle Wylvven here.”

His wings retract, disappearing as if they were never there, while my feet sink into soft powder. It’s the texture of fluffy clouds, but warm to the touch. My toes can’t stop wiggling.

“Well, there’s something else terrifying lying-in wait.” I scan the lace-like palms laden with pink, purple, and orange fruit. “There always is.”

He shrugs. “Maybe, but they’re not here now.”

I’ve never heard him so calm.

I give him a good once-over. Thankfully—and rather impressively—he sustained no discernible injuries from the last battle, and I feel no additional pain either.

If that wasn’t enough of a clue as to his mood, there’s also the fact that his shoulders are looser, his braids fluttering gently in the wind. Even his armor, previously streaked with blood, is relatively clean thanks to our dip. Plus, without those twisted wings dragging along the ground, he looks a lot less broken.

If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think... “Are you actually happy we ended up here?”



This time he gives me a chin lift. “You’re unharmed. We survived the Wylvven. You’re getting better with the portal. Plus, I like it here. Lumisola was always a realm I visited when I could. It will be a good place for you to get the breather you need.”

I definitely like the idea of a breather. It’s been one roller coaster of emotion after another since I set foot on that bus.

Then Klawz’s casual words catch my attention. I know so little about him and, maybe it’s because he saved me from the Kringle Wylvven, but I’m not as furious with him as I was. “You’ve been here before?”

“Yes.” He drags a few downed palms across the sand and props them together to create a makeshift shade structure. “I’ve been here and many other realms. Before I lost my power and was imprisoned, I was able to open and close portals much like you. Well, actually,” a mischievous glint flickers in his gaze, “I accomplished it far better than you.”

I fake glare at him, but given what he just revealed, my heart’s not in it.

After his attempt to tease and deflect, all I want to do is haul him close. But I’m not sure he wants that. And, after what he did to me, I’m not sure I should want that, anyway.

So, instead, I try to drag a palm frond over myself and realize they’re heavy as heck. He made it look easy.

“Both of our kind can create portals. We learn when we’re young.” He studies me. “I wonder what happened in your case.”

*Both of our kind?* There’s that reference again.

I am honestly not sure though how much more I can handle right now so I shrug, and like him, pretend my past is

old news. “I have no idea. I was abandoned at a church in Kansas and no one ever came back to claim me.”

He stops working and stares down at me. “Probably an effort to hide you in order to protect you.”

“Didn’t feel like that.” The words bubble up before I can stop them.

“Hells’ frost.” He drops the frond and sends purple powder into the air. “Come here, little one.”

Only he doesn’t wait for me to move but leaps forward and grabs me, wrapping me in all his heat and strength, his wings snapping out to cocoon us both. “You’re claimed now.”

I know he’s a monster. I know he’s the one who tied me to him. I know he did it out of revenge and rage. I know he’ll have to eventually kill me if he wants to be truly free.

But I still feel safer than I ever have.

If it wasn’t for the faint vacuum-like tug at my skin, I’d be content to stay right here forever.

So, I burrow in deep, sliding my arms beneath his wings and wrap myself around him. He’s so big, my arms only reach a little of the way, but it’s perfect, nonetheless.

The Josephs didn’t believe in hugs.

I realize in this moment how starved I am for touch. But not just any touch. *His* touch.

His big hand cups the back of my head, his claws raking gently through my hair. “Holly, I...” There’s a long pause. A sigh. “Our kinds have never gotten along, but there was a time when we had an uneasy truce. Yes, there were skirmishes, personal vendettas, but since our powers were well-matched,

most kept their distance from each other and balance was retained.”

I’m still trying to digest this and how it might relate to what we’ve been discussing when he continues.

“Then a small sect broke the truce, war ensued, and all hells literally broke loose, allowing evil to run rampant in the realms. I suspect that is why you were hidden.” He squeezes me tighter. “Someone cared enough to try and keep you safe from the battle.”

Now I understand why he brought this up. “That’s a... nice thought.”

“It would also explain why you’re different. When all this is settled, we’ll see what we can find out about your origins. Someone’s gotta know something and I know more than a few of your kind. They don’t like dealing with me, but I can be persuasive when necessary. If I have to rip apart every bone in their bodies, we’ll get you some answers.”

“Thank you, Klawz.” Sure, he’s threatening violence and punishment, but it’s for a good cause, at least for me. “I’ve always wanted to know where I came from. Now, more than ever.”

“I know you have no reason to trust me after... what I did, but I will keep you safe, Holly.” He rests his chin on the top of my head. “Not just for now, but forever. You have my vow.”

I was so sure this was going to be the worst Christmas ever, but maybe it doesn’t have to be.

Klawz is acting nicer. He seems to have accepted that I didn’t summon him on purpose and that I’m not lying about my inability to close the portal.

And that's twice now he's saved me. Once from Clyde and his men. The second time from the Kringle Wylvven.

Still, there's so much I don't understand. So much I *need* to know before I decide if I can trust him fully. "Will you tell me how you were imprisoned?"

He stiffens, and my stomach goes tight.

But Klawz doesn't dismiss my question. "Yes, but first I need you to understand I wasn't right when I came through the portal. I'd been imprisoned and tortured for centuries by the wasteland temple sect who used my power for their own, killing thousands while accumulating riches and power."

*Oh, no.* My hands move of their own accord, gliding up and down his back in an attempt to soothe the unimaginable.

"I was," he pauses, "close to the point of no return when your summons pulled me from my prison. I...I should have seen your innocence for what it was: truth rather than a facade, but I was bad off and I didn't want to make the same mistake as before."

The last of my resentment crumbles with his explanation. "What mistake?"

His tail snaps through the air. "A long time ago, my sisters, brothers, and I were some of the most powerful beings in all the realms. Most feared us, but we did important work."

"Realms? How many more are there than the ones we've been to?"

"An infinite number. For as long as there have been realms, there have been different forms of life, some with more advantages and power, some with less. In my homeland, there are almost as many supernatural types as there are snowflakes in the sky."

I nod, though my mind reels.

“I traveled through the realms,” he continues, “punishing the undeserving and rewarding the deserving. But there were others who did not want balance.”

“Like those who imprisoned you?”

“Yes, they plotted to bring me down.” A growl rumbles from his chest. “I made it easy.”

“I’m sure you didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Does it matter? The end result was the same. I was young, arrogant, and certain I was invincible. Worse, I’d become jaded. During all my travels, I came across so few who were deserving, almost all I did was punish. When I was called to the temple wasteland for their Judgment Day, I was therefore unsurprised to find a group who stank of rot but who professed their innocence, begging for mercy.” He shudders against me. “I had none.”

I hold him tighter.

“I did as I always had.” Each word emerges as a thick rasp, as if scraped from the depths of his soul and weighed down by guilt, a secret carried alone for too long. “I punished—and by the time my growl had vibrated through the air, their bodies crumbling to dust, I saw they were not turning to coal and ash, but into shimmering, shining crystals, each a perfect snowflake.”

“What does that mean?”

“My enemies had somehow masked the goodness of the beings called to judgment and I punished the innocent. Murdered those without sin. And damned us all in the process.”

“They tricked you.”

“But it was me who fell for it.” He sucks down a heavy breath. “That is that nature of the male you once called your savior.”

“Klawz, you can’t blame yourself.”

“I can. I do. What I did not only ended innocent lives, but corrupted my power and made it possible for the temple wasteland sect to trap me and seize my defiled gift for their own use. First, they used my powers to kill my family. Then, the rest of my kind. Until,” palpable remorse tinges each word, “there was no one else left to stand against them—and all I could do was watch it happen.”

“Klawz—”

He speaks over me. “I offered no mercy to innocents and received none in return. The only difference is I deserve my punishment, they did not.”

“You’re wrong!” I want to rail at the cruelty done to him and the tragedy of it all. I do neither. Instead, I bury my face into his chest, willing him to feel less alone and at fault. “I understand why you feel the guilt you do, but it’s those who imprisoned you who are to blame for these horrors.”

No wonder he has so much pain inside him. No wonder he’s so suspicious and distrustful.

“I hate that they did that to you. Hate that you blame yourself.”

He pulls me back just far enough to stare down at me. “You leave the hating and vengeance to me. You’re too good for that.”

“Klawz.” Warmth whispers through me. “You’re too good for hating too.” I know it’s madness, I know it’s too soon, but the words tumble from me anyway and they feel right. Fated. “What you deserve is kindness, understanding, and... love.”

“Holly.” His eyes darken, pupils dilating, but he shakes his head as if fighting his reaction. “Didn’t you hear a damn thing I said? I made the same mistake with you. Again, I failed to see the innocence and goodness right in front of me.”

“I’m not so innocent anymore, beast.” I change tactics. Mostly because sympathy is getting me nowhere. “Nor am I looking for a squeaky, clean hero. I prefer someone tested. Someone who is steeped in darkness and learns from it. Someone who knows their flaws and uses them to fuel their strengths.”

He studies me as if unsure whether to trust my sincerity.

It’s then I know words will only get me so far. “Want to know something else?” I slid my hand down his sculpted abdomen and fist his length. “I’m not feeling particularly good right now, either.”

Our gazes lock, his shaft thickening against my palm as he reads the intent in my stare.

His nostrils flare. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I squeeze gently—and just like that, the pain in his stare vanishes, replaced by lust.

It’s funny how things happen. A war I didn’t even know about shaped Klawz’s fate and mine, honing us into who we’ve become.

While I wish I could take back every horror he suffered, the thought that if events hadn’t unfolded as they did, I might have never known him throbs like a bruise. The truth is, I’d

live my lonely childhood a thousand times over if it meant I ended up here with Klawz, him holding me close.

“I might not have summoned you on purpose.” Now that I have his attention, I remove my hand from his cock and place it over his hearts so I’m sure he’ll hear every word. “But I’m glad you came through that portal and escaped your jailers—and together we are going to find a way to close it for good. No one is imprisoning you ever again.”

He covers my hand with his own. “Little one, you’re too good for a monster like me.”

“I think we’re a perfect fit.” I know him better now. Understand that there is so much more to the male holding me than the stern, terrifying visage of a monster and the arousing, commanding growl of a beast.

He’s lost, like me. Without a family, like me.

Damaged and broken in ways I can’t fully comprehend.

And I might not know how to heal him or give him back what he’s lost, but I know what we both need right now.

I rise on my tiptoes, my free hand gliding up his chest to wrap around his broad shoulder. Shoulders that scared me for a time, but now seem the epitome of strength, of shelter, of sexy.

“Show me, Klawz, how to make more of my wishes come true.” Then, because it feels right, I bare my teeth and scrape them over his nipple. “I want naughty, not nice.”

He growls low—and the next thing I know the world shifts and I’m over his shoulder once more, the tips of my hair brushing his wings and his muscular round ass, his hand on my bottom. “What my good girl wants, she gets.”



## K<sup>LAWZ</sup>

I LAY her gently on the powdery sand under the shelter I've made. It's the last time I plan to be gentle for a while.

She looks up at me, eyes already at half-mast. Her hair a crown of sunlight around her face, her hands fisting her skirt to keep it from falling, her knees slightly up, thighs pressed tight.

She smiles shyly up at me, but I can see the pulse fluttering at her throat.

She's nervous. Despite her request, or maybe because of it.

This female, she stirs my blood like no other.

After so many centuries of illusion and lies, I forgot what purity looked like and almost missed out on the one good thing to come my way in forever.

I thought she summoned me to her to imprison me. Instead, she's setting me free.

It's been ages since I confessed my failure. Since someone knew what I was and gave me kindness, anyway.

It feels a hells of a lot like one lurching step closer to absolution. The kind of redemption I don't deserve, but that I'm taking, anyway.

While I can.

Because even now, my jailers' spells are increasing in strength, battering at the temporary shields keeping the portal locked tight.

But I'm not going to focus on what's coming. I'd rather focus on Holly.

I run my thumb along the knuckles of her tight fist, enjoying the half-lidded, aroused look in her eyes. "What do you know about fucking, little girl?"

She squirms on the sand, and I can tell I've taken the right approach.

"I grew up on a farm." Her cheeks grow pinker.

"And you touched yourself." I don't phrase it as a question.

Her gaze shifts away, her hold on her skirt tightening. "Yes."

"Good girl." I lean in closer. "Such a naughty, good fucking girl."

She melts at my praise, her lips tilting upward.

I can tell underneath all that sweet shyness and polite facade, my girl's a wild little thing. But someone made her feel bad about it. Made her feel she couldn't be who she is.

I'm going to rectify that.

I'm going to earn her trust. Prove to her our connection is real.

“So, my hellion knows enough to understand I’m going to push my cock deep inside her pussy and stretch her wide.” I wrap my palms over the ones she’s still got clutched to her skirt. “Until her little hole is shaped just for me. ”

She whimpers.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I use her hands to drag her skirt over the tops of her knees. “It’s going to hurt—penance for the pleasure—but you’ll like that, too. I’ll make sure of it.”

She moans louder.

How I failed to register her reactions as anything but genuine the first time I touched her shows just how lost I was, but I’m found now, my mission clear: earn her forgiveness.

“I’m going to give you every wish you’ve ever had.”

Her smile grows. “I think, maybe, you already are.”

That lurch toward absolution? It gets a little closer.

“Just wait, baby.” The hem of her skirt glides over her thighs and then, finally, she’s bare.

A perfect little pink glistening pussy with a small patch of golden fuzz peeking from between her raised legs. All for me.

“They always warn the sweet ones to fear what goes bump in the night.” I swirl my finger around her belly button and then trail it over her pubic bone to her slick, little slit. “But what are you gonna do when you’re at one’s mercy in the bright light of the day?”

Her breath hitches and I know she likes the idea of being mine to play with as I wish.

Hells, I love it too. No one does dark and dirty better than a monster.

“First,” I ghost my thumb over the swollen little nub peeking out, “I’m going to stroke this little bud with my tongue.”

Her head snaps up, eyes wide.

Guess mouth fucking is not something that happened on the farm.

“Use your hands to spread your legs, Holly.”

Palms trembling, she follows my command.

“Good. Hold them open wide for me.”

The pulse at her throat speeds up, but she does as she’s told.

“It’s good you know the way of beasts, little one.” I run my thumb along the mound she’s presenting to me. “But watching and being fucked by one are two very different things.”

She shivers, but I can tell my warning only makes her hotter, her pussy lips plumping more.

I can’t wait to lick her clean. “Good, naughty girl. Creaming just for me.” I gather the moisture and rub it over her hole, pushing some inside. “You’ll need all the slick you have to take me.”

I step back just a little.

Enough to let her see my hand wrapping around my dick.

“After I’m done fucking you with my tongue, I’m going to put this inside you.” I give it a tug as she rises to her elbows and stares with half-lidded eyes. I want her to see the small knots spaced at intervals along the shaft, the three ridges right beneath the head, and the shape of my double crown, more

like a battering ram than a puny human phallus. “It won’t go easy, but we’ll get there. You with me?”

She moans low.

“You’re with me.” Moving fast, I drop to my knees and hook her legs over my horns, her little legs hanging like a sacrifice, allowing her no leverage. Which is good by me. I mean to control everything she experiences.

“Hands above your head, Holly.” I lick my way down her frosted cream center, over her belly button, heading to where I want to be the most.

“Your tongue...” She gasps and wiggles beneath my hold. “It’s so big. Rough. Like... a cat.”

“Perfect for your little pussy.” I take a long swipe of creamy center.

She squeals, her body going rigid before it melts. “Oh, that is... incredible.”

I nuzzle her silky skin. Press my lips to the inside of each thigh before scraping my fang along her soft flesh. She’s as beautiful here as she is everywhere else.

I use two fingers to spread her fully. “My little innocent, on display, back arched, tits pointed skyward, about to be debauched. Primed for every filthy thing the beast wants to do to her.”

More slick beads on her pretty folds.

My cock grows harder.

I flick her little swollen clit gently—just once.

She whimpers as her hips rise, seeking more.

Like any good monster, I push my advantage, pinning her down and pressing her thighs wider apart. Then I add my tail to the fun, sending it winding up her leg and stroking over her tight little rosebud. “Once I lick it, tail it, or fuck it, it’s mine. *Only. Mine.* You got that, little one?”

She hesitates.

Guess ass-play didn’t happen much on the farm either.

But we monsters never play fair.

My tongue snakes out, and this time I flick her nub with just the tip. I do the same with my tail against her bottom.

“Yes!” She screams her surrender, spine arching as her hips strain toward my tongue. “Yes, yours.” Each word is a pretty pant. “Everywhere. Anytime.”

I almost come on the spot. Her submission sears deep, unearthing something long cold and encased in frost.

I’ve been alone for so long. Not anymore.

Hunger like I’ve never known engulfs me.

I bury my face in her snatch.

Devour.

The flat of my tongue makes tight little circles to give her just the right friction.

Her sweet gasps of pleasure only makes me wilder. I’m so hard, so ready for her, my ass cheeks clench and flex as I hump the air, my face buried between her legs, a beast in heat.

It’s fucking torment and perfection all at once.

She’s delicious. Nirvana. Sun after winter’s darkness.

The intoxicating scent of her sweetness mixes with carnal need—and me.

I purr with satisfaction. My scent is all over her. A warning to others of her kind and mine.

But I want her claimed fully. I want her dripping with my scent. I want it so deep inside her she'll never be free of me.

She might never have expected to mate a monster, but now that she's got one, there's no shaking me loose.

“Klawz...” Her voice is a mix of wonder, need, and just a trace of fear. “I... I...think... it's happening again.”

I can tell she's right. That tight little hole of hers is contracting around my tongue as her body stiffens, her hips jerking as I give her exactly what she needs.

“Let it.” I rumble against her clit. “Come for me, hellion.” I latch onto the swollen bud and suckle like my life depends on it. At the same time, I work the tip of my tail into her bottom, aided by all her sweet juices.

She screams, coming hard, those little legs kicking out as they hang over my horns. Her head tosses back, golden hair flying, as she whimpers and moans and her soaked cunt softens and swells beneath my tongue.

It's the most beautiful and genuine thing I've seen.

But everything about her is.

She starts to come down, but I don't let her. My hands clamp tight at her hips as I lash my tongue against her clit once more and thrust my tail deeper in her tight ass.

“Klawz!” She squirms beneath me. “I can't.”

“You can.” Still working her clit with my tongue, I push my finger back inside her pussy.

Hells. Even soaking wet, it’s snug. Just like her ass.

Her back arches and she spreads further.

“Yes, just like that.” I rumble the words against her cunt. “So wet and ready for me. So fucking horny for it, like a good, naughty girl should be.” I add another finger and push deeper, enjoying the way her belly expands and ripples as she takes me. “Show me you’re ready to take my monster cock, anywhere I want to put it.”

She squeals, and more slick coats my fingers.

My female gets off on what I am. And that gets me off as well.

Pre-cum drips from my crown.

I can’t wait to possess her. Rut her. Knot her.

I use the tip of my tongue on her clit while my fingers fuck her faster.

Until her channel is making squelching sounds and clenching around me. Her hips lifting with every drive of my fingers, my name a breathy chant on her lips, more sacred than any that’s come before.

Until her back bows and she comes apart again, her essence coating my tongue. Rich, musky, sugar spun heaven. Fertile and feminine and the answer to every question I never knew I had.

I spear my tongue deeper to draw even more of her into me.

I can’t wait anymore.



I pull back, careful to ensure my horns don't prick her.

Then, I flip her over. Purple powder flies everywhere.

She's so lax, she goes easily. My little golden doll to toy with—except I'm not playing now.

Wings cocooning us, I rise between her legs. My gaze locks on those firm ass cheeks and the hint of a glistening slit that's now exposed. Prettier than any frost flower growing between the ice floes.

I plant a hand at the small of her back, engulfing her from side to side. "I'm going to fuck and knot you now."

I know it's her first time, and this is not the missionary position, but I'm a fucking beast. A monster. And she's a monster lover.

She's going to have to learn to like it rough. Filthy.

If there's anyone who can take it, it's her.

She proves it when she cocks her head and looks over her shoulder, a slight smile playing across her lips. "Do it."

Humbled, awed, I throw back my head and roar.

Then my hands grab her hips and yank, lifting her onto her hands and knees, putting her entirely on display and at my mercy.

"Brace, little one."

She bites her lip.

I can't wait any longer.

My tail winds around her thigh to keep her spread wide.

Then, with a groan, I grab my dick and work myself inside.

I'm careful not to go too fast or rough, but I'm not gentle either. This is happening. More than once. This pussy is going to have to get used to me. Fast.

"I feel you everywhere." She whimpers, her body lurching forward on the sand as I push my way in. "You're so big." She sounds breathless and while there's a little whine to her voice, there's wanton need too.

As if the knowledge that I'm splitting her wide, reshaping her just for me, turns her on as much as it does me.

My little monster lover.

I tap her left bottom cheek with the flat of my hand. "Take it, little hellion." I lightly slap the other one. "Take it all."

She groans and I slide in deeper, aided by a copious amount of new slick.

I hit the back of her channel, barrel in farther—and feel her body stretch to accommodate me, the way only one of her kind can.

"Fuck, yeah." She's a horny little thing, and I love it.

Twisted wings flapping behind me, I pump deeper.

Her sweet gasps keep me anchored while my cock descends into the tightest, wettest paradise I've ever known. Better than heaven.

My cock isn't anything like a human's, but she's taking to it like a naughty, good girl all the same.

"Do you feel that, Holly?" Thanks to the placement of my spurs, now that I'm all the way in, my largest knots hit her clit and rosebud with every thrust. "This is a fucking claiming, female."

*I will not fail her as I have the others. I will be what she needs me to be.*

Her hands fist into the powder and she pushes backwards, impaling herself deeper. “It... goes...both... ways.”

Bold. Brash. A will of fucking steel. This female is extraordinary.

My perfect match.

She’s claiming me just as I am her.

Another layer of frost around my chest melts away.

It’s then I know, it doesn’t matter about the war between our kinds or what happens with the temporary portal, I will do anything to protect her. *Anything.*

I thrust so deep, I bury my balls against her.

We groan in unison.

*Home.*

I didn’t even realize I was looking, but I found it all the same.

She’s my Northern Star guiding me to the fucking motherland, and it’s more beautiful than I ever imagined.

She clenches around me. “I never dreamed it would feel like this.” She grips me tighter. “I need—”

“I know what you need.” I pull back. Hammer deep. Filling her as only one of my kind can.

“Yes.” She keens, her back bowing as her hips tilt to take me.

It’s hotter than hells. “That’s my girl. Take what you need. Fuck yourself on my cock.” I ram in and out.

“Yes. Fuck me, Klawz. Take everything I’m offering and more.”

I pump faster. An animal in heat. My hips rocking as I drag her tiny hips up and down my shaft, her sobs of pleasure my touchstone.

My tail returns to her rosebud, pressing deep, so I’m fucking both holes in tandem. Because I won’t settle for anything less than full claiming: cunt and ass. All of it my territory.

“Everywhere. Anytime.” She chants the tantalizing words over and over, and I’m greedy for every sweet sound of surrender.

So much so that, with a growl, I wrap my hand around her hair and drag her head back, my mouth clashing with hers. My tongue licks at the seam until she lets me in. The taste of her fucking sweet as well. Honey and spice and sugar. Just like her.

My balls tighten.

I wrench my lips away but keep hold of her hair, driving in and out.

Her channel constricts and I can feel it, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over her as she locks my dick in a vise, her ass squeezing me tight as well.

I don’t feel alone anymore. Or like the failure I’ve been.

I feel alive. Connected. Powerful in a way I haven’t felt in a long time.

All because of her.

Knees staggering, I thrust like the beast I am, making her mine, as jet after jet of my essence finds its home and my

knots swell and she shudders and jerks on my shaft.

It's the ride of a lifetime and the pleasure of it—the wonder of it—goes on and on.

Until her body goes slack and my knots reach their full size, making it impossible for me to move inside her without hurting her—which I will never fucking do again.

Only the tiniest bit of the cum I poured inside her trickles out. The rest is locked up tight.

As reckless as it is, satisfaction pumps through me. I may already be breeding her. I won't rest until her belly is swollen with our young.

Sliding my hand beneath her, I pick her up as easily as I would a doll. I'm too heavy to lie on top of her for long, but my knots still connect us, so I'm careful as I move her. I could deflate them at will, but I don't.

Instead, keeping her locked to me, I rock onto my heels before dropping to my back, settling into the soft sand, her atop me, her spine pressed to my front. My broken wings surround us both.

She makes a soft, surprised sound at the change in position, but doesn't resist.

I don't even fight the smile.

For centuries, there was nothing to grin about. Now, there's plenty.

My poor female's so worn out thanks to my fucking, she doesn't even have the strength to protest. Just moans as my cock hits her from this angle, her legs sliding to each side, leaving her open.

But that's fine with me.

I want her spread before me. Laid out like an offering.

Because I'm just getting started.

I run my palm over her breast and pinch her nipple while my other hand slides down her belly and my tail glides along her sensitive inner thigh.

She jerks, moans.

“Shhh. You just lie there, little one. Now it's time to show you just how monstrous I can be.”

“Mmm.” Her legs slide open more. “You really are giving me all my wishes.” Her head lolls to the side, her body angling just enough that her lips press against my skin, right at my hearts. “Thank you, Klawz. For everything.”

Her words sear straight to my soul. A mark that will never fade. Forgiveness and acceptance even after all I've done.

But it comes at a cost. Because it drives home how fucking selfish I've been. How truly monstrous I've become. This female is sunshine, warmth, and everything good. She should never be trapped in an icy wasteland, used and abused.

I didn't know someone like me could love, but I do. I love her with every fiber of my tainted, broken soul.

As I bring her to her peak over and over again, I know she's what I was waiting for all along—and I wonder how the hells I'm going to let her go... even as I know I am.

Because even a monster can play the hero once in a while.

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

“Wow.” Boneless, I sprawl across Klawz’s body, my cheek pressed to his broad chest.

A deep rumble vibrates from him. “Glad you approve.”

I definitely do. “No wonder the world is so obsessed with sex.”

“You think that was typical?” He chuffs, and the sound is actually smug. “Lucky for you, you’ll never have to find out.”

“I won’t?” I lift my head and grin down at him.

I may have been inexperienced, but I wasn’t raised in a cave. I know that kind of pleasure for my first time is rare. Same goes for the four orgasms Klawz gave me, each one as glorious as the last.

I’m feeling pretty pleased about how far we’ve come until Klawz’s grin fades. “We’ll see.”

*We’ll see?* That doesn’t sound so great.

“Whatever happens, Holly, I’m glad we had this time.”

“Right, me too.” But it’s not exactly what a girl wants to hear after what we just did.

I’m changed, forever altered, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. But I don’t know if this is just a passion of the moment for him, a convenience while we’re bound, or something more.

His words offer no clarity.

But how could anyone do what we did and not be forever connected?

“There are other benefits to fucking my kind.” He strokes my back, his claws combing through my hair—and I get the sense he’s trying to distract me from his earlier comment, and like the coward I am, I let him.

“What do you mean?” I stretch beneath his palm, greedy for every one of his touches.

“I can’t gift you with the impossible or the abstract.” He palms the back of my head. “But that leaves a lot of latitude.”

Brow wrinkling, I tilt my head. “I don’t understand.”

He grins, a pleased light in his eye that only makes him look more handsome. “Wish for something.”

I blink down at him. “Like a gift?”

“Yes.”

My mind blanks. “Oh, wow. I don’t know. I’ve never really had one so I—”

“What?” Suddenly, he’s sitting up and I’m straddling him, the soft fur of his pelt against my bottom, his hands cradling my jaw. “Tell me that’s not true.”



Heat warms my cheeks. “It’s no big deal. I don’t even know when my birthday is so there’s nothing to celebrate.”

I never received holiday gifts from the Josephs either. When I was younger and I snuck down on Christmas morning to find no gifts with my name under the tree, I thought if I were a little better behaved or a little harder of a worker the next year, Santa would find me deserving enough. Then I got older, and I realized it was the Josephs who didn’t consider me worthy enough to exchange even simple presents.

But who needs items anyway?

“You do.” He growls low and I realize I spoke out loud again. “You deserve to be fucked hard and spoiled rotten.” His big hands tip up my chin, his voice thick with command. “You deserve a real birthday and today’s the day.” His expression intensifies. “I’m going to be giving you what you want for as long as I’m able. Now wish.”

I shiver at the authority in his tone.

Then, I do as he says.

A book appears in the powder by Klawz’s thigh. He plucks it from the ground, gives it a shake, and hands it to me.

I stare in awe. “How did you do that?”

He shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “Now that we’re tied, some of my old, untainted power is returning and I’m strong enough to not only punish the naughty, but reward the good.”

I can’t stop staring at the book. It’s a love story I saw in a catalog. At the time, I didn’t have the money for such an extra expense, but I’d wanted it. Now, thanks to him, it’s mine.

I take his offering and clasp it to my chest. “Thank you, Klawz. This is... incredible.”

His gaze softens as he mutters low. “Such goodness.” His expression hardens. “Wish again, and this time dream bigger.”

Bigger?

In the next heartbeat, there’s a tingle against my skin and then, voila, I’m dressed in a gorgeous ice-blue gown with a deep V and sheer lace panels that flutter behind me.

I may be a simple girl from Kansas, but I’ve always dreamed of dressing like a kick-ass, powerful princess—and I’m beginning to feel as if I’m finally coming into my own.

“Beautiful.” Klawz runs an appreciative finger along the plunging neckline. “It’s perfect.” His gaze dips down. “But you’ll change out of it when there are other males around.”

Bossy.

But there are about a zillion looks I want to try out so I’m not worried. And I’ll dress as I like. As I *wish*.

But I don’t bother with that now. My big bad beast will find out soon enough.

Another gift idea flickers through my mind and, in the next heartbeat, I’m sporting a new look. This one with a hide similar to Klawz’s loincloth for the skirt, along with a matching bra, and a lot of bare skin.

My choice elicits a low, pleased purr.

“A gift for me on your birthday.” His snout nuzzles my throat as his hands glide along my belly. “How thoughtful.”

I’m not being naïve. Despite his lame *we’ll see* response from earlier, there is a true connection between us. He feels it too. I can see it in his glowing red eyes.

The book falls from my hand to land gently in the sand.

“What can I say?” Even I can hear the breathlessness in my voice. “I’m a giver.”

“Then, I’ll take.” His palms grip my bottom and rock me against his thickening shaft.

Heat coils in my belly. He might have just rocked my world, but I’m hungry for more.

I’m about to press my mouth to his when something flickers at the corner of my vision.

Alarmed, I jerk toward the potential danger.

“It’s okay, Holly.” Klawz’s firm grip keeps me right where I am, on his cock. “It’s only a flock of fairleits.”

“Fairleits? They’re so beautiful.” It feels like another birthday gift.

Tiny, winged, glittering creatures the size of bumble bees dart this way and that, at least fifteen of them. They flit on the air like hummingbirds, except each has a humanish face.

I say *humanish* because they have trumpet-like beaks instead of noses, pointed, elfin ears, and violet skin that glows. Their wings are deep lavender with white lights that sparkle like stars in the night sky. They move so fast they’re almost a blur.

I’m mesmerized, until one zips close to us and I see a look of disgust on its face as it hisses, “deemon.”

I’m immediately offended on Klawz’s behalf.

He can’t help being what he is. Plus, if that was meant as some kind of warning, I don’t need it. I like my male just as he is, horns, tail, broken wings and all.

I swat in the fairleit's general direction, not close enough to make contact, but enough to create a current of air that sends the insensitive, gnat-like fairy tumbling back a few feet.

Klawz chuckles.

I'm glad he's not hurt by the judgment, so I send a sheepish smile his way. "I don't like rudeness."

"They're persistent but harmless."

He's right. Within seconds, a few others are circling around and hissing too.

Now, I'm less worried and more annoyed, and I flap my hand more vigorously.

Klawz remains unperturbed—until one darts too close and almost bonks my nose.

"Watch it." He plucks the fairleit from the air and, two fingers pinching its wing, dangles it in front of his face, inches from his eyes. "Leave her be."

I appreciate his concern, but it's not me I'm worried about.

The moment Klawz lets go, the wide-eyed fairleit speeds away and, in the next blink, all the rest disappear too.

"Well done!" I pat his arm. "Don't let them bother you."

He shoots me a quizzical look. "I don't."

"Good." I don't want him to be anything but happy.

Plus, I guess I'm actually adjusting to my new reality since I'm not only unfazed by the tiny, winged creatures, but way more interested in the being who fascinates me above all else: Klawz.

"Now, where were we? Oh, yes." I grab his hands and place them on my bottom. "You were about to take."

His eyes glow a deeper red. “You ready to give, baby?”

“Yes.” The raw demand in his voice makes me squirm. I had no idea I was so insatiable, but it feels right to be like this was Klawz.

“I’m going to fuck you on all fours. Wings spread wide so anyone watching can see you on your hands and knees, laid out before me like a good sacrifice.”

I should object, but I won’t. Because my pussy loves every dirty, profane word.

“But first,” his thumb strokes across my bottom lip, “on your knees, beautiful. I want to see just how good you can be.”

Oh, I think I might just end up liking this birthday gift most of all.

He slides me off his lap.

I tremble harder. Knees tucked beneath me like a supplicant, I slip between his furred thighs as he leans back onto his elbows, his torso a long, lean line of sculpted, lickable muscle that tapers to a deep V.

A god-like creature at the altar, ripe for exaltation.

With a flick of his wrist, he flips aside the leather of his loincloth, freeing his shaft. Thick and swollen, it bobs straight upward, the main vein pulsing.

I press my thighs together tight.

He’s so different from me. So powerful, confident, and masterful. So big, barbaric, and alien. Everything about him excites me. Even the soft suede-like pelt on his thighs and around his cock and the leathery balls that hang beneath.

But it’s his shaft I’m focused on now.

I've had it thrusting deep inside me, but I've never gotten this close a look. I'm mesmerized.

It's longer and thicker than my forearm—and I can barely believe he fit that monster inside me, or how desperately I want him to do it again.

There are small knots spaced along the underside, kind of like a natural Jacobs's ladder, and two larger knots at the base so that he'll hit my clit no matter what position he puts me in to fuck me.

I swallow hard as I note the three ridges between the end of the shaft and the head. I already know from experience they bring exquisite pleasure.

But the head of his shaft is flat and round kind of like an oversized hammer and I shiver in both pleasure and fear at the thought of that battering ram invading. Claiming. Stretching my lips and throat wide.

As if he knows my thoughts, he grabs his shaft and tugs upward. "Ready to worship, little one?"

Saliva pools in the back of my throat and there's only one answer I can give. "Always."

Happy birthday to me.

**K** <sup>LAWZ</sup>

“OPEN THOSE PRETTY LIPS.” I wrap one hand around my dick and tug once more. “I’m going to show you exactly how I like my sweet, little offering to devote herself.”

Her breath comes faster.

Especially as I fist a section of her hair, guiding her wide-eyed face to where I need it most.

Even better, it’s what she craves, too.

I push my shaft between her lush lips and groan as it glides inside, wet and warm.

There’s nothing sexier. Her innocent eyes are eager as they lock on me while her mouth stretches as best as it can, her cheeks hollowing.

Like always, she’s working hard to please.

A shudder rolls through me, my balls going tight.

My hips roll. “You take to it so well, my sweet, little hellion. My perfect toy. My everything.”

Her moan almost sets me off. I fight it. Sink deeper.

“Cup my balls.” My command is a low growl. “Stroke ‘em.”

She hesitates, and I know why. They’re huge, veiny, leathery. The balls of an animal. A brute. One more sign she’s not being fucked by a human male but by a monster.

Then her soft, little hands are on them, kneading gently, working them with her nimble fingers as her mouth never stops. Her golden head bobs as her pink lips slide up and down my veiny cock.

It’s wrong, filthy, almost obscene—and so perfect.

“That’s right, little one. Just like that. Brand me. Leave your scent everywhere so everyone knows this dick is yours.” I grip her hair and work her faster over my length. “Because you think it’s just those fuckers in the motel after you? Hells no. I hear all their wishes, Holly. The room check-in guy, the nice father with the kids, even the bus driver. They all want you on your knees. They all want to be sucked while you play with their balls.”

I drag her head back until her lips stretch wide around the crown and she’s staring up at me. “But it’s me who gets it. Deserving or not, it’s me and my animal cock that’s fucking your perfect, pink mouth.”

She moans, her tongue flattening as I thrust deep and she opens her throat and lets me in.

Sweet submission.

I might be monstrous. Beastly. Scarred. Ugly and huge compared to her golden perfection, but we’re a perfect fucking match.



*Harder, Klawz. Mark me just for you too.* Without warning, her wishes whisper through my mind once more—and awe, followed by relief, slams through me.

I've regained her trust. It's another gift I never expected.

"Fuck." I snake my tail down the crease of her perfect ass and between her closed thighs until the tip finds its target.

Her body bucks.

I barely manage to hold on. Her wishes... they're so damned beautiful.

Now that I'm not so lost to the rage, I can see all I missed before: the sweetness to her hopes, the beauty of her longing for connection.

She's flawless to her core. So good she's willing to give a beast like me a second chance.

I'm going to do whatever it takes to be worthy of that. To give her whatever she needs.

"Spread those pretty thighs for me. I'm taking this too, good girl." My tail flicks her clit firm and fast the way I know she likes.

I might be taking, but I want to give too. After hearing that she's been ignored, taken for granted, and overlooked by the humans who raised her, I want her to have everything she wants and more.

I want to shore up every crack caused by their neglect and prove to her she's always been strong enough. Good enough. That for me, she is literally the only thing that matters.

"What satisfaction is there in an infinite number of groveling, selfish supplicants to someone like me, baby?" I concentrate on my words so I don't come down her pretty

throat before I've primed her just right. "But a single soul so complex, pulsing with its own dark and light, innocence and viciousness, glowing with its own power and uncorrupted sweetness? That's the kind of creature a force of monstrous vengeance takes notice of."

Her tongue laves at the underside as if rewarding me in turn—and I fucking love it.

"That's a creature he wishes to corrupt and master and take for his own. To cherish and protect and worship." My grip in her hair tightens. "Because he knows, she will always be enough for him. Always be his match. And that... after so many false sacrifices and boons, is truly a gift beyond measure."

Eyes full of heat and pride lock with mine.

I swallow hard and say the rest of what must be said. "That's the kind of soul a male rips through time and his own selfishness to hunt, possess, claim, and breed." I pause. "To... wish to spend forever with."

She hums low. Takes me so deep my shaft slides all the way down her throat as she squeezes me tight.

"Fuck!" With a roar, I pull back. Rearing up, I lift her from the sand and plant her on my dick, impaling deep.

We moan in unison, my hands flexing around her ass.

Her palms land on my chest, her golden hair falling in her face and whispering across my chest as she rolls her hips. "I love you, Klawz."

Suddenly, I don't feel broken anymore. Or like a failure.

I'm fucking reborn.

“Holly!” We come together, her body bucking against mine, my wings wrapped tight around her—and I hope there’s one more miracle left for this season because all I want is to keep this female for myself forever.

But only the truly deserving get what they wish for.



## HOLLY

I CAN’T CATCH my breath, my body still humming with pleasure.

Each time is better and better—and maybe it was too soon for me to say what I did, but I can’t regret it.

It’s how I feel.

I love him.

I understand why he acted as he did at first and I forgive him.

I’ve never experienced this mix of raw, greedy need for someone and serene contentment. There’s a sense of safety I’ve never had before. As if I could do anything, be anything I want, and he’d be right there with me, cheering me on.

It’s as if I’ve known him forever—and, conversely, as if I’ll never plumb the depths of who he truly is, though I want to try.

He fascinates me. Excites me. Challenges me. Soothes me.

Except, cheek pressed to Klawz’s hard pec, his arms wrapped tight around me, it’s not lost on me that he’s gone

quiet. Or that he didn't exactly say *I love you* back.

Yes, he spoke of wishing to be together forever, but now that my mind isn't muddled by an impending orgasm, I'm realizing that's not really the same thing. The Josephs found me useful and wanted me to stay with them forever too and, while I don't think Klawz is anything like them, old fears are hard to shake.

Am I doomed to be always wishing for more from those around me? Is there something about me that keeps others from deeming me truly worthy of love?

"Klawz—" Palms on his chest, I push out of his hold, not exactly sure what to say, but determined to get some answers, when something shiny darts beneath his wing.

This time I don't panic. I know what it is. Saved by a fairleit. "They're back."

"Yup." Klawz's opens his wings to reveal a whole flock of them swirling above our heads.

It's a dazzling light show.

Unbelievably romantic.

He sits up, taking me with him so I'm straddling him and we can both see the show.

It's lovely—until one zooms closer. "Deeemon."

Its hiss sounds a bit like a snake if it could sing.

"Wow, they really don't like demons."

Klawz expression sobers. "Demons from certain sects capture fairleit and use them in their homes as decor."

"That's horrible." I don't want to hurt his feelings, but some demons sound really terrible.

He shrugs. “Few demons are sweet.”

“But some are.” I wrap my arms around him and hold tight.

“Yes.” There’s a tone to his voice I haven’t heard before and I worry I messed things up when I told him I loved him. “Some can definitely surprise you.”

I’m thinking of how to rectify the situation when another fairleit divebombs so close its wings flutters against my ear.

“Deeemon.” More follow, murmuring the same word.

I flick my hand, waving them back. “Go away! He can’t help what he is.”

One darts in front of my nose. “We knooow. Neither can youuu.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Klawz shaking his head while his clawed hand drags across his lips, his fingers pinched in the universal ‘zip-it’ motion.

Except these glittering pests clearly don’t recognize the gesture because the one flitting from one side of my face to the other keeps on talking. “Though as far as demons gooo, you’re not so baaad. Prettiest one we’ve come across so faaar.”

“Excuse me?”

“Most are rotten to the cooore. But not youuu.” It lands on the tip of my nose and ceases vibrating for a millisecond. “You’re a tolerable demon, actually.”

Klawz raises a finger to flick it away. “Enough.”

I stop him with a raised palm, my cross-eyed gaze locked on the shimmering creature perched on my nose. “Me? I’m the demon?”

The fairleit scoffs and alights, zipping in front of my face once more. “Of cooourse. Who else would it beee? Look at youuu. Pretty and harmless-looking, just like all the rest of your kind. Made to entice so you can lure in your victims, trap them, deceive them, and revel in their paiiin.”

“Oh, my god.”

“That’s enough from you.” Klawz plucks the chatty fairleit from the air and tosses him high into the stratosphere.

With a shriek, the others follow, and in the next instant, the swirling orange and purple sky is calm and still.

I’m anything but.

*I’m the demon?*

Shock rips through me. Followed by disbelief.

How can that be? I’m... I’m polite. Hard-working. Honest. I’ve never even turned in a library book late. I’ve only ever tried to follow instructions, to please, to do what was expected of me.

“Holly.” Warm hands cup my jaw—and I realize I’ve stumbled to my feet and Klawz is looming over me. “It’s okay.”

*No.* I don’t think it is. I’m not sure it will ever be okay again. “I-I thought I was the angel.”

His expression softens. “I know.”

“I’m the demon.” I shout the words at him, as if the volume at which I declare it will make it seem less unfathomable.

“Yes, and thank the snowfall for that.” His voice is gruff. “We angels are usually a humorless, arrogant lot. Not nearly as

pretty as demons, who are meant to be far more of a temptation.” He taps the tip of my nose. “And you, Holly, are tempting to me in every way.”

His words are sweet, but the panic is still welling inside me. “A-Am I bad then?”

“No.” His hands slid down to my shoulders, and he pulls me closer. “Never.”

“Are you sure?” My gaze slides away. “I... I like the things you do to me.”

“That’s good, beautiful.” His voice thickens. “Very good.” His hold tightens. “Angel or hellion, we’re all just looking for someone whose demons play well with our own—and you play very well with me.”

But not enough that he said *I love you* back.

Is it because I’m a demon?

Is that also why the Josephs never cared quite enough about me either? Did they sense what I am too?

All my life I tried to be perfect for the Josephs, perfect for the parents I never knew, and yet something lurked inside me and I knew it.

I was restless, hungry for more—and that seemed okay. But what if it was rooted in bad rather than good impulses? What if no one ever loved me because I don’t actually deserve it?

“I killed those men.” I realize with a panic. “I opened the portal. I accidentally tormented you for years. Those are the actions of a bad soul.”

“Holly”—his big hands glide up and down my arms—“you know as well as I, not everything is so black and

white. Good people can do bad things and vice versa. You may have demon blood, but you're as good as it gets."

Am I?

*Swoosh.*

A strange sound snaps me from my panic at the same time that I hear Klawz's curse.

Sand is swirling everywhere like a cyclone, smacking me in the face and coating my eyes and nose.

Before I can make sense of it, I'm flying over the water as if tugged by an invisible rope—and I know exactly what's happened.

I've freaked out and activated the portal again.

"Klawz!" I reach out blindly, trying to fight the pull of the swirling black void that looms ahead like open jaws.

But it's no use.

I can't even slow down—and maybe this is what I deserve. Maybe he's better off without me, anyway.

I know who I am now, *what* I am, and I wish I didn't.

All too soon, I'm at the threshold, an icy tingling ripping through me as my shoulder pierces the barrier and I wonder if I was always meant to be alone. If this was always my fate, after all.

"Holly!" A heavy, familiar force slams into me and Klawz's arms wrap tight around me.

I can't help it.

I know I probably shouldn't, but my fingers curl into him and I hold him close as we tumble together into the blackness.



H<sup>OLLY</sup>

*CRASH.*

Klawz lands on something soft, me still in his arms. Then, there's a loud creak and we drop a few more feet.

My eyelids fly open and I recognize the peeling paint and ugly rust carpet.

We're back at the motel.

We came through the portal, landed on the mattress, and broke the bed, but I did it.

I got us back here.

I might be a demon, but it looks like I can still do some good.

The blinking, neon light outside says two days 'til Christmas so I guess we've been gone longer than I realized, or else time moves differently in other realms.

Either way, I've never been so happy to see this stupid motel in my life—until a faint jarring click catches my

attention and I swivel to the right.

The barrel of a shotgun hovers inches from my temple.

“Hello, angel.” Face still black and blue, Clyde leers down at me, a veritable army of at least twenty other rough-looking men at his back. “Been waiting for you, and whatever that freak is. Looks like I get my little stocking stuffer, after all.”

“I’m no angel.” I snarl the words at my attacker.

The sound of twenty more shotgun safety locks disengaging echoes through the room—and every weapon is pointed at me and Klawz.

Beside me, my monster growls low.

I should be terrified, but I’m not.

I’m angry. Hurt. Scared.

Plus, I fear I know exactly why Klawz doesn’t love me and no one ever has.

On the plus side, my panic from earlier is absent.

That roaring in my ears is back though. The dazzling light is too. This time, I know what it is: the call of the demon, the source of my power.

Because what I told Clyde is the truth. I’m *not* an angel. Or some sweet little, do-gooder thing.

I have super strength, fast reflexes, the ability to create portals, and a dark hunger inside that doesn’t want to play by the rules.

Suddenly, that doesn’t seem so bad.

In fact, it seems like perfect timing, Clyde’s reappearance the permission I need to be myself. To behave as I like.

With a sweep of my hand, I send my attacker tumbling back.

He screams as he hits the wall, the gun falling from his hand.

Instant panic ensues from Clyde's gang, but Klawz has it covered.

Shrieks and the crack of bones echo around me, but my gaze locks on Clyde as I push off the bed and stalk to where he's pinned to the wall, squirming and struggling, a pitiful little bug just asking to be squashed.

"Guess what, Clyde?" I slide him down the wall until we're nose-to-nose and I can see every jutting cord in his body as he strains uselessly against my hold. "I did get that big Christmas surprise you were laughing about, after all."

Eyes bulging, mouth open, he stares at me as if he's never seen me before—and I guess he hasn't. Not this version of me, anyway.

I remember how terrified I was when he dragged me from that bus, when he shoved me into the alley, when he and his gang threw me on that bed.

How helpless and alone I felt.

Not anymore.

"Turns out I'm not so powerless." I release him from the wall, only to slam him back against it. Then, buoyed by some deep-seated instinct, I conjure the image of the highway bus hurtling toward Clyde.

He shrieks, body bracing, and a damp spot blooms at the crotch of his pants.

Looks like I found a new skill—a decidedly demonic one—the ability to create illusions and sow terror.

I like it a lot.

Clyde is still screaming when, with a flick of my wrist, I send him hurtling through the air and straight into a swirling portal that looks a lot like the one Klawz and I tumbled through the first time.

With any luck, Clyde and the Kringle Wylvven will battle it out for most evil.

Pride rushes through me.

Now, neither I nor anyone in this town will have to deal with Clyde ever again.

Turns out I was able to treat myself to a pretty nice birthday, after all.

The faint sound of Clyde's screams are still audible as I close the portal and swivel back around to see if Klawz needs help.

The room is empty minus my fierce monster and some new splatters of blood and swirling ash.

He stands in the middle of it all, hands on hips, crooked wings spread wide, a proud look on his face. "Come here, hellion. You did so well."

There's no contempt in his stare. Nor disgust.

Pleasure whispers through me. No wonder he calls me hellion.

I am one, in my bones and in my blood, and maybe that really is okay.

Right on the heels of that thought I hear the disapproving voices of the Josephs but, for once, I swat them aside.

“Klawz.” My voice sounds huskier than usual.

Enough that his eyes narrow, his pupils dilating as his nostrils flare. “Yeah, baby?”

But he already knows.

“My monster still wants to play.” I stalk closer, my steps slow and careful as if I’m hunting prey.

He doesn’t hesitate. “Give me everything you got, hellion.”

It’s all the permission I need.

I’m half terrified, afraid of what I’m about to show him. Half too hungry to care. But I can’t fight it any longer. I’m done pretending to be something I’m not.

Power explodes from me.

In the next instant, Klawz is pinned to the motel wall, his massive body suspended two feet above the ground, his arms spread wide, muscles bulging, an offering just for me.

“Fuck.” Eyes glowing a deeper red, fierce arousal is stamped on every harsh line of his beautiful face. “Look at what my demon can do when she lets go.”

I don’t know if this loss of control is good or bad, but it doesn’t matter. This part of me won’t be denied any longer.

I glide so close there’s less than a foot between us, my head even with the bottom of his chiseled twelve-pack.

Then, I wish his armor and clothes gone.

In the next heartbeat, that monster cock is stiff and swollen and bobbing right in front of my eyes—and mouth.

He growls low. “Suck it.”

*Bossy.* Even now.

But demons make their own rules.

Rising to my tiptoes, I lick a line from his belly button down over his shaft, the tip of my tongue a wet, slow caress that ends with me circling his thick crown, but I don't swallow him down.

Not even when he growls my name in a deep, warning rasp that only makes me wetter, my nipples tight and achy.

“Mouth, baby. I want those lips wrapped around me.”

But apparently we demons really do like to torment arrogant angels—and this one is all mine to do with as I wish—so I carry out my own plan.

With a thought, I drag him another few inches up the wall. Tongue the underside of his balls.

“Fuck.” His head knocks the wall, horns denting the plaster, before his glowing eyes find mine. “Paybacks gonna be a bitch, little one.”

“We'll see.” I bite the inside of his thigh, my newly emerged fangs sinking deep into the quad muscle.

He jerks against his invisible bonds, his cock growing impossibly bigger, those knots now so prominent I know I'll feel every ridge once he drives inside me.

I grin wide and nip him again. Only this time, I squeeze his cock as I do. Fisting his dick, I play with it like it's my own personal toy. “Looks like you're not the only dispenser of rewards, angel.”

His eyes glow an even deeper red. The scent of danger, of aggression, thickens the room and my demon preens.

“You forget what else I do, little one? I punish. You lookin’ to get disciplined, hellion?”

I shiver at the question. At his tone.

*I want him to splay me wide, shape me just for him. Make me his vessel and use me as he wishes. I want every dark, depraved boon he promises to bestow.*

But this time he’s going to have to earn it.

“You think you can?” Hand still working him, I wish away my clothes. “I’ve got power now.”

“You do... and it’s hot as hells.” He flashes his fangs. “But I wouldn’t underestimate me.”

“We’ll see.” Echoing his earlier words, my palm slides down my belly toward the V between my thighs.

“That’s mine.” He strains so hard against my hold the veins in his arms and the one snaking down his abdomen swell, a map I want to trace with my tongue.

“We’ll see.” I repeat, releasing his cock.

“I’m going to regret using that phrase, aren’t I?”

“Yup.” Stepping back to give him a better view, I trace one finger around my clit.

His gaze narrows, nostrils flaring. I’ve just waved a red flag in front of my beast—and I’ve never felt more alive.

“Mine.” His growl is even deeper and huskier than before.

I stroke myself faster.

The cords at his neck bulge as he fights my hold. “Come closer, demon.”

Smiling, I back up another step.

His snarl ripples straight to my core. The way he’s watching me, as if he’d give anything to be my finger right now, drives my arousal higher.

I slid my finger deep inside me and call his name.

That’s all it takes. With a roar, he breaks free.

Leaping from the wall, he lands in a crouch an arm’s length away. Then, before I’ve fully processed what’s happening, he rears up, his huge hands grabbing for me.

But I’m fast, my reactions quicker than they’ve ever been. It’s nothing for me to duck and elude his grasp. Except I’m still me and an undignified, not at all bad-ass squeal erupts as I dart beneath his arms and run.

Though the truth is, I want to get caught.

I’m halfway across the room when I’m jerked against his broad chest. “Now we’ll see exactly what happens to naughty, good girls who ignore their guardian angel’s commands.”

“Will we?” I snap his hold, shoving him away from me with another thought.

He crashes into the far wall. Laughs. Growls low.

I’ve only taken two long strides when I’m caught again.

This time, he grabs me by my hair, guides me toward the broken bed, and no matter how I struggle, or what thoughts I hurl his way, I can’t get free.

In the next heartbeat, he’s on the mattress and I’m over his lap. His palm pins me in place.



I realize then—too late—that he’s been toying with me, only using half his strength and speed.

Looks like his kind is stronger than my kind. Or maybe it’s just him. I am younger than him by a few hundred centuries.

Either way, I’m in trouble. *The best kind.*

My demon purrs as if in heaven.

“You ready for that punishment, hellion?”

Slick drips from between my thighs.

His hand rubs my bottom, and I moan. I know what’s coming.

“You’ve been naughty, little one.” His icy rasp sends a rush of heat between my thighs.

It’s like my dream. Only this is real, and a thousand times hotter.

*Slap.* His palm warms my ass.

I scream, back bowing, hips lifting. The sharp bite of pleasure is exactly what my demon craves.

*Slap.* He does it again. And again.

Panting, I squirm on his lap.

“Uh-uh. You stay just how I put you.” His tail circles my thigh, spreading me wide. Making it all too easy for the flat of his hand to land on my soaked, swollen folds.

I scream louder. Need coiling inside, my instincts primal, raw.

I’m still screaming when his finger penetrates my bottom.

“Whose is this?” His other hand spans my warmed cheeks, then my pussy in rapid succession.

“Yours.” I cry out, lost to the beauty of surrender. “Yours, always.”

“That’s right, hellion. Always.” His fingers rub my clit in reward, priming me. “Now, you’ll come being spanked. You’ll come knowing exactly how your beast deals with naughty good girls.”

I keen, too smart to beg for mercy, too needy to do anything but take it as his finger stretches my ass while he works my clit in rapid succession with the flat of his palm.

It’s too much.

Ecstasy and pain mingling, I topple over the edge, coming hard, screaming his name.

I’m still soaring, pleasure raging through every cell, when I’m tossed on the bed.

He follows right behind, his big body dwarfing mine as he traps me beneath him. His eyes are wild, his nostrils wide, fangs flashing, his cock a heavy, demanding weight against my belly.

A beast in heat.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Holly.” He captures my wrists in a tight hold. “Claws, tail, fangs, and cock. I’m going to use it all.”

I moan.

“Spread those thighs.” It’s not a request. It’s a command. “I’m coming in.”

I do as I’m told.

There’s no more warning.

He rams inside, driving deep—and I'm so soaked, he slides right in.

I scream once more, my entire body arching as I make room for him inside me. His hips piston, stretching me almost beyond bearing as my back skids along the mattress, jerking with every one of his ferocious thrusts.

And the best part? I know I can take it. I survived an insane fall. I avenged myself on the men who tried to hurt me. I went toe-to-toe with a beast and fell madly in love.

I not only *can* take, I *want* to take it.

I'm not fragile or powerless. I'm fucking ferocious.

I wrap my legs around Klawz's hips and dig my heels into his ass.

"Fuck." He shudders above me, ruts me with even greater force. "You like that, baby?" His forehead presses to mine. "You like knowing you're the perfect match for my beast?"

I don't answer him with words. Instead, rearing up, I sink my teeth into the straining chord at his throat, the taste of his angel blood on my tongue pure paradise.

He roars. Ropey liquid coats my pussy as he comes hard, his hips ramming deep as he tangles his hand in my hair and jerks my mouth from his flesh.

Tilting my head back, his expression feral, he exposes my throat and, fangs flashing, bites me in return, his fangs sinking deep while his cock rams home.

I shatter. White-hot pleasure crashing over me as I follow him over the edge.

Two monsters, each giving as good as we get. Set free in a way we've never been before.

It's beautiful and wild and twisted, and I love every moment of it.

It's every dark, depraved boon he promised to bestow and I feel reborn.

A little while later, the bed even more broken than before, Klawz is still deep inside me, his hands gentle once more as he strokes my hip and then presses a kiss to my sweat-soaked temple.

I muster the energy to speak. "I was freaked out at first, but now I'm okay about the whole demon thing."

"I noticed." He smiles a lazy, sated grin. "I'm glad. You're extraordinary, Holly, and you should be proud of who you are."

So what if he doesn't love me yet? He clearly cares about me and I can't let old insecurities get in my way now. I'm way too bad-ass for that.

"Some bad impulses can be used for good." I'm babbling, but I like working it out aloud. "The town will be better off. As will all the other unsuspecting girls who come here."

"Exactly."

"There's something else too." I hesitate, but it needs to be said. "Now that I'm getting more comfortable with my powers, I noticed something."

"What?" His big hand continues to stroke down my back.

I gather my courage. "I don't think you're the last of your kind."

He freezes.

“Maybe I’m wrong, but I think I can sense them.” I talk fast. “Like a soft tickling sensation against my skin, even if I can’t say where they are or how I know.”

He swallows hard and I fear I’ve made a misstep, but then he speaks. “It makes sense.” There’s a shade of hesitant hopefulness that wasn’t in his tone before. “Our kinds can often sense each other, like an early warning detection system or a honed instinct for survival.”

“So I could be right?”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up but—”

His finger presses into my lips. “Even the idea is another gift. A chance to hope. Another opportunity for absolution.”

I want to protest that he doesn’t need the latter, but he keeps talking.

“I might not be able to bring back my family or the innocents my powers were used to destroy, but perhaps I can play a part in finding those other angels. In restoring the realm to balance.” His finger leaves my mouth, and he cradles my jaw in his hands. “Thank you for that, Holly.”

I cover his palms with my own. “We’ll do it together.”

“Together.” His mouth covers mine.

Best birthday-and-the-day-before-the-day-before Christmas ever.



*KNOCK. Knock.*

It’s hours later, and Klawz and I are still in bed.

Apparently, angel-monster beasts have ridiculous stamina. But guess what? Newly awakened demons do too, so it's all good.

Plus, we weren't only fooling around.

For the last little while, I've been trying to figure out how to permanently close the portal to the temple wasteland while Klawz mastered the remote in a split second and commandeered the grainy TV that somehow miraculously survived all the mayhem.

I swear I was focused on my task, but watching Klawz proved a great break when I grew frustrated with my repeated failures.

He complained through *It's A Wonderful Life*, chuckled at *Home Alone*, and couldn't tear his gaze from *Violent Night*, cheering at every bloody dismembering before asking if we could visit this realm once I got the hang of portal jumping.

I didn't have the heart to break it to him, it wasn't real.

While he was binge-watching, I got pretty good at opening gateways. Less so at closing them; one in particular. Whatever spell Klawz's ex-jailers used to bind him to the frozen temple is powerful.

I have no idea yet how to shatter it.

Even now, the force of that pull is growing stronger and I know Klawz can feel it too.

But I'll figure it out. I'm determined and I'm a bad-ass demon. I just need time—and renewed energy.

Which is why I convinced Klawz to let me order delivery from down the road. I know figuring out how to close the portal is urgent, but I need food and rest and so does he.

At the first sound of a tap against the door, I'm up and grabbing the money I'd put by the bedside table.

But, of course, my protective monster gets to the propped-up door first. Despite the fact that I asked him to keep hidden.

I thought someone from the motel might investigate the ruckus and Clyde's screams, but they never did. Which says a lot. They're clearly used to turning a blind eye to any violent goings-on. But, in this instance, it worked in our favor. I know Klawz can take on a bunch of gang members with guns, but I have no idea how he'd do against a full police unit or military troop.

Best to never find out for everyone's sake.

I shoo Klawz to the side. "Stay out of sight."

He doesn't look happy, but he steps behind the door.

I crack it open.

"Merry Almost-Christmas." A brown delivery bag looms in my line of sight.

"Great. Thanks." I grab for the bag while handing the delivery guy the last bit of cash I had in my wallet.

The guy's grip on the bag tightens as he looks me up and down, his red hat slipping forward onto his forehead. "Oh, wow. Hey, there."

Ugh. I forgot. I'm wearing the beach outfit I had on before. Completely appropriate for fun with Klawz. Not so good for this situation.

"Thanks for the food. See ya." I tug harder on the bag, attempting to free it from his grip. I may be able to pin a guy with my powers, but my upper body strength is still not that impressive, even after working on the farm all my life.

He doesn't get the hint. His grip tightens as he tries to peer into the room. "You alone in there? Maybe wanting some comp—"

A massive hand snaps out and wraps around the delivery guy's throat, lifting him off the ground like a rag doll. "She's busy."

"Klawz, no! You can't injure the delivery guy. He's bringing our food."

Undeterred, Klawz sniffs the air and peers down the hall. "If he is the bringer of our meal, where is the animal?"

*Ummm.*

Klawz lifts the poor guy higher, tilting him from side to side. "Plus, I don't like his wish list when it comes to you."

I blink, absorbing his words. He suggested before that he could hear and grant wishes, but I didn't really get it. Now I do—and eww. I don't want this delivery guy wishing for anything when it comes to me.

But I also don't want him to lose his life over it.

"You and I are a couple. He can wish all he likes, it's not going to come true." I assure my possessive beast.

"Oh, I know." Klawz's expression hardens. "Just like I know all about his side job delivering illegal drugs to the young. He's been on the naughty list for a while."

Oh, boy. This guy's future doesn't sound too bright, but I'm done with all the killing.

Apparently, even a demon has her limits.

Still, I don't bother trying to pry Klawz's fist from the guy's throat. Instead, I pick up the dropped bag and rip it open,



lifting the plastic top off the first container inside.

Nostrils flaring, Klawz's head whips toward me. "What is that heavenly smell?"

"Put the guy down and I'll show you." I walk backwards, deeper into our room.

The male crumples to the ground, forgotten, as Klawz's gaze lasers in on the container in my hand. "I've never sampled the like."

I repress a giggle at the sheer awe in his tone. "It's a cheeseburger." I know it's not typical day-before-Christmas Eve fare, but there's not a ton of delivery options available tonight and it's not as if I can take a seven-foot tall, horned creature out to a restaurant.

"What else is in there?" The excitement in his eyes makes it impossible for me not to smile. "Before my imprisonment, I actually visited this realm yearly but only to pass judgment and reward the deserving." More proof there really might be a connection between Klawz and Santa Claus. "I never lingered."

"Well, now I can show you what you've missed." I hold up the meal.

He's shown me new worlds. Now it's my turn to show him mine, even if we do it silly-style.

Maybe that's exactly what he needs. He's had little fun in his life for a long time now, and he's also still hurting, still struggling with his own inner demons. I want to be the hellion who helps him defeat them for good.

"Fries. A milkshake." I jiggle the bag and watch as the delivery guy stumbles to his feet and hightails it out of sight so fast he trips over his own feet.

Then it's just me, Klawz, and the adorable look on his fearsome face.

“Fast food at its finest,” I explain. “There's no better taste in the world than a crispy fry.”

I expect Klawz to grin with me. Instead, he scowls. “Wrong. I have tasted the sweetest nectar in this realm and any other: you.” His expression heats. “And I will taste you again and again. On my lips. In my lungs. On my cock.”

Oh, I like the sound of that so much a full tremble rolls through me. The bag shakes in my hold.

“Well, come and get it then.” I whisper. “No reason there can't be dessert before the main course.”

H<sup>OLLY</sup>

“I DON’T WANT ANOTHER CHEESEBURGER.”

It’s late Christmas Eve, we’ve been holed up in the motel all day, and Klawz is restless. So restless he’s spouting sacrilege as he paces from one side of the room to the other.

Or maybe, after six patties from six different delivery places, even a monster fills up.

I get it.

I’ve been trying for a long time to break the spell with no luck and, all the while, the tug on our skin is growing stronger, as if invisible ropes are cinching tighter with each second that ticks by.

I know it’s worse for him.

Klawz has already endured centuries of captivity. It’s clear the motel room is beginning to feel a lot like his old prison.

As for me, a lot of my earlier confidence has faded. I might be a demon, but when it comes to this, I’m feeling more

like the same helpless girl I always was, the disapproving, disappointed faces of the Josephs like specters in the room.

“We need a break.” I roll from the bed.

Klawz’s eyes glow a darker red and I can tell what he’s thinking.

“Not that.” I can’t help but smile. “A different kind of break.”

He looks disgruntled until I take his hand and pull him toward the propped-up door. His expression shifts to curious—and relieved.

I was right. He is feeling penned in.

“One sec.” I jiggle the door until it opens enough for me to peer out.

It’s the middle of the night and there’s not a soul in sight. Perfect.

“Come on.” I tug him forward and we creep down the hall with the stained carpet and flickering fluorescent lights toward the emergency exit while I wish for a nice, cozy jacket for myself. Klawz assures me he’s fine as is.

Of course, no sound goes off when I push the exit door ajar. No one cares what happens to anyone who stays here.

We exit into the back parking lot and I hear Klawz’s swift intake of breath.

Normally, this place would likely look desolate and sad, but there are snow drifts everywhere: a blanket of white that glitters under the full moon.

I worry for a second that it will remind Klawz too much of the realm he’s trying to escape, but all of that dissipates when

he bounds forward, his hooves sinking into the snow.

He scoops up a huge handful, letting it fall from his fingers. “I could never get close enough to touch it while imprisoned. I wanted to, so much, but that damned barrier wouldn’t give.” There’s wonder in his tone. “I forgot how cold and wet it is.” He grabs more. “I like it.”

My chest swells. I hate what he’s suffered, but I’m glad I could give him this. No matter what happens, he has his freedom now, and he’s using it to make some of his wishes come true.

Instinct takes over.

“Look out! Snowball fight!” I scoop up a snowball, pack it quickly, and toss it at him.

It bounces off his chest. No reaction. No expression.

“Klawz?” I’m suddenly unsure of myself.

Was that too much? A show of aggression in his world?

I can be such an idiot. But I’ve never had a snow fight before and it always looked like fun.

“Well-aimed, little one.” He speaks at last, his voice soft, as if he’s gently breaking bad news to me. “But you should never warn your prey. Also, you must wind up your arm and hit harder. I know you’re a demon, but I barely felt that at all. A wounding shot needs to be packed harder and—”

“I’m not trying to hurt or injure you.” Amusement thickens my tone. “We call it a snowball fight, but it’s not really a fight. It’s meant to be playful.” I gesture toward him. “Now, it’s your turn to hit me with one.”

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s okay. It’s just a fun game.”

His scowl deepens. “I would never consider it fun to hurt you.”

It might be cold outside, but inside I’m melting.

“Okay.” My voice is a rough whisper as I march through the snow toward him. “Forget about the snowball fight. Let me show you how to make a snow angel, instead.”

Without warning, I fall back, letting the snow catch me.

The cold hits and I gasp, but it’s Klawz’s bellow that sounds loudest.

He’s beside me in an instant. A heartbeat later, I’m snatched from the snow and in his arms. “It’s too cold for you to lie in.”

I laugh and snuggle into his hold. “I’m fine. I have my jacket.” Still, despite my protest, I revel in his care. I’ve had so little of it—and he’s so good at giving it to me. “You’ve ruined my snow angel,” I tease.

“I don’t want a snow angel.” He nuzzles my neck with his snout, brushing aside the snow. “I like my golden demon just fine.”

My hands clasp his jaw. “I like my beastly angel a whole lot, too.”

“Good.” His expression sobers. “I know you’re worried about being a demon, but don’t be. You’re perfect, Holly, just as you are. Naughty in the best of ways, nice when it matters most.”

His words slide into cracks I’ve carried inside my soul for years, filling me up, smoothing out all the jagged, painful edges.

Nor is he done. “Stop trying to please two dead, sour humans who didn’t deserve you. Start worrying more about pleasing yourself. Once you tap into all that power inside you, you’ll be unstoppable.”

His words send a shiver through me, as if they’re the key to unlocking a door inside me I didn’t realize was there. But it’s just out of reach, power surging beneath my skin, not yet accessible.

“I don’t deserve your kindness, little one. Or”—his voice thickens—“your love. But I will try to be worthy of it.”

I blink up at him, absorbing his words. *Does Klawz actually not realize how extraordinary he is?*

I clasp my cold hands to his jaw. “You already are worthy, Klawz.”

He stills beneath my hold.

I persist. “It’s true, Klawz. You’ve changed my life for the better. You deserve good, too.”

His expression softens, but he still shakes his head. “I failed to keep my family safe. Innocents died because I lost control. Now, you’re in danger because of me.”

“Weren’t you the one who said nothing is black and white? Your past is painful and I understand your guilt and grief, but don’t forget that if you hadn’t been imprisoned, we likely never would have connected. I would never have accidentally summoned you. I would have been alone against Clyde and the other attackers.”

Klawz growls low.

“But I wasn’t alone”—I reassure us both—“because I had you. Whatever mistakes and painful lessons had to be learned

to put us in each others' paths, I'm grateful for them. I don't think they make us undeserving. They make us perfectly imperfect." I rise up to my tiptoes and press my lips to the skin above his hearts. "No matter what you are to the rest of the world, to me you'll always be my champion and my guardian angel."

He stares into my eyes, a million different emotions playing across his face. "Thank you, Holly, for giving me that."

I smile. *More proof I'm not so powerless, after all.*

All my life I wondered who I was. Tried to be good. Squirmed at the way others saw me.

But when Klawz looks at me, I revel in who I see through his eyes. He knows who I am. What I'm capable of. All the dark, filthy wishes that lurk deep inside.

And he doesn't like me any less. In fact, he likes me *because* of it. The same way I like him.

Klawz may not yet fully believe that he's my salvation, but I know differently.

"I'll give you everything." I tell him. "Just ask and it's yours."

"All I want is you." At the touch of his lips to my throat, a new kind of heat takes hold and I'm warming to this new way to play in the snow.

Until, without warning, he falls backwards, taking me with him.

"Klawz!" We sink into the soft powder, me on top.

He grins up at me. "Now, this is a fun game."



I can't help but giggle. My body is pressed to his, his thick shaft against my belly, and I know exactly why he's suddenly in high spirits.

“Plus”—his expression grows serious—“now I can give you your snow angel and still keep you safe and cozy.”

If I hadn't fallen in love with him already, I would now. He's so thoughtful with me. So protective.

Unable to help myself, I lean forward and press my lips to his.

His tongue tangles with mine, a wild, raw possession that leaves me breathless—and I'm only willing to break away when air becomes a must.

“I like rolling in the snow with you.” I whisper the words against his lips. “I like the care you take with me. Thank you.”

That familiar red glow darkens his gaze, and he rumbles, “I am going to take even better care of you. With my cock, tongue, and tail.”

I like that just as much.

Which is why I don't protest as he hauls me over his shoulder, snow flying everywhere, and stalks through the drifts toward the motel door.

Enjoying the ride, I prop myself up and admire the view.

We've left behind snow imprints after all. Two outlines of what looks like a tiny snow angel and a massive snow devil with horns—and it's perfect because, even though it's the opposite of the truth, it's also exactly right.

Despite our differences, Klawz and I are the same when it comes to the ferocity of our feelings.

Best Christmas Eve ever.

We make it all the way back inside and into our room with no problem.

I'm sliding down Klawz's body, his hands on my ass, my nipples achy and ready for his touch, when agonizing pain rips through me and a cold unlike I've ever experienced before seeps into my veins.

But it's Klawz who drops to his knees. "Run!"

**K** <sup>LAWZ</sup>

I FUCKING WANTED MORE TIME, but it looks like I'm not going to get my wish, after all.

“Klawz!” Of course, Holly chooses now to disobey me, her arms wrapping around me though I commanded her to run.

She's in pain too. I can tell. I'm doing my best to draw the worst of it into myself, but some is leaking out through our soul bond.

Especially now that we're tied together so tight. United as I never expected or imagined. Bonded in a way so beautiful and right I know I'll never truly be free of it, no matter what comes next.

Soon, however, the spell will be too powerful for me to control and I won't be able to protect her or fight the pull.

Already, the terrible cold is seeping beneath my skin, burrowing through sinew and settling in my bones, the invisible, icy cord dragging me back to the wasteland temple prison cinching so tight it crushes my ribs.

“It’s them, isn’t it?” Holly’s frantic shout jerks me from my thoughts. She’s hard to hear over the roaring wind. “They’ve broken through the portal block. They’re pulling you back.”

“Yes.” And because I’m the selfish bastard who connected her to me, they’re trying to take her too.

But that’s not happening.

With a roar, I wrap my hands around her shoulders and toss her onto the bed. “Hold tight to the headboard.”

Thankfully, this time she obeys.

The wind flattens my braids against my face and whips at my wings, twisting them further as it tries to suck me back into the void.

But I won’t let it. Not yet.

I take one last look at my beautiful hellion, her recent words of love, forgiveness, and absolution echoing in my head. Then, I raise my arms, lower my head, and plunge my horn deep into my wrist, cutting through veins and arteries.

Jaw clamped tight, I do the same with the other wrist.

Because she’s right.

I will always be her champion and guardian angel.

“Klawz! No!” Her scream echoes through the room and I hate the pain I hear.

But I know she’ll be okay. There’s no one stronger than my little one.

“What have you done?” She’s reached me now, her arms sliding beneath me as I sink to the floor, her voice shrill.

“Broke the bond.”

“What? No!” She’s pressing on my wounds, trying to staunch the blood, but it’s no use. I purposely made each slash a mortal wound.

“It’s alright, Holly.” I lose myself in her and ignore the pain. “The bond can only be severed if the death magic is appeased. Balance must be reestablished. Draining myself dry is the only way to break it.”

“I don’t want it gone.” She’s sobbing now.

“But I want you... safe.” It’s getting harder to fight the pull, but at least when those fuckers drag me back, they’ll get a nasty surprise.

I’ll be dead, or close to it, and useless to them.

It’s not what I wanted. Leaving Holly is the worst option, but it’s the only play left. I’ve fought my whole life to stay alive, to wait for my shot at revenge and the chance to punish all who’ve wronged me and my kind, but it now seems a paltry goal compared to dying to keep a beautiful soul like Holly’s safe.

I can think of no better sacrifice.

She’s going to be okay—and that means a part of me always will be, too.

Finally, I’ve become the male I need to be for her, the hero she deserves.

“This is my fault.” She’s sobbing in earnest now. “I-I wasn’t good enough. Wasn’t able to close the portal.”

“No, this is on me. You’re perfect, Holly. Always were and always will be. I love you with every twisted, broken shard of my soul—and I always will.” Her breath hitches and I wish there was more time to make her believe, but there are

instructions to pass along. “Once I’m gone, our combined power will pass to you. Use it to close the portal forever.”

“No! I want you here.” She clutches me tighter. “Stay with me.”

“Shhh, little one.” I cup her jaw, absorbing her warmth against my skin one more time. “It’s alright. I was imprisoned for so long, frozen inside and out. Then I found you. You set me free. You gave me life.”

She presses her hand to mine. “You’re my home. M-My North Star. I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. I will always be with you. In your dreams...”  
I want to say more, but it’s too late.

With a final tug, my jailers drag me back to them and away from her forever.



HOLLY

“No!” I reach for Klawz but it’s no use.

He’s gone.

My fingers close around nothing.

The wind vanishes. The snowflakes and the swirling, black void disappear, too. Everything is silent and still.

It’s only me and the blood on my hands and jacket.

Too much blood.

He loved me, and I’ve lost him.

Unacceptable.

I failed him.

Excruciating.

His sacrifice floors me. No one has ever put my needs above their own. Protected me above all else. Given their life willingly so I could keep mine.

No one has ever loved me like that.

But that's exactly why I refuse to follow his final wish and close the portal forever, entombing him in a frozen wasteland.

He will not be the ultimate sacrifice.

This will not be how my Christmas goes.

I may not be able to save him, but I will not abandon him.

I shove to my feet and yank the sheet from the hotel mattress.

Dropping to my knees, I swipe it through the puddle of his blood. Then I stalk to the broken dresser and grab a large splinter.

Already, I can feel Klawz's words coming true.

The power beneath my skin swells, raging through my veins like a swift river as the soul bond ruptures and his power transfers to me.

*I could do anything with it, be anything.* The tantalizing, demonic whispers drift through my mind. *Seal the portal and be, forever, the ruler of this realm. A creature of power beyond imagination. Beholden to no one. Used by no one. A failure to no one.*

With no time to lose, I ignore such foolishness and jab the wood deep.

Blood wells. Nothing like what spilled from my sweet, monstrous Klawz, but enough.

It rolls down my finger and mixes with his blood on the sheet, and my skin tingles.

On impulse, I add my tears, letting them drip onto the fabric.

Klawz spoke of the magic of life and death, but what about love? What about the essence of grief so profound that you'd give up anything and everything just to feel another's warmth against your skin one more time?

I grip the sheet tighter.

I don't know what's going to happen when I open another portal. I don't even know if Klawz is still alive or if I can free him from his jailers long enough to wrench him from that wasteland.

Yet, for the chance to try, for the chance to hold him in my arms for even one more moment, I will risk anything.

I've never been so clear about what I want—and I am going to get it.

*Start worrying more about pleasing yourself. Once you tap into all that power inside you, you'll be unstoppable.*

I drag the sheet toward the area where the void last hung suspended in the room, chanting the words Klawz used, waving it in the air as I picture the way he looked at me right before they stole him away.

They want a monster... Well, they're about to get more than they bargained for.

I'm out for blood.



In the next blink of an eye, a swirling portal appears and I step through without hesitation.

It's Christmas Eve and I'm about to deliver judgment.

## H<sup>O</sup>LLY

THE WIND LASHES my skin as I climb the temple steps.

It's cold here, the kind of grim chill that slips into your bones and makes you feel as if you'll never be warm again. It's stark and colorless too, everything in shades of gray and white. An unending frozen wasteland that numbs the soul.

After suffering in this place for centuries, they've dragged Klawz back here to die.

But I won't let this be his final resting place. I won't let him wallow in this stark, lifeless hell forever.

No matter what it takes, I am making sure his body and soul are enshrined in warmth, light, and love.

If I have to give my life for him to have this final wish, I will. Without question.

I've always been afraid. Worried I wouldn't be enough. Not anymore.

I reach the top step, the white dress I've conjured for the occasion fluttering in the wind. Columns of jagged ice loom

everywhere, jutting from the frozen ground while icicles drip from the frost temple ceiling like fangs.

In the center of the dais stands a huge, snow-covered throne. But Klawz isn't there.

My head snaps to the right and I see a cluster of robed figures on a different set of temple steps. Some are frantically running this way and that. Some are crowded around something on the ground. All are shouting.

“We can't lose him!”

“Find sacrifices. At least thirty children. Fast!”

“His power is next to nothing,” objects another. “Why bother?”

“You fool.” One robed figure shoves another. “There is always more torment worth wringing from him.”

“His body might die, but with luck, his soul will remain within the new barrier,” shouts another as he etches a deep line into the frozen ground. “His essence, his power, will be bound to us evermore.”

Rage slams through me.

These are the true monsters, attempting to enslave Klawz even in death.

But that is not happening.

Klawz will have his freedom above all else.

There's a pressure at my back, one I've felt before, only this time it's more intense and suddenly wings unfurl from my shoulders, as white and glittery as the surrounding wasteland, but streaked with red.

The wings of a demon. Feathered wings that will enable me to protect my monstrous angel.

I alight with that thought, gliding easily across the open space and setting down gently a few feet from my prey. “If it’s power you’re after, I can help with that.”

Several robed heads whip my way, shock playing across their faces.

I send a violent burst of wind ripping through the space. One strong enough to crack temple columns, send icicles plummeting to the ground, and blow back the hoods of my enemies, leaving their faces exposed.

Of course, they look like me. Golden-haired and innocent-looking, but they’re as corrupt as souls can be.

And they’re blocking my view of what matters most. “Let him be.”

It’s the only warning I’ll give them.

“Who are you?” Fighting the wind, one of the dark-robed figure pushes to standing and, unlike the others, his expression has already shifted, growing calculated and covetous.

He can sense the power inside me and he’s greedy for more.

Luckily, I’m in the mood to grant wishes.

“I’m Holly.” I sashay forward, wings spread wide, white dress plastered to my hips and thighs. “Sounds as if you’re looking for a new source of power to deliver judgment. Well, here I am.”

I raise my palms.

Blood-red light shines from my fingertips as I exhale, a rumble vibrating from my throat.

It's not as deep a growl as Klawz's, but it gets the job done.

There's only time to register the briefest flash of panic on the faces of the robed figures. To hear them muttering whatever puny spells they have to take me down, tiny splinters that stab my skin, but do nothing to weaken my resolve.

I'm willing to suffer any pain to wrench Klawz from them. He's mine, now and always.

Fueled by this thought, my power explodes.

In a blinding flash, red and white splash everywhere, blood and bones splattering across the temple steps.

Robed bodies sprawl on every surface and I'm not even winded.

Klawz was right. Once I stop worrying about pleasing everyone else, my power is truly unstoppable.

In the next heartbeat, robes and bodies disintegrate, swirling into ash, spinning and twirling with the snowflakes.

Something beautiful from something ugly.

It's another lesson, but I'm already focused elsewhere, icy tears forming as rage gives way to unfathomable grief.

Without the robed supplicants blocking my way, I've a clear view of my beautiful beast lying diagonally on the stark white steps. A too-bright splash of crimson blood pools beneath him, dripping downward.

Worse, he's not moving.

“Klawz!” In a flash, I’m next to him, falling to my knees, my hands grabbing his shoulders. I use all my strength to roll him over, his wings spreading out behind him like a sainted sacrifice. “I’m here. I’ve come for you.” I force the words out through my tight throat. “I’m not leaving you here. You’ll never be trapped here again.”

“Holly.” A familiar palm cups my face—and it’s warm. “Sweet, sweet Holly.”

“Klawz!”

“That was far too big a risk you took, little hellion.” He pulls me to him and, in the next second, he’s sitting up and I’m straddling him and, if the bulge pressing into my core is any indication, he’s more than recovered.

His wings unfurl behind him, glittering like black ice, but they’re no longer twisted. They’re as vibrant and vital as him.

“Y-You’re alive.” I stare into his glowing red eyes. “How is this possible?”

He utters a single word. “You.”

My palms trace his strong shoulders. “Is this real?”

His stare softens. “It’s real.”

He holds out his arms. The wounds are gone. Erased as if they were never there.

“How?”

He cups the nape of my neck with one of his huge hands, drawing me so close our foreheads touch. “There’s only one magic stronger than life or death, that of love.”

“We were both willing to do anything for the other,” I whisper as understanding dawns.

“Yes.” He presses a kiss to one temple, then the other. “It restored the balance.”

“And brought you back to me.” I wrap my arms around as much of him as I can reach. “I can’t think of a better gift.”

“Our celebration is just beginning, little one.” He stands with me in his arms, his wings whole and straight and outstretched behind him, his hands beneath my bottom, my legs wrapped around his hips, his tail snaking around my back. “Take us through the portal. Anywhere you want to go.” He starts down the steps, his hooves clopping against the ice. “You wanted to see the world. Now you’ll see many. You wanted to know who you are. Now you do. You’re Holly.” He holds me tighter. “And you’re mine. Every fucking day is going to be Christmas for us from here on out.”

“Damn right.” I press my lips to his and smile as his wings shelter me from the cold.

Best. Holiday. Ever.

## EPILOGUE

**K** <sup>LAWZ</sup>

*FIVE YEARS LATER....*

“IT’S TOO BIG. It will never fit.” Holly peers down at me through the frosted window.

“That’s what you said about me.” I drag the glittery Everfrost tree destined for our bedroom up three more steps. “I make it work, always.”

“I can’t deny you that.” She giggles.

My chest tightens. It doesn’t matter how many times I hear that sound, it hums through my soul like the most precious of gifts.

Laughter. Sun. Warmth. Redemption. Love. Holly has given me all of that and more.

After so much blood-soaked rage and violence, it’s a blessing I’ll never take for granted.



“I can’t deny *you* anything.” I reach the top of the stairs and stop short.

She’s fluttering around the smaller tree in the entranceway, those pretty, white demon wings with slashes of red glittering as she moves, her round pregnant belly brushing against the branches as she drapes a glittering ornament on the needles near the top.

“Careful.” I drop the tree and bound forward. “I told you to wait for me. My youngling doesn’t like being poked.”

Leaping up, I snatch her from the sky and, dropping back to the floor, curl her safely in my arms.

“Oh, really?” She offers a fake scowl but drapes her arms around my neck. “Then what does he say about what happened just a few hours past?”

“He understands. He’s alpha too.” All my boys are.

We have two so far, and this one on the way. The older two are a mix of their parents with my coloring and her artichoke blue eyes and the combined power of demon and angel blood running through their veins. Two major handfuls, to be sure.

Even now, the sound of laughter and cracking tree trunks echoes from outside where I left Nox and Shade hurling snowballs at each other, two mini, mischievous beasts. Each possessing the arm power of a small cannon and, thankfully, equally solid ducking skills.

Holly insists the next one after this be a girl.

I’m willing to keep trying as long as it takes to give her what she’s wishing for. I’m thoughtful like that.

Smug, I walk down the hallway with her cradled in my arms.

If it were up to me, that's where my hellion would always be. But she's a demon and she's Holly and there's no holding her back now that she's found out who she really is.

Plus, there's still a war to end.

Which is another reason I remain close and keep vigilante. I know she can take care of herself, but with me around, why should she? She's got a monster for a mate and that means evildoers beware.

I will destroy the very fabric of the realms to keep her and our young safe.

I might be an angel, but I'm no saint.

"You have sparkles in your braids." Her fingers brush along the cords at my neck.

My cock grows hard. Even her innocent touches drive me wild.

Holly is mine.

She's addicted to my cock. So well trained she gets wet every time I stalk her way. But I'm equally devoted, the need to possess her, protect her, pleasure her, a clawing drive sunk so deep inside me I'll never get free.

And it's exactly the kind of prison I crave. The *only* kind I will ever tolerate again.

"That's Everfrost." I press a kiss to her tiny upturned nose. "Everything here sparkles, especially you."

It's one of the reasons I decided on this realm for one of our homes.

The war might rage on but we're safe here.

Holly's restricted who can use the portal to our family so we don't have to worry about others dropping by announced or vengeful wasteland, demon acolytes dragging either of us back to their ruined temple.

Meanwhile, I set about making the home we've always wanted. I half-conjured, half-built a castle with high ceilings, frosted windows, and turrets.

At first, Holly worried it was too much like the frozen temple wasteland and there'd be negative associations, but once I cleared out the Kringle Wylvven, took her on our first sleigh ride, made snow angels, and fucked her against the trunk of a glittery white pine, she stopped worrying and agreed to stay.

Which is good. My young like it here. As do I.

It's a peaceful refuge.

Plus, I'm nostalgic about this place. It's where I first heard Holly laugh. Where I first fell fully, deeply, monstrously in love with the female who brought joy and hope back into my life.

Of course, Holly always wanted to travel, so we do that as well.

The beach in Lumisola remains a favorite get-away. She likes the warmth and the beauty of the place, and I'm a fan since it's where Holly and I first fucked—and because every time we go there, she wears tiny loincloth scraps she calls a bee-keeni.

Which means I like to go there often.

We've even spent considerable time at her old farm in Kansas. I still haven't figured out how Holly came to be at the nearby church. Despite my best efforts, no one seems to know

anything about a demon child abandoned in the Earth realm, but Holly says it's okay. She found the family she always longed for and she swears to me it's more than enough. She's content to wander the rolling hills of farmland with me and our young and focus on the future rather than the past.

Of course, I took care of a certain sweaty bank manager with roving hands the first time we traveled to the Kansas realm, so now I'm happy there as well.

It's a beautiful life.

More shouts and laughter ring from outside as I carry Holly through the open space of our main gathering hall, decorated with mistletoe, glittering candles, and another huge white pine.

Holly loves to celebrate this time of year. She says it's because it brought me to her and, therefore, needs to be commemorated.

I agree.

Though I make sure we're not just celebrating the holiday, but her birthday.

Which is why I have a ton of surprise presents tucked away, ready to be given when the time is right.

No way my female gets overlooked ever. Not when I'm around to spoil her rotten on her special day—and every other day too.

Because, for me, every moment with her is a miracle.

Her palm cups my jaw. "You okay, Klawz?"

Of course, she's always thinking of me, just as I am of her.

"I'm better than okay." I hold her closer. "I'm great."

“Good.” She leans forward and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth, but her gaze is knowing. “We’ll find them. Don’t give up hope.”

She might not be able to hear my wishes like I can hers, but she still knows what’s in my heart.

“I know we will, baby.”

When I’m not with Holly and my young, I spend time searching for my brethren.

Thus far, I’ve had little luck. Same goes for Holly’s efforts. But if my hellion says they’re out there, alive in some realm, I believe it. It sticks in my craw, of course, that I haven’t saved them yet, but I’m not giving up. I don’t know if they’re in hiding or imprisoned, but I’ll find them, and Holly’s love is proof that miracles happen. So, I know I’ll find others of my kind someday, too.

In the meantime, I focus on the gifts I have. Namely, Holly and our young.

I take heart from the fact that my offspring won’t be used as pawns. Or go without the love of those who sired them.

I lost what mattered most to me once. I never will again.

In the end, I suspect that will be the greatest gift I can give to the realms: a future created with hope.

Because if there is any chance of ending the war and restoring the balance that once existed, it will likely come in the form of my offspring. Creatures spawned by an angel and a demon, imbued with extraordinary powers, and steeped in love.

If not, well, as long as they’re happy, I’m good.

Thanks to Holly, I'm the rare monster that gets to have a happy ending.

Well, multiple happy endings, several times a day and night.

I place her gently on the blanket by the roaring fire and follow her down. "My queen. My love. My everything." I shake the glitter from my shoulders and watch it cascade onto her: an angel's glow to surround the fiercest, sweetest demon I know.

"What about the tree?" She smiles up at me.

"I'll deal with it later."

"And the boys?"

"Fed, watered, and distracted. Plus, I spell locked the door on the way in."

She giggles once more.

I've learned over the years.

"They'll be fine," I assure her. If I've played my cards right—and I have—it will be hours before they come looking to eat.

Now it's my turn.

I rear up so I'm on my knees, looming above her. "Open those thighs. Your monster wants to play rough."

She doesn't hesitate.

"Good, naughty girl."

Her pupils dilate.

"I'm going to spread you under the tree, little one." I hook her legs over my horns like the sweetest of offerings. "Lick

my way down that pretty skin and unwrap my gift. Then, I'm going to flip you over and fuck you hard. The first three times, I'll be nice. After that, you're getting naughty."

She smiles wide, her voice deepening to a husky demon rasp. "After that, it's my turn to play."

"Hell, yeah." I twine my tail around her throat and squeeze gently. "Bring it, hellion."

And she does.

There's peace and joy in Holly and my world and our future has never looked brighter or merrier.



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Gifted to the Beast: A Fated-Mates Captive Romance

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Alison Aimes is a *USA Today* bestselling author of Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Omegaverse Romance. Her books are on the steamy side and full of strong heroes, brave heroines, loads of action, and happy ever-afters. She lives in Maryland with her husband, two kids, her dog and a serious stash of chocolate.

Alison can be found online at [www.alisonaimes.com](http://www.alisonaimes.com).

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