

BESTSELLING PARANORMAL AUTHOR
STEPHANIE HUDSON



**THE
HELLBEASTS
PAST**

BOOK 8

THE HELLBEAST'S PAST

THE HELLBEAST KING

8

STEPHANIE HUDSON

HUDSON INDIE INK

The HellBeast's Past

The HellBeast King #8

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The HellBeast's Past/Stephanie Hudson – 1st ed.”

I dedicate this book to the wonderful Maggie Day. A huge fan of the HellBeast saga and was loved by all. A true life and soul of any party, with a smile that could light up a room.

May you find your heavenly story in the Afterlife.

Maggie Day

1962 - 2023

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FALLING FROM A HELLBEAST



“Hello again... *Ella Connor.*”

As soon as I heard this, I swallowed down what felt like a solid lump named panic before I lowered my fearful gaze down to where my necklace lay against his chest.

My wolf.

It was like he had suspected all this time. As if, deep down, that Hellish core of him had recognized what he himself hadn't wanted to admit. He hadn't wanted to give weight to the possibility that I could have been that girl. The one his HellBeast had wanted enough to stop him from doing what the man inside him had wanted to do.

Of course, the question now was...

Who was stronger?

Who would win the fight? The man Hell-bent on revenge, or the HellBeast who recognized his Chosen?

And more importantly... *would I survive the internal battle?*

From the burning hatred in his eyes, I would say not. Not when his hands tightened merciless at my wrists, making me wince against the slight pain as bare rock pressed into the backs of my hands. But this wasn't the only thing I reacted to because I couldn't bare the look of loathing any longer, making me turn my face away.

Something he didn't like... *at all.*

I knew that when I felt my wrists being transferred into one hand so he was free to collar my throat with the other, now using his thumb to press my chin up.

“You will look at me and *you will face your fate!*” He hissed this last part, and it was precisely when I found my anger.

So, instead of biting my lip and holding back my response, I sneered back,

“Maybe it’s you who needs to face your own!”

At this he snarled, making me flinch as his face moved closer to my own, baring his fangs at me. Then with my face once again turned away from his in fear, he growled his next words against my cheek. And unbeknownst to him, but it was the exact warning he had said to me the very first time we met this way.

“Word to the wise, girl... in my Hell, your fear is intoxicating to feed from.”

Of course, the question now was, did this mean our Fate was always meant to start from this point? And in it, did that mean that this was the true start of our journey. But if that was so, then the only thing I wanted to know was how far were we from our happy ever after, because right now...

I felt a million miles away and a thousand years from happiness.

Which was why I closed my eyes as the pain and frustration washed over me. A feeling so strong it felt powerful enough to sweep me away completely. Because all I wished for was just to find a way to prove to him, once and for all, that I had nothing to do with the death of his traitorous wife! Which was why I told him on a whisper,

“I wish there was a way for you to see the truth...”

“What did you just say?!” he demanded, lowering his face to mine, making my eyes snap back to his to find them narrowed down at me. The scar running through his brow was almost glowing with his anger. I opened my mouth, about to speak, when suddenly a great raucous happened behind us that

I couldn't really see due to his large frame blocking everything beyond him. But whatever it was, it caused Jared to lose his footing as someone pushed into him from behind. Which meant that now he was right up against me, having no choice but to let go of my wrists and use both his hands to save himself from headbutting straight into me.

Of course, it also meant that it brought his face about an inch from my own, meaning he felt the gasp of air that escaped me whisper against his lips. Yet, instead of snarling at the cause, he suddenly seemed utterly transfixed by the sight. This along with the feel of me being so close. Which was why my hands fisted in his shirt as if he was my protector. My anchor. My saviour.

He was my everything.

So, I clung to him when I knew in the realms of reality, I was purposely ignoring the fact that I should have been trying to get away, not holding on. And he, too, must have questioned it just like I was. Question why a terrified girl threatened by a powerful being such as he would be clinging on to him as if he was the hero in my story.

Not the villain.

My actions were the reason why we both had so many questions behind our eyes, the windows to our souls that were now locked to one and other. There were a million questions and what felt like untouchable years between us, like some invisible barrier.

It was too much. It was heart breaking. *It was pain.*

“Ahh!” I shouted as that same pain in my heart became a physical thing on my skin. His eyes narrowed down at my arm as even more glass seemed to explode around us, making him quickly grab me to him, this time to protect me better. He did this by tucking me under him as he arched over me.

Now why did he do that?

I had no answer, just as I didn't know what was happening behind him, but it sounded like some kind of riot! But shamelessly this came secondary to what I really wanted to

know and that was, why did Jared still have his arms wrapped around me as if to save me from harm? Especially when he was the one that only moments ago wanted to be the cause of it. It made little sense.

Of course, I didn't have long to question his actions as even more chaos erupted all around us, jarring Jared from whatever spell he had momentarily succumbed to. Which was why, one second, I was staring into a pair of silver depths and, the next, I was staring at his back as he spun to shield me from the mayhem. This also gave me a chance to peek around him and I gasped when I saw the cause of so much destruction that seemed to echo all around us.

It looked like a fucking war!

Demons of all shapes and sizes were fighting, with some of what I could see as being Jared's men trying to gain back some semblance of order. But then the closer I looked, it seemed even some of them were fighting the wrong side, making me wonder even more what the hell was happening. What had gone so wrong?

"What's happening?" I asked in what I knew was barely above a whisper. I saw Jared look down at me, over his large shoulder, the hard tensed line of his jaw telling me he was gritting his teeth in anger as he forced out,

"I don't know."

I opened my mouth to speak when, in the end, only a scream of shock came out as a horned Demon with crusty looking green skin was thrown and landed close enough that I thought he would hit us. However, Jared must have known otherwise, because he simply took a step back and forced me to do the same until I could feel my back press against the stone.

As for the unlucky Demon, he landed into the corner of a wooden cart that had been filled with what looked like barrels of beer. This made one of the wheels splinter and caused the cart to tip along with the barrels, making one fall and split, and causing a foul smelling brown liquid to spill and soak to the dirt floor.

“Oh Gods, what is that awful smell!?” I asked as I started coughing, making Jared sniff at the air before growling in anger.

“*Rafflesia Arnoldii*,” he snarled viciously, and just as I was about to ask what he meant, I screamed. Only this time, it wasn’t due to anything coming at me but instead something...

Getting at me from behind.

“AHHH!” I shouted the moment I felt the hands at my shoulders coming from an impossible place. But then I felt that impossible pull me even deeper as I started to fall backwards, right through the wall that had fallen away, turning to smoke. I had never felt so disorientated in all my life... but wait, that wasn’t quite true. No, because I had felt this way before. Which was why, for a few blissful moments, I believed that something back in my own time must have happened. Something with power strong enough that it meant that I was now back where I belonged. That this time traveling nightmare was over.

But of course, *I was wrong.*

Because the second I landed, I did so into a body who caught me and, unfortunately, it wasn’t the Marcus of the twenty-first century. It was the one who was trying to rescue me from the clutches of an angry HellBeast who must have looked seconds away from killing me!

I knew that because I was left looking across the club and to where I had seconds ago been standing. And the sight that met me was that of a furious King now hammering his hand into the wall I had just slipped through. The black smoke disappearing around his fist as he cracked the stone.

“I would say we have overstayed our welcome, wouldn’t you, my dear?” Marcus said, now taking my hand in his gloved one and pulling me around to face him.

“I would say Hell yeah it has, but it looks like Hell is right here.”

“One that should keep them busy enough... Come on Cookie, time to go!” Marcus said now pulling me with him

through the crowd, one that was either joining the fight or trying to run from it, like we were. However, I couldn't help but look back this time to see Jared leaping up onto the raised stone dais, now scanning the crowd as if trying to find me. However, he wasn't the only one, because it looked as if one of his men was taking matters into his own hands... *literally!*

"Watch out!" I screamed as power seemed to build up in his circling hands before he pushed his palms outwards towards us. It burst from him in great streams of yellow light and torched everything in his path. A deadly heat that would have hit us had Marcus not reacted quick enough. He grabbed me and dove to the side, meaning despite us being the intended target, the doomed clown who had zero fucking luck, got the blast square in his chest. This caused him to fly backwards and crash into the very tent we had made him vacate our first night here.

"Umm... now what are the chances of that?" Marcus mused as we both raised our heads to watch at the same time from where we lay.

"Surprisingly high," I commented dryly, considering who it had hit... *the poor bastard*. Marcus raised a brow at me, making me point out, "Not exactly the time."

"No, I suppose not," he said before shaking the dust from his hair and making his bells jingle before telling me,

"Time to run again, Cookie."

I nodded to this before we both pushed ourselves off the floor and moved from our bellies back to our feet.

"Don't have to tell me twice," I said as he took my hand in his once more, tightening his hold on it as he continued to lead me through the chaos. Although the moment we finally made it to the exit, we both skidded to an abrupt stop as Jared's men finally caught up to us. HellBeasts flanked us from either side until they met in the middle and were now blocking our escape, snarling a clear and dangerous warning. They all varied in size and look, from black charred flesh to clumped fur like it had been dipped in wet red cement. All though the

one thing they all had very much in common, was that they were all utterly terrifying!

“Well, it was nice knowing you, Marcus,” I muttered after my initial gasp of despair. However, the second I heard him chuckle, I looked up and frowned when I found him smirking.

“I’m missing something here, aren’t I?” I asked, hoping... no, no, *praying* that I was.

“Oh, please, Cookie, did you really think that I wouldn’t have at least one more trick up my sleeve?” he said, making an elaborate show of dipping his fingers into his wide cuff and pulling a shimmering glass bottle from the material, winking at me at the same time. My eyes widened in response to his own glittering with pure mischief, as if he literally lived for this shit.

“*GET THEM!*” I heard this command roared from behind, but I didn’t need to look back to know who it was that gave the order. Which was why I focused more on Marcus and the actions of a man who was going to save both our asses from this mess. Something that happened the second he threw the bottle on the floor, making it smash right at our feet. This was at the same time that one of Jared’s HellBeasts leapt through the air, morphing back into his human form mid-motion. His dark, midnight-blue scaled fur rippled and peeled away. As if he were jumping through an invisible, body-sized hoop that ripped away his supernatural form from him. I couldn’t help but open my mouth to scream, a sound that started in one place and ended in another.

Because this attempt on reaching us in time didn’t have the desired effect. Not when Marcus and I were currently falling forward into what was now a shimmering smoke on the floor. I braced myself as the scream continued, holding my hands out in front of me and believing I was going to need them to help break my fall. I even braced myself for the pain that I knew would surely vibrate up my arms.

Thankfully, the pain of landing never came and the world tipped around us as if someone had just folded reality up around us. This meant that I was left still standing in a new

destination. Oh, and did so with my arms still held out in front of me like I was acting out some kind of cheesy Zombie impression.

“No need for that now, Cookie,” Marcus said, tapping on my arms to prompt me to stop from looking like an idiot.

“Wh-what just happened?” I asked in astonishment.

“I just saved our delectable little souls, that is what,” he replied, and I scanned the area around us to find we were now actually standing outside the Cheshire Cheese.

“Yeah, but how?” Again, my astonished tone wouldn’t leave me.

“Think of it as having a portal in my pocket, now come on, we are not out of Hell’s reach just yet.”

“Is that how you managed to get me away from Jared?” I felt like it should have been a ‘duh, Ella’ moment but I doubted duh was yet a part of the English language.

“That, and I poisoned half the club,” he commented offhandedly, like this was just a regular Tuesday. Or whatever the hell day it was because, by this point, it was impossible to keep up.

“*You what!?*” I hissed in response making him chuckle.

“It’s amazing just how many takers there are for a free cup of ale, not even the smell put them off,” he pondered happily with an evil grin.

“Okay, so hold up... let’s go back to the poisoning people part,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Oh, don’t worry, the effects will wear off soon enough... well, they should do,” he said, adding this last part as an afterthought by pausing in his steps and rubbing his gloved fingers to his chin.

“Should do?! Jesus, Marcus, I wanted to escape, not kill people!” I cried in horror.

“Oh, such dramatics... fear not, little Cookie, I killed no one... no, I simply slipped a little Corpse Lily into the ale,” he

said, patting the top of my head like I was some silly little pet of his, and one he obviously found amusing.

“And that made people crazy?”

“Wonderful, wasn’t it?” he replied, that creepy grin of his getting creepier by the second.

“Not when they start killing each other!” I reminded him, making him shrug his shoulders and muse,

“Oh... well I guess I was wrong... *I might have caused a few deaths after all,*” he said winking at me, a gesture that matched the Demonic smirk of his lips perfectly.

“You think?!” I screeched in outrage.

“Well, that will teach them to drink freely and not question why.”

“Not really a lesson to learn if you’re dead, Marcus!” I pointed out, making him chuckle.

“Ah, well, there is that... now come on, otherwise...” He paused and looked back at the entrance to the pub before reminding me that we were far from being danger free yet.

“... *WE WILL SOON BE JOINING THEM.*”

FIGHTING INSTINCTS



“**F**UCK!” I roared the moment I felt her literally slip through my hold like a fucking ghost that was being dragged back to the Afterlife. Of course, in my world I knew this was far from the truth, for the Fool was behind this... *I just fucking knew it!*

Just like him being the cause as to why all fucking Hell was being let loose in my club! The very reason why my Demons were going to war with those they had not long ago tipped a tankard to. Now those tankards were being used to batter heads with, and the beer that had once been swirling in the bottom was laced with fucking Corpse Lily. A poison sending the patrons of the Devil’s Ring fucking insane!

And they weren’t the only ones!

However, the difference was that I didn’t need to sip the spiked ale to send me that way. Not when the girl had been stolen from me and my beautiful prisoner taken. But of course, now it all made fucking sense about as much as it didn’t!

It was her. My fucking shameful fixation in flesh and blood and no longer that of just a haunting memory. It shouldn’t be possible... *she, shouldn’t be possible.* How the fuck had she not aged? She was human, the girl I had obsessed over, with both hatred and loathing equally as much as I had dishonourably felt something deeper than both.

An infatuation I now understood as much as I didn’t. Why oh why couldn’t I have just killed the bitch and be done with this madness?! I could have snapped her neck in seconds,

that's all it would have taken. A simple twist that was about as simple as performing surgery on the heart.

I was still in fucking shock! I couldn't believe she had actually been here within my grasp all this time. Of course, I discovered that there was a considerable amount more to the witch's cast than just what met my eye these last few days. It hadn't just given her the aura of a supernatural being but denied any who might have recognized her with a subtle attack on their memories.

In short, I hadn't stood a chance at identifying her, despite the niggling feeling in the back of my mind that this was a soul my own recognized. But then the second the casting started to seep away from her dancing form, doing so like paper turning to ash as her veil was stripped of her, I felt the physical pain pierce my heart like an arrow shot from Fates' hand.

Those eyes... my beautiful green eyes were back.

Back in my life.

Eyes I couldn't ignore, nor could I tear my own away from. Windows to the soul, one I would look into and see a reflection of my own shame staring back at me. The girl I had saved and brought into our lives only moments before she destroyed everything. My whole life had unravelled in an instant and all because I allowed myself that single moment of weakness. The slightest slip of my heart and the result would last an eternity.

Gods but how I hated her!

Fuck, *but how I wanted her even more.*

It was beyond comprehension. Almost beyond even my life's reality, yet it was what it was. For she was here now and all I could think about was a poisonous mixture brewing that consisted of vengeance, lust, and hatred. Yet there was a part of me that knew there was another element in the mix I could only ignore for so long. The one my HellBeast brought to the table and continued to lay it out for me.

The part that told me who she really was to us both.

Which was only confirmed the moment I scented something on the floor. The reason even in my madness I knelt to the place she had once stood and dipped my fingertips in the droplets of blood I found there.

No longer just the blood of my enemy.

Now the blood of who my HellBeast craved to claim.

Which was why I curled my fingers into a fist of frustration, as I was back up to my feet in a pounding heartbeat, roaring in my anger,

“WHERE IS THE GIRL!?”

However, my crazed demand went unheard by the mindlessness that had overtaken most of my men, forcing me to take action myself. I did this by leaping onto the fighting platform, which these last few days had been used for so much more than just bloodshed. In fact, one of the things I had asked Orth to discover from the witch was if her ability to dance was part of the spell cast. If it had been just another ploy to infiltrate my club and grab the attention of its King? This being just another in the long list of questions added to an ever-growing scroll unravelling in my mind. The main question at the top of the list being, what had they hoped to gain by coming here?

None of it made any sense to me. For clearly, she knew the risk to her life, as the last time we met, my warning had obviously made its impact. The evidence to that fact was in her treachery, considering she had needed the witch's services. Because she knew I would recognise her as herself and therefore what would happen when I did.

It all shocked me, but none more so than discovering that the answer to this question had been no, the witch hadn't given her this incredible talent for dance. Nor had she detected any such thing herself when I had paid her to dissolve the casting, bringing the witch to my club and doing so purposely whilst the girl danced.

Of course, I had expected her to fall. To stumble. To trip over her lies and lose the ability to weave me under her spell

even further. A spell cast by using her incredible body as a tool to lure me even deeper under than where she already held me imprisoned.

However, what I had discovered, no one could have prepared me for. Ella Connor. A name I had agonised over for far too many years. The reason I had kept her necklace on my person every day since. Why I found myself on too many occasions subconsciously gripping it in my hand as if the fucking thing brought me comfort.

Why the fuck had she come back? Why the fuck was she here?! There were too many questions and I would not lose my chance at finding them out!

So, I quickly started to scan the crowd, determined to find them and thus giving me another reason to bless the unusual flaming red hair that I would spot far easier in the crowd. Of course, I knew now the Fool had used a *Veloxiter*. Which meant swift journey in Latin and at its most basic form was no more than a portal in a bottle. A useful tool, and one not easy to come by, and thankfully for me, one with its limitations.

The distance it could make you travel would only get you so far and, at the most, the other side of my club. Which was why I focused on the exit, seeing them amongst the fighting and irrationally my first thought was to worry that she would get hurt... *again*. The smell of her blood still clung to me, and it did nothing to cool my HellBeast roaring inside of me. This for more than one reason as the scent alone was enough to push my Beast far too close to the surface than I would allow around her. Secondly, she was hurt and, admittedly, I struggled with knowing that.

It was a fucked-up fear that was about to come to fruition the moment I caught sight of one of Orth's men taking aim in their direction, taking my order to get the girl as one of harmful intent.

"NO!" I bellowed, throwing myself at him seconds too late after the power was expelled from his hands of known sorcery. I knocked him clean from his feet, ready to power my fist into his face for the offence of trying to harm what was mine.

However, the overwhelming need to know that she was alright rode harder against my instincts with the power of fucking wild stallions. This meant that I left the winded sorcerer on the floor as I jumped back to my feet, once more scanning the crowd for my girl.

“Fuck! Ella, where the fuck are you, girl?” I snapped at no one, now unable to find her and fearing the worst. My frustration mounting by the second as my cause for worry grew to a knife’s edge, so much so that I could feel my HellBeast mere moments from erupting and killing everyone in my path.

What in great Hell’s damnation was this feeling!?

Why was this panic growing? Why did I even care if my enemy suffered? If she had been hit by the powerful force and was now lying dying on the floor...

“NO!” I roared, leaping onto the stage once more, for that had been exactly what she had made it. She transformed my club into a thing of pure beauty, if only momentarily. A fleeting moment in this club’s history, she had made it something so much more. A moment of truth and clarity as she graced the hearts of Demons and creatures of Hell, proving that not all was lost in the name of beauty for the souls of the damned. The souls of the forsaken.

She had been the light the darkness had gravitated to.

My light.

“Fuck, Ella! Get up, girl, and let me see you!” I snarled before holding my breath and waiting for the cursed prayer to be granted.

‘I wish there was a way for you to see the truth...’ That was what she had said to me. Why had she said that? Why was I questioning that now? Because, you asshole, you were too busy questioning everything else!

“Any sign on the girl?” my brother asked the moment I felt him swing himself up behind me, now joining in my scanning of the crowd.

“There!” I shouted the second I saw her rise up from the floor, only growling my anger when seeing her standing next to who she no doubt thought of as her saviour, and for the second time.

Gods, but if I gritted my teeth any harder, then she would find me a toothless HellBeast with the ability to do nothing but whistle a pretty tune and speak an idiot’s tongue.

“I have my men at the ready near the exit.”

“Good. Have your men cut them off the second they start to move,” I replied with every muscle tensed, more than grateful for my brother’s quick decision making in the midst of my inability to do so, my emotions too turbulent to act. But for Orth, well I didn’t need to look or hear his thoughts to know that he was giving the order to capture them both unharmed.

Because as much as I wanted to tear the head from that fucking fool, I also knew that he was best served to me alive. After all, I would need something to bargain with when I was to interrogate my new prisoner. And well, there were oh so many questions I had left to ask her. Questions I knew that with a knife held to his throat, I would soon have all the answers to.

But first I needed my prisoner caught in my net, one I could see was now closing in tighter around her. Which was why I started to move, knowing I would be the only one touching her. I would permit no one else to do so. In fact, I would make it a Gods be damned law and royal decree if I had to! For even the thought of that Fool touching her made me want to rip off his hands and force them down his painted, cocky throat!

“Clear the floor!” I demanded, jumping from the platform and storming my way down the middle of the club, making my order obsolete as others scrambled to get out of my way. No doubt, fearing the expression of thunder on my face as my fury rolled from me like an infectious wave, making people practically cower to get away.

I was close to running and found my movements closer to the action by the time I got close enough to see that something was obviously wrong. That something had happened, for it would now seem as if some sort of commotion had caused others to look on in shock. Which meant it was only seconds later, that instead of finding what I expected to be the sight of my new prisoners on their knees being detained by Orth's men, I found...

Nothing.

I had grabbed one of the men standing in my way and practically tossed him ten feet in the air in my haste to find, to my horror...

Another portal disappearing on the floor.

“NO!” I roared in my furious state at finding my prey escaped. Prey that I would hunt down and make pay for denying me even a second from making my claim on her.

Meaning only one thing was left to do.

Which was why I turned to my brother and said the words he didn't need to hear, but were ones that echoed around my world all the same...

“AND NOW WE HUNT.”

THE FOOL AND THE DANCER



A fool and a dancer walk into a bar...

Well, that may have sounded like the beginnings of a side-splitting joke but add a HellBeast hunting you around 18th century London, then it quickly became a nightmare. Of course, I hadn't really expected Jared to just give up. But then to have gotten the word out so quickly was astounding. I mean, it wasn't like just picking up a cell phone and making calls. Yet somehow, for each inn we walked into asking for a room for the night, we were met with a frantic shake of the head and a rushed,

"I don't want to get mixed up with the Iron Butcher of London!"

"The Iron Butcher of London?" I questioned after hearing this name twice before we had been turned away.

"Looks like your HellBeast has certainly made a reputation for himself... but alas, you would know more than I," Marcus commented in a nonchalant tone.

"Firstly, I have never heard anything about him being called the Iron Butcher and secondly, he isn't *my* HellBeast... *not in this time*," I said, adding this last part in a pained whisper. One that wasn't down to the pain I still felt in my arm where it had been cut during the riot. Of course, the adrenaline had soon worn off and after Marcus had used his cravat as a bandage it had, at the very least, stopped bleeding. The pain, however, was just a reminder of what had happened and, potentially, what was still left to come. Needless to say, I

didn't want to believe that Jared would actually hurt me. But let's just say that as I walked the Georgian streets of London, it was a cruel reminder that I knew nothing of this time... *I knew nothing of the King hunting me.*

It was at this point when Marcus stopped me in my tracks with a hand on my shoulder, turning me to face him at the same time he asked,

“You really think he's not yours?”

“You saw his reaction to seeing the real me, now answer me, Marcus, do you think he looked happy?” I pointed out in what I knew was a dejected tone.

“He didn't exactly look like he was ready to relieve you of your head either,” he countered, making me sigh back against the wall as we were close to the River Thames with Marcus telling me that this was our only chance at hiding. That we would have no choice but to cross the bridge in hopes of getting to the other side of the river and hoping word had not reached that far yet.

Of course, London Bridge looked vastly different now than it did in my own time. Marcus explained that he had read in a paper recently that they were to change it yet again, as a competition was opened to design a replacement for the medieval bridge.

I was also shocked to hear that for over five-hundred-and-fifty years people had actually lived on the bridge in towering five- or six-story buildings. In fact, Marcus went on to tell me that it was only in 1756 that the London Bridge Act gave the City Corporation the power to purchase all the properties on the bridge. This was so that they could be demolished and therefore the bridge could be improved.

He also said it used to be one of the best places to shop when in town, and how he purchased, in his words, ‘a very fine hat the ladies used to swoon over’ from one of his favourite shopkeepers who also owned a haberdashers next door.

I think the sole purpose of this conversation was to try and ease my fears and my obvious growing anxiety as I continued to look behind us while we navigated the street closest to the riverbank. I kept expecting to see Jared and his men come out of the darkness and make chase the second they saw us.

As for our plan, it pretty much remained the same. We needed to find a place to lay low. And, well, it seemed like our hopes of doing this in an inn on this side of the river was out of the question. Of course, we needed to get to the Janus Gate and now that I finally had a coin, we could do this. The only thing stopping us was logistics.

“There is a Stagecoach that leaves every Thursday from the Golden Cross, in Charing Cross, but that means we have two days until it leaves and we can’t hide this side of the Thames until then without our chances at getting caught being significantly higher. And well, it is true that I like to gamble as much as the next man, but I fear that to do so with our lives is a step even I consider too high a price to pay with.”

I couldn’t agree more.

“So, in a nutshell, you don’t trust us not to get stabbed in the back by someone who we pay to hide us.” I surmised easily enough.

“Unfortunately, recent events do lead to this conclusion, yes, as Molly seemed more eager to take coin than face the wrath of a HellBeast King, and well, I don’t suppose humans wouldn’t do the very same when faced with this notorious Iron Butcher we keep hearing about.” I inwardly cringed at the thought, not wanting to know what exactly Jared had done to warrant the name. One thing I did know that didn’t need confirming, was that whatever it was, it wouldn’t be anything good and no doubt was born from a lot of fear. Fear for good reason.

“So, the plan is to get over the river and wait it out over there for two days before making our way back to catch the stagecoach and, in that time, hope that the Iron Butcher of London, AKA, Mr angry HellBeast himself doesn’t discover his missing coin and put two and two together, equalling the

Golden Cross, in Charing Cross on Thursday?” I concluded in a rather long nutshell this time.

“I grant you, it’s risky.”

“*Oh, that’s just dandy, that is,*” I muttered sarcastically in response.

“Look, I don’t want to be a Negative Nelly here...” I started, causing a painted brow to arch my way.

“Negative Nelly?” he repeated.

“Focus here, Marcus, because I just have to point out that Jared isn’t stupid, in fact, he may seem full of growly orders and flexing muscles but above all else, he’s smart, Marcus... *smart and cunning.*” I added this last part as if it was more like something I *needed* to say. Even if just to remind myself of the fact. Hence why I now found myself once again, looking behind us and expecting to see a pair of glowing silver eyes watching from the veil of darkness.

“I have no doubt this to be true as well, for like I said, you would know better than most. Besides, I can tell for myself that this account of the man you speak of to be true, which is why our plan is simple,” Marcus said with a casual roll of his hand.

“And that is?”

“To be smarter,” he said, winking at me and with it easing my fears, if only for a moment.

But that was the dangerous thing with being just that next step closer to getting home, and it had a name... *Hope*. One I could almost taste. One I could most definitely feel, especially with the slight weight of this coin in my pocket. A coin hidden within the folds of my dress. Although, the weight of it mentally felt like carrying around an anvil, as it was literally my last hope at getting home. Now of course, all I had to do was out run my Fate in the form of one furious HellBeast King that wanted his revenge.

“Come on, Cook, let’s make haste.”

I nodded, taking the hint and walking faster towards London Bridge, one that was now minus its occupants.

“Let’s get off the main street and walk closer to the riverbank until we come upon the bridge,” Marcus said after looking behind him, and now with a serious tone, it was as if he could feel something he didn’t want to say. He then took my hand once more and he clearly didn’t want to let go.

The walk next to the river offered a straight drop into the water with only the small stone balustrades creating a barrier between us and the edge. I looked back at the ruckus of full ale houses and bustling inns at this part of town, wondering how many drunks ended up in the river after a deadly trip? The strong smell of the city seemed to cling to every surface like a sticky fog from the early stirrings of the Industrial Revolution. This mixed with the stench from the river and I spent most of my time trying not to breathe through my nose.

But soon, even this became too precarious, as Marcus decided the walkway was too dangerous and instead led me down some steps where the riverbank was much wider and further from the water’s edge.

Which meant I had to lift up my skirts and, for parts of it, we had to walk in single file as the natural footpath was too narrow. But soon the first part of the bridge could be seen, as the first arch was one we obviously intended to walk under. It also soon became clear it had once been what some poor soul had used for shelter.

However, as we walked closer, all that was left of someone’s makeshift home was a dirty torn blanket, a broken basket holding some rotten apples, and a pair of men’s shoes that looked barely held together by their nails and stitches.

It was a sad sight and made my heart ache for the bleak and desperate situation some were forced to endure. In fact, I almost asked where he thought the homeless man would be, wishing there was something I possessed that I could have left him. But this was also when Marcus pulled me closer into the shadows and warned,

“We are still being followed.” After this whispered confession, I couldn’t help but gasp softly, before whispering a hissed,

“*Still?*”

“*Ssshh, quiet now...*” he said, holding a finger to his lips, making me nod in understanding. Then with our backs to the bridge’s wall we waited. I with bated breath, Marcus with cool resolve. As if he knew what was about to happen and he was more than ready for it.

“I think it is safe but, for now, I believe we should wait,” he said, and I was smart enough to listen.

“Someone was following us... are you sure?” I asked, now feeling free to do so.

“I couldn’t be sure at first, alas now I know. Which means seeing as they have passed above, they will most likely make their way across the bridge in search of us.”

“I’m confused, aren’t you what they call a Seeker...? So, no offence, but shouldn’t you technically know what’s going to happen?”

He gave me a pointed look and told me,

“There would be little need of me even getting out of bed in the morning if I already knew what the day held and there was nothing to gain from doing so.”

“Good point, I guess... so how does it work?” I asked, and he looked like he was resisting the urge to sigh at the question.

“I see what the Fates want me to see and nothing more. If the Fates want me here, then here is exactly where I shall be,” he replied.

“And if getting caught is part of that Fate?”

“Then I am powerless to stop it, but let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, eh?” he said, giving my good arm a nudge.

“That’s not very reassuring,” I said, giving him a wry look, only the second there was a sudden bright flash of light from the way we had come, Marcus spoke,

“No, *that isn't... RUN!*”

Like before, I didn't need telling twice! Especially not when I saw figures emerging out of the portal of light that had just appeared out of nowhere. But I wasn't waiting around to find out who it was, not when at heart, *I knew*.

Of course, running wasn't much of an option either, not when men suddenly blocked our escape by dropping down off the side of the bridge and landing hard in front of us. Dark figures now rising from the bent knee they had landed on. I gasped the moment I saw the tall and looming figures of Jared's men as they rose between us and our escape.

Which meant the second I looked behind us, that gasp of fright turned into a scream lodged in my throat just as I seemed to be caught in his sights. As I suspected, the most frightening one of all was now emerging from the portal and soon storming his way towards us. A huge, intimidating form cast in shadow from the glow behind him that swirled with light, as if a small man-sized star had just birthed a God.

I swallowed down the intense lump of fear at the sight. But Marcus clearly had other ideas, now pulling the same bottle of swirling glittering liquid from his jacket, telling me,

“*Last one.*”

“Then make it count,” I said as he threw it to the ground just as Jared was roaring his orders,

“GET THEM!”

Then as everyone lunged as one, we simply stepped into our own portal created on the floor in front of us. I felt that drop in my belly, as if my insides were being momentarily scrambled when we fell through the floor and were dropped from above it. Thankfully, this time, our end destination was on top of the bridge.

Mercifully, the drop was only about six feet high, but fuck me, the landing still hurt like a bitch wearing spikes! Mortals saw this and started to back away from us, making the sign of God, crossing themselves as if Satan himself just dropped out

from Hell. Oh, and speaking of Hell, we were still being chased because I could hear the bellowing of rage from below.

“You saw nothing of this,” Marcus said, obviously taking hold of their minds and making them blissfully forget. I was actually surprised he took the time to do so, and my look must have said as much, as he quickly told me,

“Rules and all.” I almost laughed at this because, all things considered, the Gods only knew how many rules we had actually just broken. Stealing from a King seemed to be only one of them.

And speaking of Kings, mine was still making chase and, unfortunately for me, he and his men looked a damn sight quicker! Which was why we started running across the bridge as fast as we could. The uneven cobblestones and darkness not making it any easier. At least it seemed to be a clear enough night that it didn't cloud the moonlight and, at this point, was the only reason I could see at all.

“It's no use, they are gaining on us!” I shouted unhelpfully as we navigated our way past shocked mortals, horse drawn carriages, and small stone alcoves that looked built for people to take a break in. Each of these little alcoves were shaded with a half scalloped, dome roof made of stone. They also held a small bench inside and looked big enough for no more than four people, creating pockets of pure darkness at intervals along the bridge's edge.

“We will make it! Come on!” Marcus said, taking our odds into his own hands and pulling me up to the back of a carriage that was just stopping to pick someone up.

“Jump on!” he ordered, and I held up my skirt with one hand so I wouldn't trip over it as I climbed onto the thankfully empty luggage rack.

“Now hold on, this is going to be a bumpy ride,” Marcus warned as his eyes started to glaze over. Then I heard the great cry of the horses before the carriage started to travel at greater speed.

“Whoa!” I yelled as I nearly fell backwards, not ready for the horses taking off like that. Thankfully, Marcus grabbed me just in time and yanked me back so I could grip the leather straps. Straps that, no doubt, were meant for a very different type of load on the back of this thing. But despite the discomfort, it was working because I looked behind to find Jared and his men falling behind. Oh, and boy did he look pissed about it! In fact, we didn’t have that far left until we made it to the end, being we had already made it over halfway.

“We are going to make it!” I shouted over the roaring sound of horses’ hooves and the bellows of the man in front trying in vain to control the wild beasts to a slower pace. But then it seemed as if I had spoken too soon because something we couldn’t see spooked them. Which meant that suddenly the sound of their fright was the last thing I heard before Marcus grabbed me to him, cocooning me in the safety of his arms. But before I had chance to react, I swiftly found myself being thrown from the back of the carriage.

“*NO!*” I heard this roared from somewhere behind me as we landed hard on the ground, causing us to roll and, during which, hitting my head hard enough to make me groan in pain. But the sound of wood splintering, horses neighing, and metal grinding against stone seemed to drown out the sound of my pain as I lifted my head to see the cause of it all.

The carriage had crashed and was now on its side, with pieces of it broken off and now lying around the road of the bridge.

“Are you alright?” Marcus asked, being the first to get to his feet and shake himself right.

As for me, I was half wrapped up in the layers of my skirt like a red burrito, meaning I was about as graceful getting up as someone would be wearing a sleeping bag. I looked ready for a sack race!

“Gods, you’re bleeding again, Cookie,” Marcus said, coming over to me and wiping away the blood I could feel trickling down the side of my face.

“I’m fine, besides, I think we have more important things to worry about... look!” I said, nodding to the fact that Jared and his men had nearly reached us. And, Jesus, if I thought Jared looked pissed before, well now he looked beyond fucking enraged.

The moment they started to surround us was about the same time the sound of leather creaking could be heard as Marcus tightened his grip on my hand. It was a sound that seemed to echo in the night, causing Jared’s sharp silver eyes to focus on our joined hands. Then Marcus looked down at me and said,

“You have one chance at this, little Cookie... just promise me one thing...”

I frowned in question as he stepped forward, now letting go on my hand.

“*Wh-what are you doing, Marcus?*” I asked, my voice now fearful for a whole new reason. But then as he looked back at me, he smirked the second he pulled a long staff from his jacket as if by magic. As if this whole time he had an arsenal hidden under the fabric, just waiting to appear at his command.

Then he winked at me as his gaze started to glow with merely a flick of his wrist, the symbols carved into the staff mirrored the power in his eyes, igniting both him and it with an aura of blue magic.

Then he told me the promise he wanted me to keep...

“...*RUN, Ella, and don’t look back.*”

BARGAIN FOR BLOOD



“**M**arcus, no, please... I...” I stammered out, knowing he wouldn’t survive this! Not with the look of murderous intent coming from Jared in what felt like Demonic waves. As if there was a storm brewing and at the centre of all its chaos, was its King.

“RUN... RAHHH!” Marcus roared out at me, before this turned into a battle cry as he turned to face Jared and, for the first time, proved to the King that he was a lot more than just a fool with a fiddle.

Marcus lashed out with incredible accuracy, spinning his staff at dizzying speed, hitting all that came close. A charged blue fire emitted sparks and hissed from the weapon like electricity from a live wire. Crackling lightning bolts that forked at the end tasted his prey each time contact was made with every hit he made against them. They grunted and fell to their knees, creating a path for me to run through, as had been his intent.

“Marcus, come with me!” I shouted back, making him look full of regret for a moment before shaking his head at me.

“GO!” he shouted before more of Jared’s men rushed at him.

Tears fill my eyes, hating the idea of leaving him to fight alone. Knowing why he had told me not to look back. Why he had wanted my promise. Because Marcus wasn’t just fighting to save me...

No... *He was sacrificing himself for my cause.*

Which was why I couldn't do it! I just couldn't leave him. I couldn't run now and never look back like he wanted me to. Because even if through his actions I did make it home, I would be doing so a broken version of myself... *fractured by guilt*.

I would never be able to live with myself. Because I didn't know how this time traveling worked. I didn't know what I was going back to. Whether time would just rewrite itself back to the way it was before or whether I was, in fact, the rewriter of time.

That I would irreversibly be the one to get Marcus killed.

"No!" I shouted to myself, stopping dead on the path, turning to see as Marcus was being overpowered just as Jared was shouting,

"Bring me the girl, I want her unharmed!" Which was when it hit me. I might have something to bargain with after all, despite what it meant I was most likely sacrificing by doing this. So, I looked towards the edge of the bridge knowing there was only one thing left to do, and it couldn't have come any sooner. Not when I heard Jared snarl,

"And kill the fucking Fool!" So, I quickly ran for the balustrades and started to climb up next to the nearest alcove, using it to keep me balanced. I then rose to standing once my feet were both steady on the stone ledge. Then, with my hand gripping onto the ledge of where the dome half roof met the stone walls, I turned to face Jared. Someone who naturally was still looking violently toward Marcus, who now had each arm restrained behind his back. His staff was left flicking on the floor until its power extinguished all together.

"NO!" I screamed just as one of his men pulled a large blade from the sheath at his belt. But the sound of my cry did its job. It made Jared freeze in tracks.

His chilling gaze turned toward the sound he heard and the second he found me, his deadly demeanor changed. He saw that I was currently taking my life in my own hands, forcing him to quickly signal to his men. He held up his hand, silently

ordering them to stop as well, giving me time to make my threat.

“Kill him and I will kill myself. I will jump!” I shouted, making Jared suddenly look as if he had been struck. Then with a growl of anger, he called it as what it most likely looked like it was... *a bluff*.

“Kill the Fool!” he ordered roughly, and I shouted out the threat again!

“Stop! I will do it... ahhh!” I ended this in a true cry of fright as my foot slipped back, making me scabble to pull myself upright once more, thanking God there was a ledge. Especially when looking down and seeing nothing but what looked like an endless darkness below. I knew the water was there but, to me, right in that moment, it was nothing more than a sinister oblivion waiting to drag me under.

“Wait!” Jared ordered, clearly taking me far more seriously this time. So, taking this as a sign, I quickly gave him my terms.

“Let him go or, I swear to all the Gods there are, I will jump off this fucking bridge!” I said with deadly intent, one that spoke of how serious I was.

“*Oh Cookie,*” Marcus said, looking pained by my decision to stay and save his life.

“Oh, how very touching,” Jared sneered in response.

“Let him go!” I demanded, ignoring the jealous bite of his comment.

“So, you wish to sacrifice your life for his, that is it?” he said, coming to stand in front of Marcus, holding his arms wide in a mocking gesture.

“He would do the same, besides, are you really willing to let him rid you of extracting vengeance yourself?” I questioned, but his response wasn’t what I thought it would be.

“*What!?*” he snarled in what almost seemed like disbelief.

“That is what you want, isn’t it...? To kill me yourself! To kill the one who took your precious Lerna!” I snapped, making him growl venomously,

“You go too far, girl!” he warned, and perhaps I had but if I could direct his anger back to me, then I was at least taking it away from being directed at Marcus. Hence why I told him,

“No, going too far is taking my own life when I know you want to take it for your own revenge... after all, I did kill you, did I not...? *Isn’t that what you think?!*” I pushed, making him growl this time as he took a furious step towards me, forcing me to hold my foot over the edge. This was enough to tell him without words, that I would do it if he took another step closer. And it worked. The threat was great enough to get him to pause, the look on his face one of frustration and building anger.

“Let him go and my death is yours, HellBeast,” I said, setting my terms in stone, knowing this was the end, one way or another. I could see in his eyes a gaze that told me he was weighting up his options, and I didn’t like it when they narrowed as if coming to a decision.

“Fine, you want the fucking Fool, then you may have him...” he said, walking back towards where his men held Marcus prisoner. Then he grabbed him by the jacket just as his men all took a step back so he could march Marcus over to me. But just before he let him go, he kicked out his knees behind him, making him fall in front of me, hard on the ground. This painful sight ended with me crying out because I knew what was coming next.

“NO!” I shouted as his fist gripped a handful of Marcus’s sectioned hair, making the bells at the end sound more like a death toll. Then Jared produced a wicked looking blade from behind his back and brought it to Marcus’s throat.

“I think I will choose this Fool’s life instead, for forcing you to watch as he dies, is all the revenge I need!” Jared snarled viciously, turning my plan on its head.

“No please! Please! I will do anything!” I pleaded, and in my haste nearly slipping once more.

“You would give your life for this Fool!?” Jared asked, his eyes glowing with hatred as they scanned down to my friend in his grasp.

“I would save the life of any man who had already once saved my own, now please... if you want my death, then so be it, but not like this... don’t kill him, I beg of you!” I said, my voice defeated and pained.

“*You love him?!*” Jared hissed the question, misplacing my pleas for his life. I looked down at Marcus and he in turn looked up at me, an expression of pride and gratitude on his face, as well as pained realisation that he hadn’t managed to save me after all.

“He...*he is my friend,*” I said with tears now rolling freely down my cheeks, causing Marcus to close his eyes as if the emotions were too much for his soul to witness.

“And what would you give me in return if I were to spare his life?” Jared asked, surprising me not with his arrogant tone, but with the reasons he would even ask this. Because I would have thought exchanging my death for Marcus’s would be all he wanted. Which is why I had no choice but to tell him,

“Anything you ask for.”

“Anything?” he repeated as if he needed to be sure, and it was at this moment that I knew I was walking into a trap.

“I give you my word,” I said, making him scoff once as if this meant little to him. But then before I could argue that it did, he stunned me even further by telling me,

“Then I want your blood.” Jared stated this firmly enough that it shocked me enough to gasp because, well, it was the very last thing I had expected him to say.

“*My-my blood?*” I asked on barely a whisper.

“Ella, no, you can’t... AHH!” Marcus said, crying out the second Jared held his head back taut and looked down as he started to cut him, causing rivulets of blood to trickle beneath the blade.

“NO! Please, stop... Gods, just stop it!”

Jared lifted his head and looked straight at me, his movements paused for the moment.

“Give me the answer I want, girl, and I will do just that.” I took a deep breath and ignored my friend’s eyes telling me not to do this. As if he knew that the second I did, it would mean the end for me one way or another. Because Jared was either going to kill me by draining me dry or he was going to claim me. Either way, I was never getting home. He would rather make me his prisoner, or I was to become a prisoner in death. But I couldn’t let Marcus die.

This wasn’t his fight.

It was mine.

So, I swallowed down my fear and told him,

“Yes... yes, I will do it... please, just... *just don’t hurt him!*” I shouted, making Jared grin and, holy fuck, but it was pure, prime evil.

“But of course you will,” he said, once more in that arrogant tone of his before grabbing Marcus by his jacket and hauling him back to his feet. Then he tossed him back towards who I could now see was his brother stepping forward.

But my mistake in watching this was that I took my eye off the predator coming at me. Meaning that by the time I did see him, my foolish reactions kicked in as I forgot where I was. Meaning I took a step back and would have fallen into the river had Jared not been there to save me. He reached out and grabbed me, pulling me from the balustrades with a grumble of annoyance.

“Foolish fucking girl!” he barked, making me cry out as I suddenly found myself spun and facing his men with him at my back. Gods but he felt like a brick wall and an impossible force to fight against with his arm banded across my chest keeping me in place. But then as I saw Marcus being put in shackles, I started to squirm against him.

“You said you would let him go!” I shouted in outrage, but it meant nothing to Jared, who simply chuckled in my ear at the same time pulling me back tighter against him.

“I said I would spare his life, but I said nothing about letting him go,” he informed me calmly, making me let out a breath on a pained moan as realization hit me.

“You see, I may have bargained for your blood, but I am not foolish enough to give up the weakness I hold over you... speaking of which, time for me to sever all other claims over you by making my own.” This was barely a warning, it all happened so fast. One second, I was looking at Marcus as they started dragging him back towards the street and the next, my head was forced to the side.

A single heartbeat passed before he sank his fangs deep into my neck, making me cry out in pain and shock, before a very different feeling started to quickly wash over me.

Shameful forced pleasure.

Something that surprised Jared this time because the moment I started to moan against him, he growled low in his throat after pausing long enough from drinking me down. Then he swore over his claiming bite, one I knew was purposely made over the one he had made back in my own time. One he had thought was made by another.

“*Fuck!*” he cursed, before snapping,

“All of you, eyes to the fucking floor!” he growled at the few of his men that had remained. Then he picked me up as if knowing in my weakness for him that I would be unable to walk.

My heavy lids barely opened enough to see that he walked me back to the stone alcove I had been clinging to moments ago. Once in the shadow of darkness it provided us, he sat me down on the bench. I would have questioned why he did this, until he used both hands to tear one of the other benches out of his way. Then before I could protest, I was suddenly in his arms once more, as he pulled me back to standing. This was so he could then push me back against the wall of the alcove.

“*You know what I want, girl, now offer yourself to the one who now owns you,*” he demanded, his voice hard and thick with hunger. So, knowing there was no use fighting it

anymore, not when he had long ago won the battle of my heart, I let my head fall to the side so he could continue to make the claim.

“Good girl,” he praised, and I hated myself for the small thrill this brought me, feeling weak because of it. But this was a fleeting thought as all others were quickly consumed by the feel of him sinking his fangs into me once again. He groaned in pleasure as my blood filled his mouth and he started swallowing me down like a man starved for life. It was a thirst he likely never knew he had until this moment. A thirst he quenched in earnest as his hold on me tightened to the point of near pain. As if he feared his prize being taken from him at any moment and he was readying himself for the fight.

All these thoughts started to fade into nothing but background noise in my mind as the pleasure started to build once more, and I writhed against him, searching for the end. I could think of nothing else but the euphoria I knew I would find waiting for me. I could vaguely hear myself moaning as the wave built in its intensity, ready to crash into the shores of my mind. The release of dopamine and oxytocin so near to touching my soul, I could almost taste it. But then as if it had come from nowhere, when in reality, I knew the truth, the source of where I had chased it from... well, it hit me like a fucking Mac truck!

“Oh God! Yes, yes, yes... ohh... ohh, ohhh, AHHHH!” I cried out at the same time gripping on as if for dear life, when it hadn’t been that long ago I had believed him to be the cause of losing that life. As for Jared, he was growling into my neck as if he were a man possessed, nearly mindless in his need for me, I felt his desperation with each tug of his mouth but with only so much blood for me to gift him, I couldn’t help but start to go limp in his arms, this time giving him a different reason to curse.

“Fuck!” he snarled, tearing his lips from my abused flesh, before taking all my weight in his arms.

“*Fucking addictive girl,*” he snarled as if the thought of him now having a weakness annoyed him. Worse yet, it was the woman he thought had betrayed him and, no doubt, the

very last one he wished to be locked to this way. Making me wonder if it was his HellBeast that was the driving force behind his actions.

“I took too much but at least now I know how much to take the next time I feed from you.” I swallowed down the painful thought that this was all I was to become to him from now on...

A frequent meal.

I would have spoken my thoughts aloud had I the energy to do so. But as it was, I only had enough strength to hold onto him as he lifted me fully into his arms.

Arms that I knew now didn't belong to my Fated Chosen One but more like...

MY FATED CAPTOR.

PRISONERS



H *istory.*

A word I was starting to hate. Along with the words past and future. Because, once again, I found myself with that same history repeating itself. Only for me, it was like this was Fate being rewritten. And whereas, before, I knew Jared would never hurt me, now I knew there was still that possibility. Especially when I was carried to the end of the bridge to a line of carriages that were waiting there for us. Only one of them looked like it was a damn prison cell on wheels! I moaned in pain and anger as I saw a shackled Marcus being forced inside.

“His Fate remains in your hands... *remember that,*” Jared warned, whispering this last part in a hard tone to emphasize that I shouldn’t forget the reason I had given myself up in the first place. Which was why my only response to this was to turn my face away from him, making him scoff as if this reaction meant nothing to him. But I knew by the way he tightened his hold on me that it did, along with the distinct tick in his jaw that always made an appearance when he was annoyed.

He then stepped up into the other carriage, an awkward act while holding me, to be sure, but one he managed all the same. Once inside, he situated me on the seat before taking the one opposite. Then after one of his men closed the door, Jared hammered his fist twice on the roof to signal that he was ready to leave. Meanwhile, I curled up on the seat, turning myself away from Jared’s assessing gaze. Then after I must have shivered, I glanced his way to see him shrugging out of the

jacket he wore, one that made him look more like some sexy pirate. *Damn him and his hotness!*

He then tossed the heavy item at me and ordered,

“Cover yourself.” I would have liked to have tossed it back in his face, but I knew that wouldn’t have been the wisest decision. However, that didn’t mean to say that I would let go of my anger completely. Meaning that I looked him dead in the eyes so he could see for himself my defiance, as I purposely let the jacket fall to the floor. Then I turned my head back to the window, watching as we travelled the old dirt streets of 18th century London.

“If you think your defiance is the only defense you have left against me, then you are foolish.” I didn’t look at him when I answered,

“What are you going to do, King, force feed me and force me to care for myself!?”

“No, but then I will have no need, not when each comfort and basic need you deny yourself, I will also deny *your friend...*” he sneered at the word friend, making me flinch. However, he wasn’t done yet. No, not for a long shot as he leaned forward and after lifting his jacket back to hold out to me, he said,

“Oh, and just so you are aware, it can get quite cold down in my dungeon, freezing really.” At this I gritted my teeth and at the thought of him making Marcus freeze and starve to death, I snatched the jacket off him, making the bastard chuckle.

“That’s what I thought,” he said conceitedly, relaxing back in his seat once more. As for me, I reached up and felt the tender area where he had bitten me, at the same time an angry tear fell.

“It will heal in time and with it, the new scar in place of whoever the fuck gave it to you the first-time round, for his claim on you now means nothing.” I swallowed down the truth and the string of insults I wanted to hurl his way. Knowing each and every one would only give him more than I could

afford to give him. After all, I still had my coin, so not all was lost like I had thought back on the bridge.

Of course, shit just got a time-travelling bucket load more complicated. Like, how the Hell would I escape him this time with a prisoner in tow? One who I would first have to know how to break out of Jared's dungeon.

"Speaking of which, which fucker is it that I will need to kill in order to be rid of some fool who may think to come looking for you?" he asked, making me roll my eyes before snapping,

"What can I say, I fell face first into a dog's face that didn't take it too well." He growled at this.

"You think this is funny?!"

"*Hilarious,*" I muttered sarcastically.

"You think I wouldn't kill him in front of you?" I couldn't help the humorless, sarcastic laugh that escaped.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said, knowing he would be facing a mirror. Yet my comment made him snarl in anger before he hammered a fist at the window, making it smash and, in turn, I shrieked in shock. Then as I watched him calmly plucked the shards of glass from his bleeding hand, he advised,

"I suggest not pushing me, sweetheart, or you will find yourself down in my dungeon, just like your friend."

"Maybe that's where I want to be!" I snapped, making him curl his lip at me.

"Then your punishment will be complete, as I will place you in a cell facing your precious fool and you can watch his torture as a daily reminder to what your fucking pride gets you!"

My mouth dropped at this as I sat up, before hissing,

"*You wouldn't!*"

"Keep pushing me and you will find out."

At this I deflated back to my seat and angrily wiped away my tears that I couldn't help from falling. A fact I was trying to hide by using the thick cuff of Jared's jacket.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked in a hopeless voice that was strained by the agony of my situation.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Yes, why... why not just kill me and get your revenge? That's clearly what you want!" I snapped, and he growled once more as he ran a frustrated hand over his hair, pushing back the strands that had come loose from the tie.

"And on that bridge, did that really feel as if that was what I wanted?" he barked back at me.

"Well, you felt as if you were moments from draining me dry, so yeah, death all the same," I said, knowing I was being unfair but damn it, so was he! He faltered at this before finally finding the words.

"And for that I am sorry, as clearly that was not my intention," he said surprising me. As like this... well, I wouldn't have thought he had it in him to apologize.

"And just what are your intentions for me exactly, HellBeast?" I asked, my tone hard and unyielding.

"To get you to say my name for one," he admitted, surprising me yet again. I quickly recovered from this.

"Ah yes but are you forgetting the last time we met... the last time I ever said your name," I said, foolishly reminding him of our past. I could see my mistake, wondering why I kept pushing him the way I was. The grit of his teeth as he worked his jaw like he was chewing iron made me change the subject after a few tense minutes ticked by.

"Why do they call you the Iron Butcher?"

At this he scoffed and looked out of the broken window, making me pull his jacket around me closer as the cold night blew into the carriage.

"Human gossip fed by the sight of me snapping bones as easily as I snapped the sword being thrust my way before I

killed the man,” he replied, still without looking at me.

“Yep, that would do it,” I replied, making him smirk slightly, as if fighting his grin. But then as silence fell between us once again, it seemed as if Jared was feeling the weight of it more than I was. Which meant he was soon talking and, this time, he did so in a far softer tone.

“You can speak my name, Ella.” I couldn’t help my body reacting to this, tensing as his words seeped in and finally gave me some hope.

“I...” I was about to speak when he got there first and said firmly,

“We are here.” All softness that had once been there now a thing of the past, hate no doubt firmly residing where his mind was once again focused. A place where his hatred of me no doubt still burned as brightly as his shameful lust for me. I could only imagine the warring thoughts in his mind. For as much as his HellBeast wanted me as much as Jared Weller, the wronged man did not. Because just like that, I was to become his prisoner once more as I was ordered to get out of the carriage.

As if my loving him was a losing game my heart was forced to play and with it, I felt like another pawn on the board with no choice but to fall in line. Which meant getting out of the carriage knowing where I stood. Or more like where he wanted me to stand as he took my arm in his unyielding grip and walked me back into the one place I had been trying to escape from.

But then, something must have reminded him of the mortal pet he clearly intended to care for as he paused before letting me go. I couldn’t help but look down the alleyway, as if seeing my feet pounding on the cobbled floor as I took my chance at running. But before I could even take a single step, I felt him lean closer. And as if he had heard my thoughts, he whispered from behind,

“Run, and I will enjoy chasing you.” His warning made me shiver and I wasn’t sure if he knew the true cause hadn’t all been down to his threat. He then turned and walked away to

retrieve the jacket I had left behind. I knew this because, a second later, I felt the heavy weight of the thick material being draped over my shoulders.

“It is cold down there,” he said as if needing to justify this consideration to my health he showed me. Something that continued as he stepped from my back to face me. Then he hooked my chin up and turned my face to the side.

“You hit your head when you fell from the carriage?” I felt his fingers push back my wild hair gently, so he could see the injury better.

“Answer me,” he demanded.

“Yes,” I replied in an obstinate tone, still not willing to look at him.

“Hmm... tip your head.”

“What?” I asked, wondering what hoop he wanted me to jump through now.

“*Down*,” he said sternly, gripping my head with both hands, framing my face and purposely forcing me to look down. Then, once I was in the position he wanted me in, he pushed my hair back and I tensed when I felt the first sting of his tongue. He was licking the blood from the side of my face and over the cut I had there, which was when I realized he was trying to heal me.

I swallowed hard, not understanding why he cared. Why he continued to care, because once this injury was healed, he then turned to the one on my arm. He scoffed at the makeshift bandage and with a mere thought, brought a HellBeast claw to replace his nail. Then with a flick of his finger, the strip of bloodied material fell away to the floor. After this, he tore the sleeve of my dress open further so as could get to the jagged, sliced skin there.

He lifted it up to his lips and, this time, he didn't take his eyes off me as he licked the length of my torn skin with glowing eyes of sexual intent. As if he was gaining pleasure from this and, well, with the new addiction for my blood still in its infancy, then I guess that he was.

Which was why by the time I was all healed, I couldn't help but make a point of saying,

"You never cared before." But he simply took my freshly healed arm and led me towards the entrance before telling me,

"Yes, well, that was before I knew you were human, something that certainly fits now."

"Ah yes, the weak human," I snapped, making him smirk before having the audacity to agree.

"Weak, yes, but brave at the very least... that or just plain stupid, I am yet to decide which," he replied, making me sneer at him, something that only seemed to enhance his mirth at my expense. But then I remembered Marcus and started to look around as if expecting to see him being dragged in by Orthrus.

"They arrived before us. Your friend is no doubt being shown to his new home," Jared said, obviously reading my thoughts again.

"And just how long do you intend for him to be there?" I asked as I was pulled through the front door.

"Well, that all depends on how long it takes the King's men to get here." At this my blood ran cold as realization hit me like an icy blade to the chest.

"But... but you said..."

"That I wouldn't kill him. You're right, but you're forgetting, human Ella, that in this game, words are everything, vows even more so, and that includes the manner in which they are said." I gasped and tore my arm from his hold, backing away as I stammered,

"Y-y-you-you *lied*." At this he turned to face me and suddenly I was being pushed up against the door, after he slammed it shut behind me. Then with only inches between his face and mine, he all but snarled down at me,

"*No, I didn't lie.* I told you I wouldn't kill him and that remains to be true... I just didn't tell you that I don't need to be the one with a blade in my hand to get what I want."

I started shaking my head, causing him to collar my throat and pin my head back to the door at the same time he told me,

“But make no mistake, my dear human pet, his death is coming and when it does, my revenge on you will be complete as, you, too, are forced to watch someone you care for being ripped away from you!” Then as if to signify my destiny, I heard the sound of the door behind me, sealing me in and...

LOCKING me to this deathly Fate.

CHAINED TO FATE



Damn it, why couldn't I just kill her and have done with it?!

Because her blood tasted like something that was brewed in Heaven and her body felt as if it was molded by Angels, that's fucking why! But there was more to it than that, and it was the part I didn't want to delve too deeply into because I knew I would not like the answers my heart produced.

No, it was far easier to view her as the enemy... *for now*. Although even that was getting harder to hold on to as the questions bombarded me, and the possible answers making even less sense. I wanted to question her on it to the point where it was near painful, as if swallowing hot coals with each passing minute. The burn of each one hitting my stomach and making me want to vomit them all. Each question one that I knew I didn't want the answer to as much as I did.

But she needed reminding of who she was and of her position at this moment. Hence why after turning away from her tears at being told of her friend's fate, I near had to drag her to her own prison cell. In the end, being forced to throw her over my shoulder kicking and screaming.

It was a prison of my choosing and one far more comfortable than she deserved. Which was why I finally felt able to breathe when seeing her chained to my fucking wall and left to lay on a nest of covers I had dumped from my bed to the floor at her feet.

My anger, once again, warring against this building ache in my chest that I could not deny was a mixture of guilt, concern, and relief. But despite this, I knew which one was winning, for I still had the memory in my mind of her foolishly up on that ledge. A mere footstep away from plummeting to her death as she threatened to take her own life.

In truth, the panic that had assaulted me had made it hard to breathe. The furious rage had made it hard not to act the way I had wanted, by moving faster than her eyes could track and dragging her off that ledge myself. Yet fear had held me in its icy grip, for I couldn't risk even a small chance I failed. That I didn't make it in time or frightened her enough that her foot slipped like it had once already.

So, in the end, I had used her own tricks back at her, I had used the Fool. I knew the second she saw his blood being spilled, that she would do anything I asked. And in the heat of the moment, there had been only one thing I had wanted from her...

Blood.

At first, I had used the excuse in my mind, telling myself that I only did this to be sure I wasn't just losing my damn sanity. That the scent of her was nothing like the taste would be. That I had to be sure. So, I had made the bargain and, after the first drop touched my tongue, I knew I had done much more than that. I had sealed her fate along with my own. And now...

I needed to know why.

Why she was an addiction I couldn't kill. One I couldn't run from. An addiction I could never let go of. Which was what made her so dangerous to me. I could barely think rationally around her. She utterly consumed my every thought, and with it came a bitterness so sour I wanted her to suffer for what she continued to put me through. This mental torture was a blade she held at my throat without even realizing her palm was around the handle.

But even my means of making her suffer lacked weight, for the second I had seen her injuries, I had needed to rid her

of them. The sight of them like tasting rot on my tongue and forcing down the bile. It physically hurt me and had my HellBeast clawing at me to do something.

It was truly maddening!

Just like the way she refused to even look at me the moment I righted her world again, pulling her from my shoulder and chaining her up like some newly acquired, unruly pet of mine. Other than to scream at me, cursing like she was half consumed by the barrel, she hadn't said a single calm word to me. Not since my cruelty towards her when lashing out and telling her of my intent for the Fool.

No, she had simply hung her head in defeat as if the fight I admired so much had been drained from her. Only her tears were left, and not those which were shed as a woman's tool to manipulate this guilt I felt clawing its way up my spine.

I could tell this was the case because she kept trying to hide them, as if I couldn't fucking scent them in the air. The urge to lick them from her skin just another temptation to add to the ever-growing list! And at the very top of it was what I now knew happened to her body when I fed from her. A pleasure she couldn't fight or hide from me, no matter how much she tried.

Now as for my own pleasure, well this I had managed to hide well enough the first time but as for my next taste... No, I doubted I would find the same strength again.

It was why I was furious, feeling weak since the very last day of my mortal life was drained from me. An event in time that was led by her first stepping foot in my life. But even as I thought it, there were doubts, despite how deep the roots of my hatred were buried. Thirty years for it to grow and now she was back, they felt as if loosening from the seeds I had allowed to cultivate in my madness. I had to admit, that when I had first been turned, I hadn't questioned anything more than where to find those responsible.

Her included.

But unlike the others, I had let her live.

I had let her walk away.

And I had always questioned why. Always asked myself why I had let her run away that day. I'd had her life in my hands, yet couldn't find it inside me to do it, despite my uncontrollable rage. Despite my hatred. Despite my burning need for revenge. And now I questioned it even more. Because I had started to look back on that time with different eyes. Before I had remembered only the parts that damned her. But now, I couldn't help but wonder if she had been merely used as a scapegoat.

Had she been as innocent as I?

Just another tool used in their means to gain power.

"No, I will not do this!" I growl at myself after letting my moment of weakness impact the wall as I punched a hole into the bare rock my home was made of. Because I refused to think of my wife as anything other than the victim in all of this. For anything else would only mean that I would be exchanging one deceitful love for another, and I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't do that to her memory.

I wouldn't.

Hence why I snarled again as I made my way through the tunnels leading to the dungeons, unwilling to accept Lerna as being anything but a faithful wife. No, at the very most, she too was led to believe that Ella had betrayed us both. It was the only explanation if Ella were found to be as innocent as she claimed to be.

And speaking of answers, why and how in the Gods damnation had she come here? Questions plagued my mind once more, knowing that she looked as if she hadn't aged a fucking day! But how was that possible if she was mortal? A fact that made a lot more sense to me now considering how she did not heal and had no powers to speak of.

Well, that wasn't strictly true, as she certainly had a power over me, especially when dancing on the stage the way she had. A gift she had learnt just like any other mortal being. For that, I couldn't help but be in awe of her and, well, I hadn't

lied when I spoke of her bravery in being here. This despite throwing back in her face the insult of stupidity, for in the moment giving her any compliment felt like ash on my tongue.

But right now, I knew interrogating her was a mistake. As I swear to the Gods, that just the sight of her trying to hide her tears, and I had nearly given into impulse to take her in my arms to comfort her. No, first I needed an edge to the lies she told. And lucky for me, I knew just where to find those truths ready to be told or forced through bloody lips, either one was fine with me. Although, I did allow myself a grin when hoping for the second.

The tunnels down to the dungeon were a maze most would lose themselves to madness in long before escaping. Which was why very little was needed in the way of guards down here. Something those foolish enough to slip free of their locks had learnt the hard way. Either making their way to what they hoped was freedom only to find themselves in my fight club as the next contender, or them being killed down here in the tunnels as all ways but one led to the same place...

The Well of the Damned.

It was a place where the veil between the Mortal realm and that of where my HellBeast was born was at its thinnest. With only the souls of the damned caught between the two. And well, it was common knowledge between my own that those souls fed from the deaths of others. For they believed the more souls claimed, the more favour it would grant the collectors who still used the Wells around the world as a way to cast a wider net.

But this thin veil was also why this place even existed to begin with. As it was once used as a gateway between worlds, one that was closed long ago. Yet despite this portal no longer being strong enough to travel through, it was not enough to prevent the power of Hell seeping out of it. Therefore, the well and the souls of the damned that crept through the veil acted as a powerful connection to feed from. A place I have always been my strongest in this Realm... especially when it was being fed by fools that think they could escape me.

And speaking of Fools...

“I hope our new prisoner is situated uncomfortably,” I remarked as I walked closer to my brother after the widest tunnel opened up to the largest space down here...

The atrium of chains.

A large circular room that, other than the four arched doorways, one of which I had just walked through, the entire space was floor-to-ceiling chains hanging down like iron drapes. It was more like a crude temple in its design, with mighty stalagmites the width of oak trees, that acted as nature's pillars. They had formed around the walls and mirrored the stalactites above, where the two forces were a few centuries from meeting. It admittedly made the colossal room look like gigantic mouth open and eternally at the ready to swallow the prisoners whole.

But other than adding a sinister essence to the space, they also added a practical value as well. For we had used them as building blocks for the three balconies that circled the room. The ceiling was high enough to be four stories high, with more than enough space to house hundreds of prisoners at a time in this room alone. Each of the balconies were sectioned in such a way so as the less powerful offenders could be winched up there and chained to their place at the wall.

The chains were, of course, attached in various ways to the different species of Demons we housed down here. With the more dangerous creatures being kept to the left through an arched doorway. One that lead to a corridor full of cells and all were made to keep the worst of the worst behind iron bars. Cells strong enough thanks to each being cast with enough spells to make even Lucifer take a step back before trying to break free. Of course, he would be one of the only few that would manage the incredible fete. But, still, for most, it was pointless to even try. And in such a cell was where I had directed my brother to place the fool... *after the fucker was searched first of course.*

But even then, I knew with his type of power, that he could have very well been one of the few to escape. Because

foolishly, I had underestimated him, in both his skills to fight and the level of his power. In truth, the fucker had impressed me and under different circumstances, then I would have even recruited him to fight with me not against me.

But my little dancing girl had put a stop to that, hadn't she... *Now where had that thought come from exactly?*

"I put him in the one with the leaky pipe as it usually tunnels madness into the minds of others," Orth replied as we made our way towards his cell.

"Not this one, I think, for his mind is too strong for that."

"Yeah, the creepy fucker just laughed when it started dripping on his head... not even enough to wipe that shit off his face," Orth said, making me frown for a moment, as I thought back to that scent when around him.

"And nor would it," I said as we approached his cell, making me grin when I saw him hanging there by his wrists limp in the shackles above. These two had been cast with spells so as to add an extra measure to keep him from escaping.

One that was needed if my suspicion and what I said next was true.

"Isn't that right..."

"*CURSED ONE?*"

CHOSEN MISTAKES



“Isn’t that right... *Cursed One?*” I said, making him raise his head slowly before offering me that creepy knowing grin of his, the blood staining his teeth making it even more macabre than before.

“*Fuck me,*” my brother hissed, knowing what this meant and no doubt now understanding why I wanted to take the precaution of having him put here instead of the Atrium of Chains.

“I would bow but, you know...” He shook his chains to make his point and now it was my turn to make my own.

“The human, tell me about her and I will make your stay here more comfortable.”

At this he grinned, and I had to say, the sight was like burning hot claws against my flesh.

“Ah. Cookie, such a sweet girl and far too innocent for the likes of you, that is to be sure,” he said, making me snarl as I took a step closer to his cell.

“*You want her!*” It wasn’t a question.

“As much pleasure as I would get from your reaction if I did, I regretfully speak the truth when I tell you that... No, I do not want your Ella, HellBeast,” he replied, purposely pausing just to punish me the only way he knew how. But at the very least I saw the truth of his words, and it was enough to enable me to take a calming breath. One comforting enough so as I could uncurl my fists. Of course, hearing the claim

spoken by another also managed to soothe some of my murderous intent. None more so than for my Beast. But I was not foolish enough to believe the truth of his words would continue. Especially not when he added,

“But I also speak the truth when I tell you that you do not deserve her either.”

At this I snarled, taking another step towards the cell door, one I was a single second away from tearing open as only I had the power to do so. Because I was ruler here and therefore that power cast connected straight to me. The very same one that fueled my veins like coal to a roaring stove.

“Easier, brother, he wishes to rile you,” Orthrus advised, making the hanging bastard sneer with malice and jest,

“Who, me? Surely not, for what gain would it serve...? No, no, I merely wish for you to seek the truth and, with it, do the right thing by letting Ella go.”

“I swear, Fool, that if you do not cease your tongue from making useless attempts at trying to convince me to let her go, then I will rip it from your bloody mouth!” I warned, making him shrug his shoulders. A physical act that lifted his own body with startling ease considering his hands were shackled above his head. In fact, given the strength of those castings, he should, in theory, have no strength at all.

“Fine, if you are not willing to let her go and do what you know is right, then ask yourself all the whys in the world and see where it gets you. I hope it is to a place of reason before you fuck it up beyond all repair,” he whined, making me grit my teeth.

“What in Gods damnation are you talking about, Fool? And hurry the fuck up before I let my brother just tear you to pieces!” Orth snapped. And he was right, seeing as my anger was only growing with every word out of his foul, twisted mouth! Which unsurprisingly, meant he did indeed need to hold me back.

“Just ask yourself why it is you can’t kill her, as you idiotically think you wish to” Marcus said, making me tense

enough that I swear something in a mortal man would have snapped.

“Speak!” I demanded on a growl.

“Oh, I have much to say but first, you must ask the right question, King of HellBeasts,” he said, making me grind my teeth, shrugging off Orth’s hold and ripping open the door before taking him by the neck... *one far too tempting to snap.*

“Tell me what I want to know!” I demanded in what I knew was one of my most deadly tones, as it was a combination of two warring bodies. That of my HellBeast and the man who only had revenge on his mind. Not that this had any effect on the idiot hanging from a chain and inches from my snarling face.

“*Not until you ask,*” he forced out, still smiling, the dumb fuck. Fine, he wanted to play this game, I would play it if it got me what I wanted.

“Why do I feel this way about her!?” I growled, making the bastard chuckle.

“*Gods, but the stupid bastard really does have a death wish,*” my brother muttered after I pushed off Marcus, letting him go to swing away from me with the force of my actions. Again, he merely laughed in that sinister way of his.

“And there it is, the biggest question of all, and the one with the answer powerful enough to change everything, almighty King,” he said with the title of King dripping with disdain.

“Continue to speak in riddles, by all means, and you will find my patience for your foolery snap right along with that of your neck,” I replied in a far calmer tone this time, despite the clear threat made and the curl of my fists.

“Fine, you want the picture painted for you, then here it is, HellBeast. You can’t kill her, nor can you truly hate her, for she is none other than your... *Chosen One,*” he said in such a way that this would mean something to me. Hence why I narrowed my gaze, my features portraying one that had clearly never heard of this term before.

“My Chosen One?” The tone with which I asked only added to my look of confusion, for the denial was there ready to make at the very tip of my tongue.

“You truly don’t know, do you?” he asked, looking genuinely shocked.

“There is only one of us here that plays the fool, so stop fucking around and speak!” I snapped.

“Each King is gifted a Chosen One, a single being born for one soul and one soul alone. An Electus touched by the Fates themselves, and one whose destiny is forever intertwined with the King that will make them their Queen.” Hearing this and I couldn’t help but react as I jerked back a fraction. But if I were honest, then with the power of his words... I was surprised I remained on my feet at all.

“No... there must be a mistake... I... I already...” I stammered as my words started to fail me. My mind was close to doing so as well and I loathed the weakness I felt in either action, despite being unable to help it all the same. But then I gritted my teeth as the fucker started laughing once more and had I not still needed him, I would have killed him for that alone.

“The Fates don’t make mistakes, HellBeast, you should know that by now. Or if they did, then I would have been the first to agree with you, seeing as I believe she could do better than how you have treated her.”

I swear my teeth were going to shatter!

“*Yes, so you have said,*” I forced out bitterly.

“Like it or not, she belongs to you and I suspect that your HellBeast understands the claim better than your stubborn human mind does.” Well, I couldn’t say he was wrong there, not that I was willing to admit that. Besides, I had more important questions to ask than to argue an unbeatable argument.

“And what of her... does she know of the claim?” At this his lips curved into another malevolent grin.

“Oh, she knows, perhaps she has even foolishly counted on it but here is the catch, HellBeast, just because the Fates gifted her to you, there is one thing they also gifted to her in return and a fact you have grossly overlooked, it seems.” Damn it to Hell but if I didn’t need this devious bastard for information, then I would have been wiping the blood from my hands already.

“Yeah, and what’s that, asshole?” I sneered.

“What all Gods grant mortals, of course... *Free Will.*”

The second the words were out of his mouth, I swear, my blood turned to ice for the first time since my rebirth from fiery depths.

She had the choice, *whereas I had none.* I never had a chance against her. It was why I couldn’t kill her. It suddenly made unjust and imperfect sense. My reaction to her, even when I was human. It was instantaneous. As if the very Gods themselves had struck me down, the scar forever engraved like a brand scorched upon on my heart. One that would never heal, no matter how hard I tried or how many years I lived through. Why the obsession never faded, even with what should have been the healing balm of time.

And now I knew why.

My love for her was destiny.

In all honesty, I didn’t know how I felt about it. For in truth, it felt as if I’d had my hand forced by the Fates. It also had me questioning everything, especially the past. But for now, I focused more on the present, which was why I made my point.

“So, the Gods chose to pair me with an enemy, is that what you dare to tell me?!”

“I speak what I know,” he replied, but that wasn’t good enough!

“Forgive me, Fool, but this makes little sense and therefore I find your words lacking and the truth of them questionable at best.”

At my words, I saw the first shred of anger in the fool, and his usual cocky grin morphed into something akin to insult and fury.

“When speaking of the Fates I do not lie, HellBeast, for I have been a vessel of their making for longer than all your council combined. So, take my words as however the fuck you want to take them, for that is to be your failing, not mine!”

“Oh, so you want my respect, is that it?” I threw back at him, laughing and enjoying the albeit brief change of roles.

“I want nothing from you, for it is not your life I am charged with protecting.”

I tried not to visibly flinch at this statement made.

“Oh, so you’re her keeper now, is that it?” I mocked.

“I am merely her guide and nothing more. My allegiance is with one of the Fated, not the fool that refuses to recognize the gift he has been given by ignoring the claim,” he bit back, and well I would have been the one lying if I said his words hadn’t hit their mark upon me. However, I merely folded my arms and feigned indifference.

“If that be the case and I am as you proclaim me to be, I am her Fated as she is mine, then surely that would relieve you of any ties to her,” I said, in short, trying to sever the link between them and, with it, any obligations he may have felt thus being tied to her.

“Oh, but I think my job is far from done, especially given where she resides even as we speak,” he replied, spitting his blood on the floor in his anger and causing me to forcefully push the facts he presented out of my mind, and back behind the barrier of guilt I would not allow to crack.

“She is in my care,” I simply stated.

“Is she though? For I believe she would have a very different idea of the care in which you speak,” he countered and I had to say, he had me there. Especially considering I had indeed chained the girl to my wall and claimed her not as this Chosen One he spoke of, but instead as my prisoner.

“She is where she needs to be and is no longer your concern,” I reiterated, my voice turning to iron in its resolve.

“Words, HellBeast, words without substance, for her destiny upon this world is far from set in the stone you think to carve and declare as royal decree.” I scoffed at that, jerking my chin as I asked,

“Oh, and you have that power over her, do you?”

“Like I said, I am merely a vessel of the Fates and I answer only to those who made me who and what I am... something I believe you too can relate to for that is all a King is, is he not...? A vessel for the Gods of Fate that created them.” I growled at this, a low and menacing sound.

“I am no one’s puppet, Fool!” I snapped, making him laugh and mutter,

“Keep telling yourself that, Your Majesty, but deep down you know the truth. Just like you do about who she is and what really happened in a past you cling to like a veil against the truth. Well, let me tell you that the veil you hold on to will soon burn and when it does, it can no longer protect you from the one who is truly to blame....”

“*Why, you bastard...!*” I couldn’t keep my distance anymore, as I once again had his throat in my grasp, a hairbreadth away from crushing it with a Demonic hand. Yet even through my grip he still managed to speak as blood pooled beneath his lips.

“...And word to the wise, almighty King, the longer you grip onto it, the brighter the blaze will be when it’s consumed by the flame. For you will find yourself with no protection against the bitter realization that you gained the true enemy of the past and lost a Soul Mate of the present. For mark my words, *you will lose her, HellBeast.*” I forced myself to let go after this and not for reasons of mercy. But his words had strength as I thought back to that bridge and the fear I held at the thought of the very same.

I couldn’t lose her.

The idea... fuck, *but it terrified me!*

Which meant the next time I spoke I did so under the illusion of bravado.

“Well, that’s a little hard to do given that at this present time she is chained to my fucking wall, asshole!” I snapped, divulging information I hadn’t wanted to grant him but being manipulated into doing it all the same. A fact he started laughing at, only this time it was without humor... no, it was with something I loathed even more... *it was pity.*

Something he confirmed when he gave me those very words.

“Then I pity you, I truly do, for it would seem you have already lost her, despite where her body is imprisoned. For nothing can ensnare everything else she has to give... no, that side of her you will never make your captive, not unless you start to heed my warning.”

I couldn’t help but flinch at this, knowing the insinuation was as clear as day. I may have her body imprisoned but as for her mind and that of her heart, well I was as far from claiming them both as I was from being able to hold the oceans in my hand.

“Enough of this! Now answer my question and tell me what it is I want to know!” I demanded, trying to take back control over this interrogation, as I was the one who felt on trial here.

“And prey do tell, what is that, King?” he asked in a tone of pure ridicule. One I was forced to ignore in exchange for what I wanted.

“Why has she not aged, yet she is mortal?” I asked, hating that I needed this fool and could just give into impulse and kill the insulting fucker!

“Well, that right there, is the burning question, is it not...? And one you may not yet realize but it is also one that has the power to change the course of this thread of history.” I growled at this and lost it enough to curl a fist in his jacket and used it to drag him closer so as I could snap my growing fangs

in his face. I wanted to tear his fucking throat out with my teeth, forget about simply snapping his neck!

Alas, I knew I couldn't afford to have yet another crime held over me like an anvil. As clearly, I had them mounting against her by the second and the death of her friend was what most would consider to be irreversible.

So, I merely dragged him as close as he could get and snarled the empty threat,

“If all I am to receive is the cryptic ramblings of a Seeker, then you no longer have any use to me, so last chance, Fool, tell me why she hasn't aged.”

“That you will have to ask her,” he said, making me snarl and calling my bluff.

“So, death is what you want?” I asked as we continued to play this game. But then his grin turned into one of knowing before he replied with yet another cryptic phrase, one I wouldn't fully understand until the next time I was faced with who I now knew was my Chosen Soul Mate...

“OH, HellBeast... Heaven is but such a simple Hell.”

DOWN WITH THE DEVIL



“**O**h, Marcus.”

I uttered his name the second I saw his beaten form in chains, knowing his fate was just as hopeless as ours was. Because, for once, I felt like I was playing the fucking fool.

Garmr was King Geryon.

Although, to be honest, I had no fucking clue at this point which one came first or if they had simply always been one and the same. I suppose, in the end, it didn't matter, as the life he now held in his hands I knew was just another means to an end for him.

But just like I wasn't prepared to kill my brother, I equally so wasn't willing to kill my best friend. Which was why I had no choice but to admit defeat and let go of the bitch. One who hadn't ever had enough worth to Geryon to be used to bargain with in the first place. One look at my brother and the way his shoulders lowered, I could see that he knew it too. For here we all were, in this arena like pieces on a chess board. Two Kings fighting for the rights to one Queen. One who thankfully was not yet on the board.

“Defeat indeed, for now you will soon know what it's like to watch the one you claimed, to be in the arms of another and then I will... no... no that's... that's not possible!” I narrowed my gaze the moment Geryon started to end this self-absorbed triumphant bullshit by looking towards Marcus in utter disbelief. Which made me focus not on my enemy, but now on

my broken friend. One who was strangely smiling down at the hand he seemed to have curled around something unseen... no, not a something...

But a someone.

As if he was now holding the hand of some ghost, a ghost only he and Geryon could see. In fact, I could see his lips moving as if he were speaking to someone. The barest hint of a tender smile.

Then as if this invisible presence had just been heard, I saw Geryon flinch back before suddenly the impossible happened and I heard the very last voice I ever expected to hear in this loathsome place. A voice that started to scream, causing her powerful declaration to echo around the arena with enough power that it actually cracked the floor and walls that surrounded us. In fact, if most of the Soulweed had still been intact, I think it would have had the power to burn it all to Hell all over again. There was so much strength in it, so much promise, so much emotion, it would have been hard not to react to such a claim. My pride felt close to bursting from me, making it hard for me to breathe past the tremor of shock.

“THE HELLBEAST IS MINE! I WILL COME FOR HIM! AAAAAHHHHHH!”

Thankfully, I came hurdling back to my senses in time to roar her name.

“ELLA!” But my response wasn’t one I could be certain was heard, despite knowing that she was the ghost and mercifully not in the literal sense. She was the one stood next to Marcus and he was clutching her hand. No doubt being the link she had needed to bring forth just a mere glimpse of herself. A shadow from where she was trapped. She was reaching out through space and time, trying to reach me, and using Marcus as a conduit. And that’s when I heard it, as Marcus told her softly,

“Well done, Cookie.” Of course, I wasn’t the only one who heard this as Marcus was suddenly grabbed by Geryon. The connection breaking him free of the chains by Geryon’s own

command. This so as he could demand in a snarl of words only inches from his face,

“Bring her back to me!” Of course, my friend had always had a slightly unhinged side to him. Which meant that the second he started laughing in his face it wasn't a surprise to me. It had been the reason I'd had to save his ass more than once, and now looked like no other exception. Not as the second Geryon started to rear back his hand seemingly more than ready to deliver the killing blow, I jumped from the platform to the arena floor.

“Hey, Asshole! It's not him you want to kill!” At this I smirked, twisting my features into something cruel and mocking.

“After all, it's me she made the claim to, Dickhead, not him... so let him go and come fight me, you fucking coward!” I said, holding my arms out wide and urging him to take up the challenge. At this he snarled in Marcus's face once more before tossing him aside as if he were nothing but a broken puppet.

I tensed as I watched him land before skidding along the floor towards the last of the singed Soulweed. All this time it had been burning its way around the arena as most of what was left was now nothing but ash.

I feared that he was headed for the last piece still yet to corrode and that it possibly held enough power left to hurt him. My entire body tensed, taut like string on a bow ready to fire the arrow. Yet I knew I was helpless to save him. Which meant that when he connected to the wall and it burst into a cloud of grey ash all around him, I could finally take another breath!

As for Geryon, I had to say, I was far too hopeful the second I saw him taking a furious step towards me. Although, something stopped him suddenly and I gritted my teeth before purposely taunting,

“What's the matter, Geryon, afraid I will beat your ass like last time? 'Cause you may have fooled me once by taking

possession of a new form, but this time, I know who you are... which means I know your fucking weaknesses!”

“You know nothing, HellBeast!”

At this I cracked my knuckles together before rolling my shoulder, telling him I was more than ready to kick his ass and kill the fucker. A threat I proved when I started to walk closer to him, knowing the fucking coward wouldn't meet me in the middle. But then his eyes focused to my brother behind, and I smirked back at Orth, before then telling my enemy,

“I know you're a fucking coward who won't fight me because you know you will lose.” At this he growled before his cloak flared out behind him as he tossed his arms to the side, bringing his hands together and creating an ominous green glow between them. And the moment he did, I already knew what was coming before it happened, making me mutter a hopeless,

“*Fuck,*” as I looked back to my brother to see he also was bracing himself for what was to come. Before either of us could act, Niniane's book of souls soared over our heads and landed right at Geryon's feet. The pages flipped open at speed and as each page turned, a creature's soul unlocked, swirling from the parchment and rising up in the air before landing. Which meant, in mere seconds, we were surrounded by a fucking army of souls that weren't only controlled by Niniane, but now, by who looked to be the...

Summoner King.

“Oh, look, brother, he needs an army to defeat us, just as I said he always was, nothing more than a FUCKING COWARD!” I roared this last part in anger, at the same time Orth came to stand by my side.

“No wonder Ella would choose you to claim above this shit stain. He needs summoned souls to kill us, the pussy!” Orth added, making me scoff in agreement as I folded my arms across my chest and did my best to look unaffected in the face of our impending death. But our words had the opposite effect as he grinned before informing us,

“A simple demonstration of my power, for trust me, if I had wanted you dead, you would be so... but alas, it is unfortunate that I still need you in order to get to my Chosen’s Soul.”

I grimaced at this and, for the first time, I found myself actually thankful that she was locked to the past. That she was there and as far out of his reach as she could get. Hence why I reminded him,

“She’s stuck in the past, asshole, so just how do you think keeping me a prisoner here will get her back!?” At this he started laughing before looking back at Marcus who alarmingly still looked unconscious. Then he raised a Demonic finger made of scarred, twisted flesh tipped with a black onyx claw. He then tapped the razor tip to the side of his head before telling me,

“Thanks to your friend there, I know for a fact that is exactly what will happen, and well, I think we all just witnessed the proof of it, did we not? So no, you *fucking Devil’s hound*... I won’t kill you just yet, not when I need your connection to be alive and very much of the living.”

I snarled at this, silently praying for this to be another delusion on his part.

“Besides, if I were to sever your life now, I would be without a wedding present to gift my new bride with... for your dying breath before your head makes it to a fucking silver platter is worth the wait!”

At this I lost my shit and so did my HellBeast. Which meant I found myself morphing into my HellBeast form, practically bursting free of my mortal self as I leapt into the air. Then the second my paws felt connection to the floor, they were leaving the ground just as quickly as I ate up the distance between us.

However, the moment of panic in his eyes was the only victory I could claim as he quickly brought forth the bars of my cell to contain me. This meant that the second I was only a hairsbreadth away from biting the fucker’s head off, the bars encased my body enough to prevent the killing blow.

I had been so close that I felt the heavy stale breath of relief from my enemy waft over my face. I snarled and roared in fury, twisting and writhing, trying to break free of this fucking cowardice magic that bound my body. The one restraining me back from ending this right here and now!

“So now you see, there may have been a time on the battlefield you might have been able to defeat me but now... well, now that’s a very different story.” At this I felt another presence come into view as the bitch, Niniane, joined him by his side. She bent down to pick up the book, her whole body igniting into a powerful green aura the second she came into contact with it.

“It all happened just like you said it would,” she purred next to him, and I swear the hatred coming off me in waves should have been enough to kill the Demonic whore!

Fucking magic!

“Yes, and thanks to our unwilling friend, over there.” My eyes shot to Marcus who I knew just from the sight of his injuries had fought like Hell to hide the shit this bastard had no doubt clawed out of his mind. Which was why I changed from my HellBeast and back to that of a man so that I could issue the threat. One forced out when the pain of the bars squeezed me tighter, like coiling metal snakes ready to consume life.

“And what of the Gods of Fate? For surely you cannot be foolish enough not to believe that stealing the thoughts of one of their vessels is a grave offence.”

“Still a death sentence, so I hear,” my brother added, making me look behind me. And now that I was in a better position to do so, the sight my eyes met was only to see that he too was as caught as I was. For it was his turn to get his first taste of these Demonic bars that had twisted around our bodies.

“Do I look fucking worried, HellBeast? No. Pretty soon, I will be untouchable and once finally reunited with my new Queen, then it will be I that the Gods will fear... for I will be UNSTOPPABLE!” he shouted this out to the rest of the arena, making the crowd that was as trapped here as we were witness

this charade, exchanging a theater of fighting and death for one of drama and tragedy.

“You’re fucking deluded, Geryon. Nothing can beat the Gods!” I growled viciously.

“Is that so?” he asked in a knowing tone, and if I had been able to see his face, then no doubt an arch of a brow would have been added to the question.

“You really have no idea what kind of power she truly wields, do you...? The immense power a mortal life has locked inside her state of being. Well, make no mistake, the moment I get my hands back on my new Queen, you will see it for yourself, HellBeast...”

I started shaking my head, about to hurl more abuse his way when his words stopped me. For they held the power to disarm me completely...

“...FOR my niece can’t hide any longer.”

CHAINED TO MY LIES



Well, this was a fine mess I had gotten myself into, I thought after trying in vain once more to slip my now torn wrists free from the shackles. I had rubbed the skin on them until raw in my anger and desperation to be free. But now all the strength was zapped out of me, and I was left to merely slump down to the floor and give up. Which meant that now my wrists just hurt, right along with my pride.

Because I had become exactly what he had called me, some damn mortal pet of his! Because what else I could call being chained to his wall, I didn't know.

I was currently in a living room of sorts, if a room in a cave with rich furnishing can be call that. I also recognized it as being a room next to Jared's bedroom, so this was part of his private chambers. To be honest, had I not been in this pitiful pissed off state, then I would have even found it quite cozy.

Nothing adorned the walls other than the large wrought iron candle holders that cast shadows along the uneven bare rock. Plush thick rugs covered the floor in a haphazard way that worked, some with such an intricate pattern, they looked like tapestries. Carved wooden furniture with plush plum-colored velvet cushions were arranged around a simple fireplace. One that had been carved straight from the rock in an oval shape. I had no clue how they had managed to create a chimney from way down underground, but I could bet my ass on it being by supernatural means.

Either way I was thankful for it because, without it, the cave Jared called home would have been freezing. It was most likely why I always saw small fires flickering away in iron cages throughout the club; there was always a chill, but not the type that ever showed my breath.

As for now, I was grateful for both the heat and the sound of crackling wood as it burned. Back in the future, this had never been a problem, with Jared's home being fully equipped with electricity. But back in the 1700's, lighting somewhere like the club required too many candles and flaming torches to count, just like his home did.

A home I missed.

The sound of the thick length of chain attached to the stone wall rattling when I moved was just another reminder of how much. From the end of this heavy chunk of iron that kept me tethered, one I had come to loathe, was a pair of shackles linked to the main chain. Shackles that made me wince in pain every time they jarred against my abused wrists.

At my feet was a nest of bedding that he had obviously scooped off the bed and dumped at my feet. I knew this should have given me a slither of hope that he actually gave a shit about me. Healing me outside of the pub should have been another indication that he did.

At the very least, the second he ignited the fire with a thought, was enough to know he didn't want me to freeze to death. Nor did he expect me to be standing for hours on end as the chain was long enough for me to sit in my 'pet bed'.

I felt like some fucking mistreated dog with a shitty owner! But by the time I had slumped down on my makeshift bed, my furious emotions had run dry and morphed into ones of hopelessness and self-pity. I had tried for so long to keep fighting, to tug at the chain with my foot to the wall to try and work it free from the rock.

But that had been just as hopeless as trying to slip free of my shackles to the point that I only ended up injuring myself further. And now I had blood trickling down my hands and dripping from my fingertips. And with each drop that fell it

felt as if they had the power to invoke a new emotion. Because, right now, hate and love seemed to frame the path I was being forced to walk upon.

I was so torn, and I kept telling myself that this Jared was not the man I had fallen in love with. And in all honesty, at this rate, I couldn't see myself ever getting to that point again... *not in this period in time.*

But then I had to remember I was also not the girl he fell in love with either. No, to him I was nothing more than the enemy. The one he would always hold responsible for the death of his wife.

God, but only if I had never been stupid enough to step into that damn fountain! Then none of this would have happened and at the very least, I would have been living in a world where Jared loved me. Where I was his Chosen One. His Fated, and not the person who he blamed as being the source of all his pain. This world of his that I had been plunged into was almost too cruel to bear. But worst of all, were my conflicted and warring feelings over the man I thought I would never stop loving.

Speaking of which, I couldn't help but flinch the moment I felt a gentle, warm hand lifting up my face, realizing that in both my mental and physical exhaustion, I must have fallen asleep.

"You're bleeding," Jared said at the same time I opened my eyes to see what was quickly becoming the painful sight of a pair of stunning silver-grey eyes. Hence why before I could allow them to lure me into a false sense of security, a comfort I usually found in them, I turned my face away. This leaving him to clench his absent fingers into what was no doubt a frustrated fist held suspended in the air.

I didn't know how long it was that he would wait for a better response, but he remained bent on one knee in front of me all the same. Seconds, minutes, I didn't know how much time passed before I felt my injured wrists and bloody hands lifted into his. I also tried to hold back the wince of pain, gritting my teeth and not wanting to give him any more fuel in

calling me a weak human. I already knew it would not be long before my illness returned, as I could already feel the knowing effects seeping back into my aching bones.

I heard him sigh, the moment he started to turn my hands over to try and assess the damage for himself.

“If I had known you would be so foolish enough to injure yourself in the attempt at breaking free, I would have assigned you a guard,” he chastised, making me bite back the hurl of insults I wanted to throw in his face. Although that didn’t stop me from responding entirely,

“If I had known you were a cruel tyrant, then I never would have come here in the first place.”

He scoffed at this, “Then you are foolish in more ways than one, especially if you did so even after the last time we met in that old woman’s cottage.” At the mention, I thought about my friend, unable to help whispering her name,

“Josephine.”

“At the time, I had believed you nothing more than someone taking advantage of an old woman’s kindness but after seeing her memories of you for myself, even in my rage I realized that I judged you wrongly for that.” Wow, was that something he just apologized for? Well, if it was, then it was most likely the best I was going to get in a way of a sorry.

“She’s my friend... *she was my friend,*” I added, knowing that she was no doubt long since dead but that didn’t do anything to quell the pain that clung to the thought. Because for him, thirty years were days lived through and time passed. But for me, it felt like it was all yesterday. For me it had been merely days creeping into weeks that made up my time here. Hence why it was all too raw. Too fresh. Too deep a wound with no time to heal. It may have been his past but for me, it was still a present nightmare I was living through.

Gods but when would it end?!

I wouldn’t meet his eyes again, but I could feel his own on me, searching for what, I didn’t know. Perhaps the truth, perhaps the lie, perhaps the hope for both. I knew he wanted

me as the villain in his story as much as he most likely didn't. At least if the past few days were any indication. I wasn't so much of a hopeless fool not to recognize the desire that had burned between both of us. He could have just killed me on that bridge. He could have simply snapped my neck and had done with it, just like he could have done in the cottage thirty years ago.

Hell, he could have done it the second he discovered who I was.

But even now, he was here and seemingly worried for the state of my wrists, handling them as if he feared that any moment they would shatter in his large hands. And speaking of shattering, he did this to the silence between us when he said,

"Then you should know that the loss of a friend was endured only by one, for I had her memories of you taken from her mind and left her with enough coin that she lived comfortably for the rest of her days." Hearing this and I couldn't help it when my head snapped up.

"You did?"

"So, you see, I am not the heartless, tyrant bastard you make me out to be."

I scoffed a laugh and rattled my chains for emphasis, making me wince when I did as they jarred against my raw skin. An action he stopped instantly by gripping my hands to prevent any more movement. Oh, and his angry scowl was enough to cut me without the blade. This along with his voice when he ordered,

"Do not do that again."

"And why would you care!? I thought you would be happy to see me like this!" I snapped venomously, wondering if I was in my right mind for poking the angry bear.

"If that were truly the way of things then ask yourself, why are you still breathing?!" he snapped back in return.

"I know why I am still breathing, and it has nothing to do with your conscience!" I bit back, making him snarl in anger

and anyone with half a brain cell would have flinched, but no, not me. No, I just glared right back at him because I may have feared at what he would do to me before coming here but not anymore... *not after the bridge*. Not when I suspected that the reason he couldn't hurt me was because his HellBeast wouldn't let him. The Fates wouldn't let him.

And in all honesty...

It meant nothing anymore.

Like being born into royalty or something. I didn't earn it, just like I didn't earn his care. He only did so because *he had to*. Because what was love if it wasn't something you could fall from. What was a desired touch if it was something felt by the hand of a puppeteer? What of words of yearning if they were first whispered in your ear by the lips of a God.

It meant nothing when it was Fated. But to love despite it and not because of it... well that... *that meant everything*. Because that was what falling in love with Jared had been. A journey made despite the Gods leading the path.

"You know little of my mind, so I suggest you keep such thoughts to yourself," he warned, which stupidly only made me want to push even harder.

"What's wrong, HellBeast, have I touched a nerve?" I asked, making him suddenly snap the chain between my shackles as way of answer and making me flinch this time. It was most definitely something I took as a warning.

"Ah, so that barbed tongue of yours can be subdued after all."

I narrowed my eyes at him, deciding not to reply the way I wanted, a string of obscenities that would have made a sailor blush.

"Well, if fear is what it takes for you to be tamed, then let the war begin," he said, making me finally look away as I knew that his words were true. This did feel like a war between us, and one with no victor in sight. But little did he know that the greatest battle I faced was the one of my heart.

“Now I am going to heal this...” My head snapped back to his when hearing this, feeling the shackles loosen the moment he released them, doing so with nothing more than a fingertip ran along the symbols that were etched into the metal rings.

“You will not!” I snapped, making him actually grin.

“Then let this be our first battle because. one way or another, I am healing this damaged skin of yours.” I tried to pull my hands from his grasp at this, moving back at the same time and finding nothing but a wall at my back and a satisfied HellBeast at my front.

“Now that is a curious thing,” he mused.

“What is? Wait, I don’t care, just let me go.” I said. making the bastard smirk and ignore my obvious plea, focusing instead on my own curiosity.

“Your fear of me hurting you is outweighed by the fear of the lust you wish to deny yourself.” Again, if I had the power to shoot deadly lasers from my eyes, I would have started aiming at that damn sexy grin of his! Instead, I bit back,

“Oh yes, enduring a forced orgasm is me denying my lust for you... *deluded HellBeast.*” I muttered this last part, making him deepen his knowing smirk before raising a brow and repeating in mocking tone,

“A forced orgasm... sounds frightening and truly horrific indeed.” To which I rolled my eyes and trying to hate this playful banter that had switched the conversation to only slightly annoying. After all, I was trying to hate him here.

“Yes, well let’s try taking away your free will and see how *you* like it!” I snapped and, unfortunately, reminding him of the one time that happened, and with life altering consequences at that.

“*Never again,*” he snarled, making me wish I could instantly take it back but knowing right now my pride wouldn’t let me. Yet, in the end, it didn’t matter as the reminder left him just as quickly as it appeared. Then that hard edge to both his voice and his jaw relaxed enough to tease,

“But I suppose if forced to endure such again, then forced pleasure by your hands wouldn’t be something you would find me fight against... too hard.” Again, I rolled my eyes but this time it was most definitely lacking and also came with the slip of a chuckle.

Damn him!

“Now hold still, pet of mine.”

Okay, so calling me that definitely had me dropping what stupid little humor had momentarily gripped me. Which meant I did the opposite and tried to scramble back away from him. Of course, little good this did me, as he dropped his other knee and crawled over me enough that he could pull me right under him. Then with a flash of movement he bit both his palms just as I was fighting to be free of his massive bulk looming over me.

Then he grabbed both my wrists, encircling his bloody hands around them and pinning them above my head with frightening ease.

“NO!” I shouted, trying to fight him, despite knowing that it was pointless. He was a powerhouse of strength and even though I knew he was trying to be gentle with me, it was firm enough to let me know that fighting was a useless endeavor.

“Easy now, calm for me and just let it happen,” he ordered calmly, making me wish he was being an asshole just so I could add this moment to the long list of things to hate him for. Of course, I couldn’t let him off that easily.

“*Fuck you!*” I seethed, yet he just grinned down at me before lowering enough to run his nose up my cheek, telling me,

“I would watch your words, as you very may wish to do such after this forced orgasm of yours... now relax and just let it happen,” he said again, in that smooth velvet tone that I knew well, and one he usually reserved for the bedroom.

“I wouldn’t fuck you even if you begged me... ahhh... ooohhhh God!” This insult started off well enough but, by the end, it most definitely lacked the luster of hatred. Especially

when the feeling of his blood hit my system like an injection of lust had just shot straight to my core! I even felt my back start to arch, now pressing up into him instead of what I should have been doing.

“That’s it... Gods, *so fucking beautiful,*” he muttered as if to himself and in my lust-filled fog, I tried to cling onto his words. But the raging fire burning up inside me wouldn’t let me hold on to my hate. Not long enough to drown his words out of my mind. To cling on to the darkness, and shadow the feeling in a shroud of bitterness and loathing. To try and stop my treacherous heart from jumping at the sound of him calling me beautiful.

To know that his words still had the power over me was a fact I didn’t want to admit.

So instead, I let myself focus on the stolen free will that was stripping me bare. The way the intensity of his healing built and built until I knew it would erupt out of me. The fear of the end, knowing that everything between us would return to one at war instead of fighting it together like we always had. But right now...

It was time to let go.

So, I did, and unfortunately, I did this screaming his name, one I had vowed not to say,

“Oh, oh, oh God, Jared, I... I... am COMING! JARED, YES! AHHH!” I cried out, panting through the tense and body shuddering orgasm. One that felt like it had been building since the bridge. At this, he groaned before lowering his forehead to my own, one now speckled in perspiration from trying to fight it for too long.

“And there is my name, and one spoken the only way it should be, from lips calling out not in hatred but in blissful solace.”

I panted through the euphoria and with each breath I took, the feeling went back in the box ready for me to lock away again, clarity taking its place. Which was why after a second more of relishing this moment, one that I could fool myself

into believing was the way it always was between us, I turned my face away. Turned away and let go of the lie, let go of the time before the great chasm of time tore us apart. Time that had created a distance so vast, it seemed we would never find our way across.

In response, I felt and heard his sigh of frustration, one made for a second time after I demanded quietly,

“Please get off me.” However, he told me firmly,

“You can’t hide from this between us forever...” then he lowered his lips to my ear, and what came next sounded too much like a vow he had made just for me...

“... YOU CAN’T HIDE FROM ME.”

THE SUM OF OUR FEARS



“**Y**ou can't hide from me.”

I didn't say anything to this, even though 'watch me' was just on the tip of my tongue. But then there was also a stubborn part of me that wouldn't shut up and kept whispering, *who are you trying to fool with that one?* Especially when all I cared about was getting back to my own time and, with it, getting back to my Jared... a man I didn't ever intend to hide from. And, well, they were one and the same, but light-years apart.

He pushed himself away from where he had me caged on the floor among the nest of bedding. And the moment I had this freedom, I rubbed at my now healed wrists and couldn't hold myself back from asking,

“Why did you do that?”

“Because despite what you think of me, it displeases me to see you harmed,” he answered and as nice and reassuring as that was to hear, he had mistaken my question.

“By why did you do it that way?” I asked again, this time trying to make myself clearer. However, when he raised his brow down at me, I added even more,

“With your blood.”

At this he lowered a hand for me to take so he could help me off the floor. I slowly got to my feet, no longer choosing to feel any more vulnerable than I already did around him given the difference in our size. But he wouldn't let me hide by

looking at the ground as I waited for his answer. No, instead, he used two fingertips to raise my face up before telling me,

“Because I wanted pleasure to replace the pain.”

I swallowed hard at this and tried to escape the intensity of his gaze. Because there were so many sides to this man and his kindness was what disarmed me the most. His treatment of me had been almost barbaric, yet here he was now, with what looked like conflicted tenderness painted across his features. As if what he wanted to do and what he knew he shouldn't do clashed, like two magnets pushing against each other and hoping to make the connection.

Simply put, he was at war. At war with himself, and I doubted even he knew which side of him would win because it could all change in any given minute.

Just like now, as he stepped away from me, folded his arms across his chest, and slipped back on his mask of indifference.

“Now tell me, how is it you came to be here?” he asked, startling me at his hard tone. Gone was the gentle promise he had whispered upon my skin only moments ago.

“You know how, I told you that I met Marcus on the way...” I started to tell him, but he quickly interrupted me.

“That is not what I mean, and you know it,” he snapped, interjecting on my past excuses. I started shaking my head, at the same time telling him,

“I came here on horseback.” This made him growl before storming back over to me and making me near trip up over the covers as I tried to back away.

“Enough!” he shouted.

My back was now at the wall and this time, at the very least, I was standing on two legs, no matter how wobbly they were thanks to his intimidating presence.

“You try my patience, girl... now tell me, how is it possible you are here, thirty years past and you haven't aged a damn day?!” I took in a shuddering breath, readying myself for the lie I had been working on while he was away and

obviously dealing with his other prisoner. Which reminded me, I needed to know Marcus was alright.

Perhaps I could bargain?

“I will tell you, but only after I can see for myself that Marcus is alright.” At this he closed what little distance there was left between us and like he had done after my last dance, he caged me with the bulk of his body. His hand flattened above my head as he leant his weight into me, keeping me trapped. The snarl of anger directed my way wasn’t a good indication I wasn’t going to get my way in this.

“The Fool lives and that is all you need to know,” he told me firmly.

“Then my being here now is all you need to know,” I replied stubbornly, making him snarl this time and I forced myself to hold firm in spite of the scary sound.

“Then I shall leave and take my frustrations out on your friend,” he snapped before pushing from the wall and making his way to the door, causing me to panic.

“No! Please, don’t!” I begged. God only knew what Marcus was already going through, and the last thing I wanted to do was add to my friend’s misery. At this, Jared paused and turned his body side on enough to regard me.

“I can’t tell you what I myself don’t know.”

He narrowed his gaze for a few seconds before telling me,

“Not good enough!” Then he started walking again, so this time, I ran to him and grabbed his arm.

The contact between us was enough to make him take pause and look down to where I touched him. His sleeves were rolled up his forearms and he was minus the waistcoat and jacket he had been wearing on the bridge. I quickly started to retract my hand.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“What?! Touch me? Lay claim to what we both know is yours by right and declared as such by the Gods?!” he said almost bitterly and making me gasp as I took small steps back.

“Y-y-y-you know?” I uttered on a breathy whisper.

“What, that you’re my Chosen One? That you are this Fated Electus the Gods have gifted me with...? Oh yes, that Fool of yours told me many things!” I flinched at that, hating the idea of what must have been done to him for Marcus to have been forced to give away my secrets.

But of course, I knew the reason Jared told me this and I didn’t give him the response he wanted. His jealousy was burning deep within his veins and my concern for Marcus was riding him hard. Hard enough to try and turn Marcus against me. Trying to make me feel a betrayal whereas I didn’t see any. I only saw a necessity to live and who was I to try and deny him the extra relief from pain? After all, it had been my mess we were dealing with and the trouble I had gotten him into by him helping me only doubled my guilt.

Jared sneered when he didn’t see the disappointment in my gaze he had obviously been hoping for.

“Yet here you are, still asking questions,” I pointed out, making him grit his teeth before admitting,

“It is true, he didn’t have all the answers I sought but then I was reminded that unless they come from your own lips, then they would be meaningless from anything other than the source.” I tried not to shrink back at that.

“Then let me see him and you will have them,” I said, pushing once again for more.

“No! You are fresh out of bargains, my little dancing girl, for I am at my limit. Now which is it to be? Told willingly from your lips or beaten out of his?!” I tensed at this and closed my eyes as the impossible situation was laid out before me, because really... *what was stopping him from doing both?*

Not a chance I could take. So, after a deep, defeated sigh, I gave him what he wanted.

“Alright... alright, I will tell you, just... please, *please don’t hurt my friend,*” I said, my tone as deflated as my shoulders were.

He didn't agree to this but, at the very least, he remained silent and didn't throw in my face how he could do whatever he damn well pleased. No, instead he simply stood like the immovable figure of a man he was, once more crossing his arms over the large space of his chest, his muscles bulging, forcing me to have to focus on anything but the desired sight.

"I didn't lie when I told you that I woke up and had no idea where I was or how I got there," I said, reminding him of my tale of woe and when Marcus had saved me. He nodded once for me to keep going.

"What I didn't tell you was that after I ran from you, back when... well, you know..." I let my voice trail off at this because, well, let's face it, neither of us needed a reminder of that time, least of all him.

"Well, I found someone I thought would help me, and I trusted them, thinking that they would get me home. Only they..." His eyes narrowed at this.

"They what?" he asked, his voice now turned to granite and one look at his face, and I soon found out why as I had come to know the expression well... *he was being protective.*

"He betrayed me and instead of helping me get home, he used me and sent me here," I said, and now I could add another easy-to-read emotion to his face... *jealously.*

"He? How did this man use you? Tell me!" His anger was bubbling over pretty quickly and I looked down to see his fingers had curled into fists. It looked like he wanted to punch the weapon of flesh into a wall. His knuckles cracked as they tensed hard enough, they turned white.

"Ella, my patience is held by a thread here, now answer me... how did this man use you?" His harsh, ragged tone made my head snap back up from staring at his hands and shifting my focus from the pumped veins I could see snaking up his forearms.

"There was something he wanted, and it was more important to him than helping me get home... but... well, it wasn't anything, you know... nothing sexual," I said, feeling

awkward just saying it, let alone thinking it, as... *eww much*. I mean, jeez, he was family after all. So I hoped this was enough to get Jared to back down, as I quickly saw where his mind had been focused on.

However, the second he narrowed his eyes, I could tell he was also trying to scent the lie.

“You are not telling me everything,” he stated confidently, but at the very least, he didn’t call bullshit on the whole thing. And how could he? It wasn’t like there wasn’t a shred of truth to it. I just wasn’t about to tell him that it was actually my uncle who had betrayed my trust... and oh, that it just so happened that my uncle was the King of Kings, ruler of all Supernatural beings on Earth.

Jesus, but when did my life get so fucked up and complicated...? Oh yeah, when I snuck into a Demonic fight club at eighteen and fell head over tail for a HellBeast.

Speaking of which, he was still currently looking at me with a hard, unyielding expression on his face. One that didn’t exactly look like the picture of patience as he was forced to wait for my response.

“I don’t know what you want...” I started to say but he was having none of it.

“Thirty years have passed, Ella, so surely you do not expect me to forget this fact or be satisfied by such lack of an explanation.”

Damn it, he was like a dog with a monster bone! No pun intended... well, maybe just a little one.

“Well?” he pressed, still currently looking at me with that stern expression on his handsome, broody face.

“Yes, well given how you wanted to kill me the last time we met thirty years ago, then excuse me for not being totally forthcoming in all the details surrounding why and how I needed help getting home to begin with... or did you forget your threat to hunt me down should I remain?” I said, throwing his past back at him and using it as an emotional weapon.

His expression said it all... *guilt*.

“That may be so, but what I still don’t understand is if that be the way of things, then why risk your life again and enter my domain? After all, there are very few who would be bitten by the wolf and then choose to venture into its den, years later.” Damn it, but he was right, and this was the part where I needed to get creative.

“We believed it was the only place that I could find someone with the ability to send me home, back to my own time.” He raised a questioning brow at this.

“I find that hard to believe, but even if such a being happened to frequent my club, I am amazed you would risk your life a second time just to achieve going home, as you put it,” he replied, with a slight nod of his head at the end.

“Yeah, and why is that?” I queried, truly curious to see what point he was trying to make.

“Because living in the future is better than dying in it.” Damn, but that sound logic was hard to argue against, as he was right. Although he didn’t exactly have all the facts, which is why the only answer I could give started with a slight shrug my shoulders before words followed.

“What can I say, but some things are worth the risk.” He scoffed at that but otherwise didn’t comment.

“Besides, I’m still standing, aren’t I?” I pointed out and again, the look he gave me said it all... *only because he had allowed it*.

“Standing because you knew who you were to me, all this time.” Okay so maybe his look hadn’t said it all. I couldn’t help but take in a quick breath.

“I didn’t rely on it, if that is what you are asking,” I replied, unable to keep the bitter tone from my waving my voice.

“You knew... even back when we first met, you knew and yet you...” he let his sentence trail off at the same time he tore his eyes from me, turning his face as if he could no longer

stand looking at me. It hurt but I couldn't help but turn the feeling into anger.

“I what? Tried to warn you?! I ran all the way from those woods after I overheard what they planned to do and tried to get you to come with me... yeah, Jared, I did that!” I snapped, saying his name again and making his head whip back to mine.

“And yet they showed up only minutes later, and with my wife begging for her life... I... fuck but you...” He stopped himself even as his anger grew... or maybe it was because of it. I just didn't know anymore. But one thing I did know, and that was his response fueled my anger even more. Which was why I threw my fisted hands back behind me and cocked my head back as I shouted,

“I don't have to explain shit to you! I know what happened and I stand by my words. I don't care what lies they spun or what part they tried to make you believe I played! I don't care that they...” It was at this point that he had hit his limit on his own rage building, quickly cutting me off in a far more effective way than I could ever muster.

“Lerna, her name was Lerna! And she was the one who told me of your betrayal!” he roared, making me flinch back and instantly I wanted to cry because of it.

I knew now that this wasn't just a case of wrong place at the wrong time. This was a case of believing my word over the word of his beloved dead wife. Gods but what hope did I have? Hence why I let my shoulders slump once more and this time in that face of a losing battle. I only had one card left to play and, unfortunately for me, it was the Queen of Hearts.

“Then ask yourself, Jared, why would the Fates gift you a Chosen One who you would only end up hating? Why would they create that destiny for you...? One where you would only ever see me as the villain? Why would they pair you with such a person, someone who betrays you?”

“Because they are fucking cruel!” he threw back at me, making me jerk back enough that my steps took me, once again, to the wall for support. Because that was the worst blow

yet and this time, I wouldn't recover from it enough to hide the tears. Tears he saw and hardened his jaw.

"Right... Okay... I... I... understand," I whispered.

"Ella, I..." At this I lifted a hand and forced pained words past the agonizing lump I couldn't seem to swallow.

"Please don't... please, I can't take anymore... I am done," I said before swiping the tears from my cheeks and straightening my back. Then I nodded once and started to walk towards the door, surprised when he let me make it past him. Damn it, I even had my hand on the handle, pulling it down and readying myself to run from him. I was so close and with every footstep I took, my heart cracked further with words he couldn't take back.

However, Jared must have come to his senses enough to act, because clearly getting away from him wasn't ever going to be that easy.

"And where the fuck do you think you are going?" I heard the fury in his voice before the handle was wrenched out of my hand, and the door slammed back to its frame so hard that it splintered in places. Then as I was whipped back to face him, his face twisted with anger and something else I couldn't place... *was it shame?*

It didn't matter because, like I said, I was done. So, I answered his question with a venomous tone,

"I don't know but I will ask the cruel Gods of Fate when I finally fucking get there!" I roared back at him, finding my anger unleashed and weighty enough it matched his own. At this his hand suddenly collared my throat and pressed me against the door, before he stepped into me and snarled,

"Then we will ask them together!"

Then before I could question what was happening, his lips were on mine and my gasp of shock was one he took quick advantage of. And so might Gods help me, but I was far too weak in my resolve that it dissolved the second his kiss took me home. When it took me to my safe place and transported me back to the man I loved. It enveloped me in a level of

comfort only the arms of Jared were capable of giving me. Arms that wound around my body and anchored me to his hard frame, keeping me as a willingly captive. My prison warden, and one I found myself clinging to, with hands curled into his shirt like a storm was brewing. Or perhaps we had already survived the storm, and this was merely the aftermath. I honestly didn't know and, right now, nor did I care to know.

I just needed this.

I just needed him.

So, I let myself be taken down this time travelling rabbit hole back to my future as he dominated the kiss. His hands explored my body as if he was starved of the feeling, as if his need matched that of my own and burned just like the inferno where he was created.

Because at its core, nothing else mattered. He may never trust me, and I couldn't trust that he ever would. But this, right now, well this was something that we could both trust in. It was the sum of our fears ignited by the thought of going our separate ways. He had gone against the grain of his vengeance by letting me live, knowing he couldn't let me go. And I had knowingly stepped into danger because I couldn't let him be captured and simply do nothing.

We were bound as lovers or as enemies, it didn't matter anymore. There was no more fighting this and he knew it. That was why I felt him suddenly lift me up and as natural as mother nature herself, I opened up to him, spreading my legs as if one of her flowers was searching for the sunlight.

I wrapped my legs around him as he hoisted me up so he didn't break contact with my lips. Lips he devoured, biting them, sucking them, soothing the sting that sent delicious shockwaves down to the junction of my thighs. And I wasn't the only one getting a sexual high from this, I could feel the familiar bulge that was no less impressive than it was back in my own time.

The long, hard length of his cock was straining to be free as if it had a will of its own. It was rubbing against me in a way where there would be another forced orgasm soon.

Although forced was the wrong word. No, not when I was the one rubbing myself against him like I was trying to ride him like a fairground ride!

No wonder he growled against my neck, the rumbling vibrations traveling down my skin and subconsciously pebbling my nipples. The hard points pressing against the confines of my dress, and most definitely wanted in on the action. But then something must have caught his attention seconds after a sound in the room had tried to penetrate the sexual fog that choked the air of clearheaded oxygen. Well, at least it did for one of us, because Jared was now focused on something other than me. I knew that the second I heard him growl and, this time, *it wasn't of the happy kind.*

Which had me still questioning what the fuck just happened the second he pried my legs from around his waist. Meaning I had no choice but to find the floor with my unsteady feet.

“Jared?” I spoke his name in question as he suddenly turned from me, before bending as if to retrieve something from the floor. But with his back to me I couldn't see what it was.

“What is...?” I never got to finish as he rose to his full height and turned back to face me. Then he spoke, his voice hard and near empty of all emotion but rage.

“At least now I know the truth...” he said harshly.

“I don't understand,” I said, shaking my head and trying to figure out what I had done this time.

“...And why you came back here...” He paused as his eyes narrowed, glowing with burning anger, and my panic turned to terror when he suddenly snarled,

“...*You came to steal from me.*” And at the same time, he opened his palm and finally allowed me to see...

THE COIN IN HIS HAND.

WHEN THE LOCKS TURN



I stared at that coin in his hand as if it was a tiny bomb about to go off.

“Jared, I...”

“*Don’t!*” he snarled dangerously and, as if it was the theme of the day, my back found the door. This as self-preservation kicked in and my need to retreat was too strong to ignore. I tried to tell my pounding heart that he wouldn’t hurt me but with that burning, white-hot look in his eyes, it was hard to listen.

He looked enraged.

“I didn’t lie.” I spoke quickly, now having to ignore the incredulous look he was giving me. But then before he had chance to open his mouth, I pressed forward.

“I told you I came here to find a way home. That right there is my only way home,” I said, nodding down to the coin, one he quickly closed within his fist the moment I mentioned it being my only hope to leave. As if he feared I had the power or the speed to suddenly rip it from his hand and run.

“So, you needed payment!” he snarled, assuming as much and, well, I suppose it was the most logical explanation. Especially as it appeared he had no knowledge of the Temple or what it held at its core. Meaning that with no clue of the fountain or what it had the power to do, for the moment, I was safe. Because explaining this to him was one thing, but having to explain I was actually from the future, was a whole new ball game. Because I could get away with him simply thinking I

was from the past, that my home was thirty years ago, and this was just all down to some kind of spell cast. But having to explain the future to him would have been a mistake. *A huge one.*

Which was why I just hoped it didn't come to that.

“Ask yourself what you would do... what lengths would you go to, if only you would go back to that day, Jared...? Are you really telling me that you wouldn't enter the wolf's den and steal from the one that bit you?” I asked, now throwing the same scenario back at him like this was my last lifeline. At this he snarled again and tore his furious gaze away from me. Therefore, now that I was no longer looking at him, I felt like I could finally take my first, steady breath.

“It was all a fucking ruse!” he snapped and, well, so much for a calm breath as the next one came out shuddered.

“No... no, it wasn't.”

“*Lies!*” he hissed through gritted teeth.

“How can I lie about how I feel, given who you are to me?” I reminded him and, again, I was met with his anger.

“And yet you speak of such things when, at your core, you are nothing but a thief and your reasons for coming back here were not to claim your Chosen One!” At this I finally found my anger in return, stepping away from the door and marching up to him with my finger pointing his way.

“How dare you?! What did you expect? For me to take one look at you and throw myself into your arms after what you did to me?! After you hunted me down, terrified me to tears, had me begging you to spare my life as you threw me to the ground?! Is that what you expected from me, Jared? As you had your fangs at my throat a moment away from tearing it out!?” I bellowed, making him flinch at the memory I painted but I wasn't done with the canvas just yet!

“You remember my words, HellBeast, I told you... *I fucking told you...!*” I paused as my knees bent and my fists shook with the strength of my words.

“...*Because I don't want to live in a world where you hate me...* Those were my words to you and yours...”

“Stop!” he demanded, turning from me, but I wasn't done... far from it! So, I followed him so I was in his face again, lashing out with the painful memory.

“Yours were to tell me of what penalty I must suffer... *Then let that be your punishment, for I will never stop hating you for what you did to me...* Weren't those your fucking words, Jared?!”

“Enough!” Naturally, I didn't heed this warning as I was too fucking gone with my rage!

“Oh, along with telling me how much you fucking hated me... hated how much you craved me! Isn't that what you said to me...? So no, Jared, after coming so close to death by your hands, I didn't want to have anything to do with you!” I snapped, looking him up and down with what I knew was disgust on my face.

“I couldn't hurt you!” he shouted back, but this was when something in me snapped completely.

“*YOU DID HURT ME!*” I roared, throwing my hands back as my entire body was ridged with fury. He even managed to look shocked as if he didn't know that I truly had it in me. And it was in sight of that astonishment that I forced myself to take a calming breath, if only for myself as I could feel the knowing pressure on my lungs.

Then I told him in a slightly calmer tone,

“You were supposed to be the one to protect me! I found you, even when you were human, and I knew instantly who you were. And then I opened my eyes and there was your wife! *My Chosen One with a wife...* do you have any idea how much that hurt?” I watched as the thirty-year memory played back for him until something in his hard features changed.

“That's why you left that day... why you woke and were determined to leave?” I tore my eyes from his as I felt the tears welling there, the hurt threatening to overwhelm me. I swallowed down the emotional lump that wanted to choke me

on my pain and the next words out of my mouth were aimed to the floor.

“I only ever wanted you to be happy and I saw that you were with her. So, I knew I had missed my chance and left. I left for you, just like I came back, thinking I could foolishly save you,” I said, letting the tears fall. I shuddered the moment I felt his bent finger under my chin, raising my face to his.

“*Gods but how badly I want to believe you,*” he admitted softly, making me sigh as more tears fell, no longer ashamed of him witnessing the hurt there. His eyes searched my own, those silver depths swirling with so many buried emotions it was hard to pinpoint the ones I wanted. However, the distrust I still saw there was the only one I could truly see. Which was why the moment I felt him take away my tears with the backs of his fingers, I turned my face and took a step back.

“But it’s my word over that of a dead wife, and that is something I can never compete with. It’s why you have to let me go,” I told him, praying this time he would see reason. Of course, that was a hope too far.

“*No!*” he snarled, making me flinch at the sharp tone.

“But don’t you see, I have to?”

“No. I. Do. Not,” he said as if he were carving each word into stone. Unsurprisingly, I sighed again, feeling this argument weighing heavily on my soul.

“But I am fighting an enemy I can’t see... one I can’t ever even hope to touch. I am fighting the past, and one where I was only ever used as a pawn against you. You are my Chosen, yet you so easily turned against me at the word of the woman you love when she chose to condemn me. What else is there, Jared?” I asked, feeling the hopelessness tugging at my soul.

“*What else...?* How can you ask that when you know precisely what is between us?” he asked disbelievingly, and I swear I was tempted to ask if he had heard a single word I just said.

“Poisoned roots are hardly a good foundation to build a relationship on,” I pointed out, making him rake a frustrated hand through his hair.

“You may be willing to give up on this, *but I am not*,” he stated unwaveringly, and I just felt as if we were going around and around the same shit not-so-merry-go-round of issues.

“Then you must be willing to accept what I tell you is the truth, or I don’t see...” He quickly cut me off,

“And how can I do that when I have proven your lies time and time again?!” I winced at that, knowing there was verity to his words. Yet I still had plenty of my own argument to make.

“I lied about my past and kept the fact that I was a human girl who you once believed had betrayed you from you. That you believed I had once been a part of those that brought about your death and at the memory of your murderous rage aimed my way... well, ask yourself, Jared, do you really blame me for hiding myself from you?” At this he sighed, and I could finally see that I was getting somewhere. Proof of which when he added,

“No, in that, I cannot blame you.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling as I needed to offer him a small slice of gratitude. To let him know that, no matter how small, it had meant something to me to hear him say that. It was a tip-toed step in the right direction at least. Now if only I could get him to agree to letting me go with my friend by my side and a coin in my pocket... *doubtful... unless Demonic pigs did fly down in Hell?*

“I am not above reason, despite your low opinion of me.”

Okay, so much for a step in the right direction, I thought with a barely suppress eye roll.

“Says the man who hunted me down and coerced me into a carriage by holding a knife to my friend’s throat and using his life as leverage before chaining me to his damn wall... umm just where oh where could I possibly get that low opinion of you, Jared?” I asked mockingly, making him growl.

“I did not know who you were to me then.” Ah so it *had* been Marcus who had told him, and he wasn’t just trying to drive a wedge between us with lies. Well, little good it did for him, as like I said, I felt no ill will to Marcus for telling him. Not when I could only imagine what it was Jared had done to him. So no, I would not deny him a painless moment just by telling Jared something that he himself should have felt. Which was why I told him,

“You knew, Jared, you just didn’t want to admit it to yourself because you were so dead set on condemning me as being guilty before proven innocent. It was the reason you couldn’t kill me, the reason you wanted to bite me that night. The reason you kiss...”

“Stop!” he shouted, yet it was just another warning I ignored, making me hold my ground.

“And there it is, the guilt is written all over you face! A guilt you still feel for kissing me that day in the woods, even when you now know who I am to you!” I shouted back, with the hurt bringing on a fresh wave of tears. I was so done and needed to get out of here, which was why I spun on a heel and ran for the door, praying this time I would make it out!

Of course, I only made it a foot past the threshold that seemed like it was becoming a metaphor for my life! One cruel step towards freedom and I was once more caught in someone’s else’s trap. And this time it was Jared’s as his arms encircled me from behind before he lifted me from the floor enough to walk backwards with me trapped against him.

“Let me go!” I shouted, struggling in his arms, fighting to get free.

“Calm down!”

“LET ME GO!” I screamed this time, and tried even harder to twist from his hold, to the point, I was soon panting for breath. I couldn’t fucking breathe! I just wanted to be free... free from the pain... free from feeling as if my heart was ripped in two with each of version of him holding a half. I just wanted to take my half back to the Jared I loved as this one didn’t fucking deserve it!

“NO! Now calm the fuck down!” He tried again, only this time what he wasn’t expecting was the cracking of the emotional dam. A wall that came crumbling down as I started to cry in earnest the second the fight went right out of me. At first, he froze, inhaling a quick breath the second the first sob broke free.

“*Please... please... just... let me... go,*” I begged between ragged breaths I tried to drag air into my lungs, making him hold me in a different way now I was no longer fighting him. No, now I was clinging to his shirt once more, but this time it was in my desperation to get through to him. But then he pulled me closer, cradling my head against his chest and using a large hand to stroke back my hair.

“Sssh now...”

“B-but...”

“No more words, little one... simply calm for me and take a breath,” he said gently before lifting me fully in his arms, taking my legs from beneath me. Then without even needing to hoist me up further, being strong enough to carry me with such ease that it should have been frightening, he walked me through the door. I didn’t ask where we were going, I just needed out of this room, far from the memories of our argument. Far from the bitter swell that had built within me as all I wished for was a way to prove the truth to him.

I tried to see it from his side, knowing that he was right. I had given him little reason to trust me. Because there may have been things I hadn’t lied about, important things... but, in the end...

I had lied.

And I was still lying.

But how could I admit where I was truly from? I just couldn’t. Not with all that was held at stake if I did. Look at my uncle, he had forsaken the future by choosing to get his hands on his Chosen One, consequences be damned. Well, how did I know that Jared wouldn’t simply do the same by keeping me locked to this time, just to keep me? He wouldn’t

even let me go now and that was after a pretty heated argument and some pretty big trust issues that simply kept building.

No, I couldn't risk telling him the truth, regardless of whether or not it would cement my innocence in his mind. Because would he really believe I had come back from the future just to help those that killed him? Especially when I knew he would change into his HellBeast regardless of my being there. That would have made no sense and Jared was intelligent enough to realize it too, I was sure.

I mean, I could see it in his eyes, glimpses of wanting to believe me. But I knew that he was conflicted because that would mean exchanging one villain for the other and the next one in line was... *his dead wife*.

But regardless, as much as I knew he cared for me, I also knew that, deep down, he still cared for his wife. He was torn and I hated that for him. I really did. Which was why I let him carry me through the tunnel of caves without another word. Without a fuss or a fight this time. I just held on and kept my face buried in his chest, trying to take as much comfort from it as I could. Allowing myself to be fooled and calling it a small mercy.

But then after I felt myself being lowered down, I couldn't keep the reality at bay any longer, I had to open my eyes. Doing so as Jared was lowering me onto a bed and, this time, in a room that was not his own.

Another canopy bed with a slightly more feminine touch dominated the room. It was decorated with gold tassels around the edge of the canopy, along with gilded moldings in fancy gold, curled foliage. This matched the duck-egg blue covers with the same gold edge that hung over the sides of the bed. Swirls of gold in the fabric simmered in the glow of the candles that flickered from the chandelier hanging in the center of the room. Another roaring fire crackled across from where the bed was, in a fireplace that was carved out of the rock once more. And this time, into a more practical square shape.

As for the rest of the room, it held different pieces of furniture but instead of the chunky, heavily carved pieces I was used to seeing in Jared's space, in here it was different. Smaller and more intricate pieces of furniture were positioned in the room with purpose in mind. There was a small sitting area closer to the fire, whereas the furniture that obviously held clothes, were positioned further away on the opposite wall. But everything matched and was made in what looked like dark walnut.

The duck-egg blue and gold theme also continued throughout, with cushions on the seats, rugs on the floor and matching material from the bed also stretched around a frame that separated the space. I didn't know what was behind this screen, but I hoped it was a place I could pee soon as I didn't know how much longer I would last.

Oh, and there were also those other pesky little things humans needed, like water and food. Meaning he really was one shitty pet owner! Of course, I would have pointed these things out had I been in the right mind to do so.

But once I was lying down on the bed, he sat at the edge, creasing the silk beneath him. Then I watched as the fight in him vanished and his resolve crumbled. Especially when he arched his torso so as his elbows were resting on his knees. His hands both pushed his hair back and he let his head linger in their hold. The muscles on his back tensed with the movement, making me wish I could have run my hands down them to ease the tension there.

Because despite how pissed off I was, I also knew that this was as hard on him as it was on me and I hated that sometimes I failed to recognize that. But wasn't that like most people in the heat of an argument? It was your own feelings that fueled the opposing side and vice versa. I was hurt, yes, but looking at him now, I knew I wasn't the only one. Because Jared might have been a big beast of a man but that didn't mean he was void of the same wounds that words could inflict on me.

"I am sorry I chained you to my wall," he said after a stretch of silence between us, and I could no longer stand it, as I moved before he had change to stop me. However, any panic

he might have had, it eased the moment he felt me wrapping my arms around him from behind. I hugged his back and clung on tight enough that I felt myself rise and fall with his heavy sigh.

“And I am sorry I lied,” I told him, feeling the next sigh as more of a shudder ran through him. This before he twisted his body so he could take me in his arms, pulling me in for a hug that only ended up soaking his shirt once more because I couldn’t help the emotions. Gods, how many tears was I going to shed before morning?

“I believe this to be a better foundation, don’t you?” he asked softly, pulling back enough so he could frame my face with both hands. I only had the strength left in me to nod, as he took my tears away with both the rough pads of his thumbs. Then he pulled my face closer, and I held my breath thinking those lips of his were headed for my own. But then he tilted my face down and his kiss ended up on my forehead in a sweet gesture before he released me.

After this he stood, looking down at me and after running the backs of his fingers down my heated cheek, he told me,

“Get some rest, my little dancing girl.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, knowing he was right... *I was running on fumes*. The last of my energy being spent on our verbal assault. He too nodded in response and let his hand fall from my cheek before taking the first steps away from me. So, I was left watching him walk to the door with a sense of relief that we had at least found some common ground. That, and I was no longer chained to his wall like some unruly pet.

Although, seconds later, the door closed and I realized that I may be free of my chains but I was far from being free.

Especially when I heard...

THE LOCKS TURN.

THE DRESS FOR RESCUE



The next time I heard the locks turn I woke with a start, unable to keep his name from slipping from my lips,

“Jared?” However, who I found there in his place had me shouting a very different name,

“Smidge!”

Her hazel-amber eyes widened for a moment before they softened to being slightly amused. It was still so strange to see her looking this way. Not an orange strand of hair in sight. Instead, fine-coiled auburn curls were pinned under a hat adorned with peacock feathers held there by a bronze circular broach. This matched her dress that was a stunning peacock blue color and was edged with a bronze-colored lace. It was in the style of a long-sleeved corseted jacket that flared out around the cream satin skirt underneath.

And like every other woman in this time period, her skirts rustled as she made it over to me. She was also carrying what was clearly a dress intended for me over her arm. One that looked to be made up of layers upon layers of emerald green.

“You greet me as if we have known each other in another life.” Her comment made me tense and I couldn’t help but wonder if she suspected something. However, my face of panic must have made her feel bad as she giggled before telling me,

“Don’t worry, I know it is simply because my reputation precedes me.” I grinned at this, despite at the same time trying to still the pounding of my heart.

“But of course, that and I think my friend has taken a liking to you,” I say, testing the waters and wondering if I am ever going to get to the bottom of what happened between these two. But of course, I wouldn’t, as duh me, it hadn’t even had chance to happen yet.

“Ah yes, the handsome fool, how could I forget?” she said with a knowing smirk.

“Well, at least you called him handsome, so that’s at least one point to him.” At this she grinned and said,

“I knew I would like you and, well, you already seem quite smitten with me, my dear, although I cannot assume why... other than I am fabulous.” Again, I laughed at this before she pulled the dress draped over her arm with a flourish, so it floated to the bed in front of me.

“One new dress, milady... oh, and a hot bath awaits in the other room, so hurry before it cools, King’s orders.”

I raised a brow at this.

“The King’s orders?”

“He is waiting for you,” she informed me, and I couldn’t help the flutter this caused, one that was half filled with anxiety and the other half... well, it wasn’t hard to guess. Not when this was Jared we were talking about. And despite the circumstances that surrounded that kiss last night, it was still hot as all of Hell combined. Hence why this part won over the rest and had me grinning when I threw back the covers.

“A bath sounds heavenly.”

“Ha, and in a place like this, then that feeling is rare indeed... well, unless you are in the master’s bed of course... oh Gods no, don’t look at me like that!” she added in horror when I shot her a panicked look, seeing as it was almost as if she just implied she’d experienced this first hand.

“I merely speak from one of assumption not one of knowledge because, well, I have eyes, even if those eyes tend more to seek out his brother.” I had been halfway to the door when she said this, making me gasp,

“You have a crush on Orthrus?!”

“I do not know what it means to have a crush, but I can guess seeing as I would like for him to crush me into a bed with his weight above me,” she said with a wink.

“Oh... OH,” I said as suddenly a big piece of the Marcus, Smidge puzzle slot into place.

“Erm... can I ask...”

She waved a hand at me and said,

“Ask away, for I am an open book.”

“Have you and Orth ever... you know?” I rolled my hand at this, making her grin.

“Taken a turn at Bushy Park?” she asked and then burst out laughing when she saw the confusion on my face.

“I take it you have not heard this term before?” I shook my head, telling her I had not and prompting her to elaborate.

“Bushy Park in London, is a common place to meet up with prostitutes or even secret lovers.” She wagged her brows making me giggle.

“Well, I doubt these meet ups are to play checkers, so if it means sex, then yes, have you and Orthrus ever taken a turn at Bushy Park?”

“Unfortunately, not. Although believe me, it is not through lack of trying on my part. No, the big idiot has a preference for humans... no offence,” she told me with a clear sag of her shoulders.

“None taken as, yeah, he’s an idiot if he can’t see what an awesome girl you are.” At this she perked up, those hazel eyes with flecks of amber glittering with gratitude.

“Awesome, um... I like that.”

“But just so you know, I do know a guy that would fall head over heels for you, if ever you are interested in a guy in make-up and has bells in his hair,” I said, smirking at the sight of her grin.

“Well, he was handsome, and quite charming but is a shame then that he is due to be picked up by the King’s men and whisked off to face the gravity of his crimes.” At this I gasped and turned to face her in total horror.

“No! Oh no! He wouldn’t... *would he?*” My mind quickly spiraled into panic.

“Jared sent for the King’s brother this morning, the messenger should have caught up to him by now as he left yesterday with his new betrothed in tow, why?” She must have been talking about Ari. Jesus, it looked like Jared wasn’t the only one who worked fast. I looked around in panic and tried to figure out what I could do.

“Where is Jared now?”

“Like I said, he is waiting for you.” I released a sigh and tried to act as calm as I possibly could. Because I had no choice with what I would have to do next, but first thing was first.

“Oh, okay, well I best get ready quickly then,” I said, hoping she would get the hint, which thankfully she did. Although the moment she said,

“I will let you bathe and wait for you outside ready to escort you to him.” I nodded and went through the motions as she showed me to the room next door that was used as a sort of bathroom / dressing room. Even though I had indeed found a place to relieve myself behind the screen in my room like I had hoped.

Once there, I relieved myself on a toilet, which was blessedly more like a throne with a lid that revealed a removable porcelain bowl beneath. Nice, I thought with a grimace, feeling sorry for the poor bastard whose job it was to get rid of it. Although it was nice to not have to squat behind a bush or into a bedpan that had been behind the screen and all I’d had in the tent.

At the very least, that too had been behind a screen but when it had been time to use it, I had made Marcus get lost because there was no way I was going to go potty with an

audience. Especially not one with as good a hearing as Marcus.

But seeing as this was the closest thing I had come across that even resembled a toilet from home... I was just glad I was sitting once again. Then once that business was done, I had the quickest bath in history, annoyed that with the opportunity to have my first one in what felt like forever, I didn't have the time to enjoy it. No, instead I grabbed the bar of soap and scrubbed at my arms, having no choice but to use it on my hair too. Damn but when was shampoo and conditioner going to be invented?

Well, it wasn't like I had the time to do much of either, as I dunked my head and tried my damndest to get the suds out of my curls. Then I got out and dried myself the best I could with the linen sheets, making me quickly add towels to the list of shit I couldn't wait to get back to. Oh, and a toothbrush, as rubbing the twig shit onto my teeth wasn't a joyous occasion by any stretch of the imagination.

"Man, I miss my little bathroom," I muttered as I tried to twist my body into my dress, getting it stuck more than once on my damp skin. It was a stunning emerald-green satin, that had darker swirls of vines and leaves around the edges. It was also one I would have been more enamored with had it been easier to get on!

"And also make that any clothes that don't feel like they are trying to constrict me to death!" I complained aloud before yanking with my arms behind my back, trying my best to tie the laces.

"Fucking things!" I hissed, feeling like a damn contortionist! Then when I was assured it wouldn't at the very least let a boob spring free, I raced out the door finding Smidge lounging on a plush ivory-colored chaise lounge reading a book. Her look said it all.

"Erm, you know you have more time, should you... erh... need it." Well, that was about as subtle as a heart attack. I smoothed my hair back, feeling the curls already start to dry

and spring forward from the ribbon I had tried to tie around the mass. And hair ties... definitely miss hair ties!

“Um... nope, I’m all done,” I said a little too enthusiastically to be natural.

“Oh... alright, follow me,” she said, leading the way to where I could only hope was not in the opposite direction to where I needed to go. I had to say, as we walked through Jared’s home, I noted that it must have definitely seen its fair share of upgrades over the years, as this looked at its most basic form. Most of it consisted of bare rock tunnels of grey stone with glass lanterns hanging from arched iron arms attached to the walls. It awarded you enough light to see, but it did nothing to ward off the chill or damp, earthy smell.

But as we passed a few doors and open arches, an idea came to me.

“Smidge, where are we going? Please tell me it’s not to the dungeons.” I purposely finished this by rubbing my bear arms and faking the fear I was hoping would work in getting her to tell me all I needed to know.

“Oh, don’t worry, we are just headed to Jared’s private chambers that are up ahead and access to the dungeon is back that way through those doors at the end, so no need for unease. I doubt that Jared would want you anywhere near there.” I looked right and left as we had just entered this new tunnel through one of the open arches which was positioned in the middle. And like Smidge had said, there was a door at each end with another open arch further down that I assumed led straight to the club. Like I said, there must have been many changes over the years that all my weeks living at the club, meant nothing. It was all so different.

“Phew, that’s a relief!” I said, trying to not to overdo this little act of mine. But then the closer we got to Jared’s door, I knew it was now or never. It was the time to put my mad plan into action.

“Oh God... Smidge!” I said her name, making her stop as I grasped her arm and look concerned.

“I have to go back,” I told her quickly.

“But why, we are nearly...”

“I think I just got my period,” I told her, making her frown in question.

“Your what... oh wait, you mean your monthly bleed?”

“Yes, yes, that... shit...I have nothing with me and...” I said, purposely becoming more panicked.

“Don’t worry, I will get you what you need, you go back... wait, do you remember the way?” I nodded quickly, not caring if I did or not because I didn’t ever intend to go back to my room.

“Yeah, I remember... oh dear, I have to go,” I said, holding my skirt at the front of me, as if this would help in making things more believable. Of course, I felt bad for lying to her, but this was life and death for my friend, so what else could I do? Christ, but I may not even be able to *do anything*, I just knew I had to try. *I had to*.

“Go, go, I will meet you back in your room.” I grabbed her hand and said,

“Thank you, my friend.” She looked slightly taken aback by the title of friend but nodded all the same. I just wished I could have added a sorry along with that.

I made my way back the way I came and watched as she went through the door at the end, most likely to let Jared know first that I was going to be delayed. Well, if he was like most men, then he would hear the word ‘monthly’ and ‘bleed’ and want to stay well clear of what that entailed. After all, some things never changed.

I turned a corner and waited until I heard the sound of a door closing before chancing a look to see if it was clear. Then I picked up my skirts and ran to the door she told me would lead to the dungeons. I was actually surprised it wasn’t guarded, considering where it led to. Perhaps the hard part was still to come?

Of course, it was! I mean it wasn't as if I even had much of a plan to begin with. I was just focused on getting down there despite having no clue what I would do once I was.

Well, I would have to face that when I came to it, because one thing at a time, starting with this heavy ass looking door. One that even more surprisingly was...

UNLOCKED.

SOULFUL REFLECTIONS



“Damn it! Which fucking way this time?!” I snarled at the next junction, knowing that by the time I actually found my friend I would be too late. That was if I ever made my way out of this damn labyrinth! I swear it was built this way to send people into madness. I was also now wondering if the reason there were no guards was because if a prisoner actually did manage to escape, then they would be like rats in a maze. So why should they care if their escaped prisoners died of starvation while lost down here.

Because ever since opening that door, it had just been one tunnel after the next. As if there had been a hundred ways of getting lost and only one that led to the prison... or for most, only one that led the way out of it.

Fuck! But I don't know how long it had been, but it had felt like hours! I was just thankful that I wasn't trying to attempt this in the dark, because at least there were torches for me to light along the way. I used a flaming torch I had pulled from the hook outside of the unlocked door the second I opened it to find an endless dark void staring back at me. So, I had lit my way, thankful at least to find these torches were the only features this place held. There were no markings, nothing to help distinguish between one tunnel and the next.

At one point I gave up, realizing that I wasn't going to be any help to Marcus if I died down here. So, I turned around ready to follow my trail of torches back when I realized that at every junction, the flames had extinguished. As if their

purpose was to only hold enough light for a few minutes at a time.

Which meant that any hope I'd had of trying to follow my flaming breadcrumbs back went up in smoke... *literally*.

“Oh shit, now I'm in trouble,” I muttered, trying to use my own voice as a way to comfort myself. But that would only last so long, as I knew I was now up shit creek without a paddle or, more importantly, without a damn map!

It also meant that I had no choice but to keep walking, lighting torches as I went and hoping they stayed on long enough to get me to the end of this new nightmare. It reminded me of when I had been trying to make my way out of the Hellfire caves. Only this was a whole other level!

Shit, but I would take those caves over these ones any day. At least that came with a bloody map! It also came with markings and ways of letting you know that you had at least been a certain way before. But as for this... all these walls looked identical to the rest. Not a single part could stand out or be used as any kind of point of reference. I felt as if I had walked miles, trapped in this rock hedge maze with not even the sunlight to guide me. Or at the very least to let me know how long I had been trapped down here!

I sat down long enough to catch my breath until the torches started going out one by one, making it look as if a wall of darkness was chasing me. It freaked me out enough to get up and start running with my torch, one that I knew would only burn for so long.

I felt doomed as much as I did foolish. The heavy weight of hopelessness and self-pity dragging me under. As now I had damned us both to death and all for what...? With nothing but a silly hope and a prayer that I could have helped him in some way.

I think I endured every type of emotion, for if ever there had been a montage moment in my life, then it would currently have shown a medley of rage, despair, and defeatism. There would have been me banging on the stone walls, screaming at them in frustration and rage. There would have

been me calling out for help, the sound tunneling through the darkness. And lastly, there would have been me slumping down to the floor in a miserable heap, begging for someone to come find me.

And yet, through it all, I knew I couldn't stop. I knew that I couldn't simply give up and wait. Because no one was coming for me down here. Not to this desolate place built solely to punish those that ran from the King that owned them. A thought that, admittedly, made me want to give up on more than one occasion. But finally, after what felt like an eternity, the glow of my fire finally gifted me with more than just an infinity of rock walls.

The firelight expanded outwards further than what my eyes were used to seeing, causing me to blink at the large, cavernous space around me.

"Holy shit," I muttered, my voice feeling raw and sounding gravelly from all the screaming for help I had done previously. I spun around looking at the vast, circular room that must have been a serious fete to carve out from the rock. I wondered what this space could be or, more than anything else, why was it here?

I thought it could be an atrium of sorts, a place that would lead you from one room to another. But the only door was the one I had just walked through. It was another devastating blow, just like it was with every turn I had taken only to find another endless tunnel in front of me. Because all this large room offered was another blow and strengthening the realization that I am as lost as ever. That I have failed not only myself, but in my task of saving my friend.

I finally slumped down in the center of the room, looking up to the domed ceiling above as I swallowed down the sob of desolation that wanted to escape. The shadows from my fallen torch danced on the long, jagged stalactites that clung to the rock above, like fossilized tears that wouldn't ever fall. No, they would only grow, and I wondered how many years it would take for them to reach my skeleton after my soul had long left my body. Like Demonic fingers reaching for me, waiting to take what was left of my crumbling bones.

Unless they were trying to reach something else?

Now where that thought had come from, I didn't know. But the second it entered my mind, it was as if this became a trigger of some kind. Because suddenly the torches I didn't know had been there hiding in the shadows, suddenly flared to life. One by one, they erupted into flames, making me startle enough to gasp. My eyes followed each one all the way around the room and the second the last one ignited, it showed me far more than what I had merely thought to be a dark stone floor.

"Oh Gods!" I shrieked as the floor began to move. I quickly scrambled to my feet, looking down and questioning what it was lurking down there in the shadows beneath me. The surface I stood on looked like it was made from thick, black glass, and now I was trying to stare past my reflection looking back at me. The image of a red headed girl in a green dress with nothing but dread growing in her eyes.

I didn't dare move, fearing that suddenly the glass would crack, and I would be plunged into the inky depths that my presence here had obviously disturbed. In fact, the moment something started to rise up towards me, I could no longer resist the urge to look above me. Half expecting to see shadows swirling there like phantoms trying to reach me. But when there was nothing, the horrifying realization hit me. This wasn't their reflection I was seeing, as they weren't above me...

They were beneath me.

They were beneath this hard, icy crust I stood upon, and the longer I looked, the more the eerie shadows started to come into view. Haunting figures that each looked like deathly ghosts all started to rise, now swimming to the surface. Each of them with gnarled hands of twisted bone that looked so old, they were barely more than just a memory. One fading through time and a mere flicker of the person they used to be. At first it started with one set reaching up to me, then another pair appeared, until I soon found myself spinning around in panic as they all started to rise as one, hundreds of them now reaching up for me like a single entity.

“Ah!” I cried out as I took a step back and heard the first sound of ice cracking. It first started off as a whirling sound beneath the surface. Like a tension wire was being hit over and over again, as it echoed in the room and bounced off the rock. As I moved another foot, then came the deep crunch, groaning like it was trying to fight the break and becoming slowly deformed.

It chilled my bones as if that same icy top was rising up through my legs and trying to take possession of my body. I knew the dead souls wanted me. I could practically hear them calling out to who they knew would become their next victim.

“No, no, no, no...” My panicked voice was all the response they received as the sound of more cracking was echoing louder now, making me wonder how long it would be before my scream joined it. Because I couldn’t move. I was trapped, knowing that any sudden movements and I would only be joining them quicker. But then those gnarled hands soon came with faces! Hideous faces with hallowed cheek bones, empty eye sockets, hanging jaw bones still filled with teeth. Pieces of flesh that looked more like torn paper, with near translucent skin floating in the water like flat fish feeding from whatever soul was left on the corpse.

This time when I screamed, it was Jared’s name I called for,

“JARED, HELP ME!” But even just calling his name was too much as my weight shifted, causing more cracks to appear. They immediately branched out around me like I was the center of all destruction. A misshapen spider’s web and I was the fly caught in their trap!

But just when I thought this was the end, I heard my name being called, making me wonder if in my desperation, my brain hadn’t just manifested it. Like a memory I wanted to cling to and die with the sound of his voice being the last sound I heard.

“ELLA!”

Louder this time, and I could no longer deny the truth as hope bloomed into life. It was a sound that soon brought with

it the glorious sight of Jared as he ran through the doorway ahead of me. He then skidded to a halt the second he saw me, pain and worry etched across his features.

“*Don’t move,*” he warned and, well, it wasn’t like he needed to because I could tell what would happen the moment I did. But his presence also added something new to my situation and with it the replacement of rescuer to quickly becoming the cause. I knew that when the trapped souls beneath me started lashing out at the surface. As if now they could sense my savior was here to rescue me and they want to keep me for themselves.

I looked up with frightened eyes and quickly told him,

“Jared, I’m sorry...” He started to shake his head, telling me,

“That can wait... just hold still and let me get you out of this,” he said, making me release a shaky breath, which was somewhere in between relief and despair.

But the second he took his first step towards me, my breath was stolen as I heard the biggest crack of all. This made me look down to see all the souls now hammering their fists against the barrier and just as the floor beneath me started to give, I look up to my HellBeast.

“Jared, I lov... Ahhhh!” My admission and the very last thing I had wanted him to know and hear from my lips ended on a desperate cry.

And the last thing I heard from his was him screaming my name,

“ELLA!”

My name cried out in desperation before I...

FELL into the Well of the Damned.

BEAUTIFUL SURRENDER



My scream of terror was stolen the moment I was plunged under the water and I could literally see what looked like something being sucked out of me by a passing soul. Meaning I was powerless as the bubble rose above me before one of the souls swallowed it. As if the capsule of my breath held a piece of me and it was quickly stolen before my panicked eyes. A petrified gaze that was helpless to do anything else but watch as they circled me above, like sharks waiting to see who would strike at me first.

Of course, I tried to swim to the surface but soon realized this was impossible because it wasn't like swimming in water at all. It was more like drowning in shadows. Which was why I didn't need to question why the souls hadn't started to try and pull me down. After all, why would they if all they needed to do was wait for it to happen on its own?

But even as I held what little breath I had left, I could still see the hole I had made above me, one now getting smaller and smaller. I even found myself wondering why they hadn't yet reached for me. Why were they just circling me as I floated slowly from the surface?

For some reason, I knew that they wanted to come for me. I could feel it. But then I looked to the one that had stolen my breath, only to see that others had backed away from it. And the reason looked obvious, as the soul was now writhing in pain, as if... *dying?*

But was that even possible? Weren't these poor lost souls already dead? This question seemed to answer itself when the ghostly thief suddenly opened its mouth as if screaming silently before a deadly stillness came over it.

I then watched in shock as it was suddenly dragged down at speed, passing me on the way, giving me a glimpse of what the death of a soul looked like. That once ghostly figure now peeling away like ash taken by the wind.

It didn't make sense but whatever it was it made the others fear me, and they backed away as if I were the devil that put them here. I tried to move my arms above me, but they seemed caught, and I looked down, half expecting at least the ones below me to have me in their clutches. But there was nothing but swirls of black water writhing like too many fish in a net. As if whatever it was down there had started to take on a form of its own. A malevolent entity that was trying to keep me down here. It wanted me to drown... it wanted to add me to its collection. Which was when I also realized that the water wasn't just the warden of this prison, it was also the judge as well as the executioner.

That's when I started to hear all the ghostly voices, as if speaking directly in my mind, connecting with the souls that wanted me to join them.

'Trapped down here...'

'He led the way...'

'Save our souls...'

'Join us, for you are strong...'

But then I heard one of many, pinpointing that singular voice and hopping on to it like a lifeline...

'Master comes to claim her back, we must be quick... touch her or lose our chance...'

It was a command given to all others, and suddenly they all swam as one, coming at me like a wave of ghosts. It was as if it was now or never, and they had no other choice but to brave the consequences. Which meant the second they all made contact, I lost the very last of my air. I screamed up at

the hole, watching as my precious life source escaped above me in bubbles I was trying desperately to reach out to. The touch of the others at least freed one arm, and I fought with everything in me to reach my salvation.

But then a shadow appeared from above before suddenly crashing through the calm above me, disturbing the water. Something was reaching for me, just as all the hands started to clamp onto me harder, dragging me down like chains weighing me to the bottom. I looked to each hand as my lungs burned, failing to force my natural instincts into submission. Meaning my mouth opened on its own accord and sequentially, I dragged in water. Something I knew was foolish as it would most definitely signify my end.

But then as something more solid grabbed my outstretched hand, I looked up into a pair of glowing eyes of Hell's fire just as the darkness was trying to take over my mind. I wondered if my panicked ones looked back at him in return, moments before...

I Died.

“Come on, damn it!” I found it strange that this would be the first thing I heard as death met me. That frustrated sound that seemed to be coming from directly above me. It was full of rage and furious determination.

Did it not want me here?

“No! I will not allow this!” I heard the next growl of words spoken like a vow, before I felt something happening. The only way I could describe it was like being zapped with a live wire, causing my soul to all at once go rushing back inside of me and, with it, my body came alive once more.

I could feel the burning in my lungs, as if the water that filled them was being sucked back up through my windpipe making me choke. I suddenly gasped for air, opening my eyes in time to see Jared spitting water out to the side as I tried to breathe.

“Ella!” Jared shouted my name the second he realized there was life back inside of me. He lifted my torso up in his

arms so I was forced to sit up. He turned my head to the side as more water spluttered out of my lips, which prompted him to start patting my back gently.

“That’s it, get it all up.” I suddenly had the same memory of him doing this, only instead of near drowning, it had been a self-induced incident. One caused by ingesting copious amounts of gin.

He then started to rub comforting circles on my back as I clung to his forearm positioned at my chest to stop me from toppling forward.

“*I...I...*” I tried to talk but my voice sounded stripped bare of everything but the barest of whispers.

“Don’t speak, just concentrate all your energy on breathing for me... that’s it, small, easy breaths,” he commanded softly, making me do as he asked. That was until I could stand it no longer and I pulled back enough so I was looking up into his concerned gaze. His whole body was wet like mine was, with droplets still clinging on to his features as his wet hair met skin.

I raised my hand to his cheek, his jaw working beneath my palm at the intimate touch.

“*Y-y-y-you... saved... me,*” I stammered, testing my voice and barely finding it recognizable. At this his gaze softened after showing the first undertones of shock. Then he lowered his forehead to mine and whispered fervently,

“I will always save you, my queen.”

I sucked in a quick breath that was swiftly stolen as he crushed his lips to mine, holding me captive to his kiss in the most blissfully brutal way.

Which meant this time when the air fled my lips it was done so in...

Beautiful surrender.

“*I thought I had lost you,*” he whispered once he found me struggling to breathe, no doubt knowing my lungs weren’t yet up to the task of kissing.

“I’m sorry, I was so stupid, I was just trying to save my friend,” I told him in a rush of words. He released a heavy sigh and told me softly,

“I know.”

“You’re not angry?” At this he pulled back enough to raise a brow at me, before informing me,

“Oh, trust me, little one, I am furious.”

“But then why...” I never got to finish.

“...Do I comfort the woman I care for after such a traumatic event? Because like I said, I am not the heartless bastard you believe I am.” I winced at this.

“I don’t think you’re heartless... pig headed and stubborn, yes, you have that in spades.” At this he raised that sexy scarred brow again before I grinned at him, to show him that I was teasing him this time.

“But then you’re not exactly the only one who has tenacious tendencies and, well, misguided, foolish notions of saving the day,” I added, making him scoff before he shifted away from me. But just before he could stand, I grabbed his arm.

“Thank you, Jared... thank you, for saving me.”

“And as I told you, I will always save you... even when it is from yourself,” he added after he stood, now towering above me. I reached out my hand for him to pull me to standing but he reached down and scooped me up, with his arm around my back and one under my legs.

“I’m sure I can... *walk*.” I let this sentence trail off to a whispered word when he scowled down at me enough for me to think twice about protesting further. I also couldn’t help but look back over the place I had been plunged into, shocked to see that it now looked as it did before I had ever stepped foot onto it.

“*It’s not broken*,” I uttered in shock and mostly to myself. However, Jared didn’t miss it, as he soon surprised me further when offer way of explanation,

“I resealed it.”

“What is this place?”

I heard him sigh as we walked from the Hellish room and back into the tunnels.

“You stumbled across the Well of the Damned.”

I had heard of that name before, even before I was dragged down into it. It was as if the power of the room had wanted me to know where I had trespassed into.

“The Well of the Damned?” I asked, seeing as he was in a forthcoming mood.

“It is the reason this place exists, as here, beneath my club lies a thin veil between your realm and mine.”

“That’s why they called you their Master?” He glanced down at me at that and looked truly shocked.

“They spoke to you?” I nodded, wondering if they didn’t do that with everyone they ensnared. Not that I gathered most people survived long enough to tell of their tale. Not when they were forced to become one of the next Damned.

“Interesting,” he mused when I was deep in thought.

“Well, I don’t know about interesting, more like terrifying,” I corrected with a barely contained shudder.

“Yes, I can imagine it was. No doubt it is for even my own kind as their soul is forced from their vessel.”

I freely shivered in his hold this time, causing him to tighten his arms and pull me closer to his chest. I also couldn’t help but draw comfort from it, finally feeling safe for the first time since foolishly coming down here.

“Well, I hope you know your way out of here because I don’t fancy becoming soul food again.”

“You never should have been down here in the first place! Really, girl, what were you thinking!?” At this I frowned, hating his dark tone aimed at me, despite it being more than warranted considering where he had found me.

“Hey, firstly I have a name and it certainly isn’t girl, and secondly, I was trying to save my friend, so excuse me for not knowing you had a labyrinth of death hidden under your club!” I snapped, making him growl down at me and, without thinking, I hit a hand to his chest and said,

“And you can stop that right now. It doesn’t intimidate me anymore!”

“Pity,” he hummed darkly, making me scowl and, in turn, he explained,

“I will no doubt miss it as being an effective way at getting you to do as you are told.” I actually growled at this.

“I am not your puppet, Jared, nor one of your subjects ready to bow at your feet!” At this I heard the frustrated sigh before he admitted,

“I never wanted or expected that of you, I merely mean that you are in my world now and if keeping you safe takes a firmer hand on my part, then so be it.” I swear my mouth actually dropped open at this!

“And what is that supposed to mean... firm hand?”

“It means, I am regretting my decision to trust you and free you from my chains!” he snapped in return, and with it my ability to stop the argument from bursting free.

“I am not your damn pet!”

“No, if you were, then I would not have had to jump into the Well and save your damn soul from being taken!” he shouted, reminding me once more how foolish I had been, using it as a weapon against me.

“Excuse me, did you just damn my soul?!” I snapped, making him groan,

“Do not twist my words, woman!”

“I don’t need to. You are doing a pretty good job of it yourself! Now let me down,” I said as I started squirming in his hold.

“What? So you can run off and get yourself lost again...? No, I think not!”

“I am not an idiot, of course I am not going to go running off again,” I replied with a sneer.

“Then I see no reason to let you go,” he replied simply, and it was infuriating.

“Because it’s freakin’ weird arguing while you’re carrying me, that’s why!” I pointed out, poking his chest and causing him to look down and watch me.

“I do not know of this *freakin’* you speak of but I can guess and, trust me, there is nothing more foolishly strange than what has just occurred, meaning the fault lies with you and therefore you will just have to get used to bearing the consequences to such, woman!”

“Stop calling me that!” I shouted, now squirming to the point he had no other option than to dump me on the ground, making me land with a humph.

“Impossible woman!” he growled in frustration and at this I snapped, now scrambling quickly to my feet and nearly tripping in the dripping wet layers of far too much material.

“Fucking thing! Argh!” I muttered down at myself as I righted my skirts and damn him for the smirk I found playing at his lips as he watched me. Again, this did nothing to cool my anger, which was why I started marching towards him with that pointy finger that seemed to have a mind of its own.

“Go ahead and call me woman again, HellBeast, and I swear to Christ, you will regret it!” I shouted the empty threat up at him, making him grin mischievously down at me. Then he lowered his face closer to mine to allow for our difference in height. Then when he was mere inches from my own, he asked with a cocky self-assurance that was maddening,

“What will you do... *woman?*”

At this I couldn’t help both reactions and each as crazy as the last as I first reared back and slapped him so hard, his face whipped to the side. But then before he had chance to react to

this abuse, I suddenly grabbed his face, framing it with both hands. Then I forced it back to face me so as I could kiss him.

Which meant his growl began and ended as something I could taste, as I slipped my tongue inside and started to duel with his own, fighting for my own dominance. Then as I felt those large fists curl in the material of my dress near my ass, I placed my hands at his shoulders at the same time lifting my leg. And like a fucking lady, I climbed my way up him, totally unashamed as I made my claim on him apparent.

“Fuck me, woman!” He pulled back enough to growl.

“Don’t call me woman, HellBeast!” I snapped, before pulling his lips back to mine and, this time, using a fisted hand on his wet hair at the base of his neck to keep my control. The satisfied grin I could feel on his lips was one I couldn’t ignore because it made that warmth spread to my core. Then he let me push him against the wall with the one foot I still had on the ground. Lust slammed into me so hard, I felt nearly winded by it.

“Gods!” he hissed as I bit his lip, feeling the need to draw blood and marveling at the first taste of his essence. Damn, but what the hell was he turning me into, I just didn’t know. But one thing I did know, and that was how much I wanted him!

Wanted him with every fiber in my being. Every ounce of soul I had, despite it nearly being stolen from me.

“Ella, you need to stop... or... damn it... have mercy on me, woman!” he said, trying to put distance between us and peeling my arms from around his neck. But when my other foot hit the floor, I didn’t do as he asked. No, instead I lowered myself before him, my knees hitting the floor and getting some sick sense of satisfaction when the hard ground bit into my knees. He looked down at me as if he was completely in shock. Sufficient enough for me to distract him so I could undo his breeches from their side buttons and free him.

“What are you...” I paused long enough to look up at him, eyes full of sexual intent before telling him,

“I told you not to call me woman, HellBeast.” My voice was thick and husky with desire and the power coursing through me at being the one to render him dumb stuck. But before he could say anything more or protest, I freed his length from the material and took him into my mouth, making him hiss a curse this time,

“Fuck!”

I grinned around his cock, letting him feel the conquering satisfaction for himself. Because this man was mine and I didn't give a shit what year it was! And I would prove it to him as I swallowed him down in earnest, using my tongue to drive him wild. I kept it flat on the underside and gagged on his impressive length. I then alternated between licking long, leisurely swipes up the full length of him and swirling my tongue on the head, humming whenever I tasted the beads of precum he awarded me with.

The salty drops were lapped up like candy and he groaned in pleasure, causing me to look up to see the large figure of a man lost to my control on him. I focused then on his hands that were kept flat against the stone as if he was forcing himself not to touch me. As if afraid that if he did, I may stop my satisfying assault. However, the second I licked up the length of him once more, doing so in an even slower, more tantalizing way, his fingers curled at the same time claws pushed past his human fingernails. They gouged deep lines in the stone and the sight of such raw power had me near coming undone.

I fucking loved what I was capable of doing to this man, and my efforts were rewarded with every reaction he gave me.

“Fuck, fuck...fuuuuuck!” he moaned the second I started to take even more of him down, trying my best to relax my throat around him, gagging almost instantly when I did. But the second his will broke and his hand shot to the back of my head, I knew what he wanted. So, I held him there for as long as I was able, making him groan even louder.

“Yes! Fuck yes, suck it down, girl!” he snarled, making me do as he wished, and the rush of adrenaline was unlike

anything else I had ever experienced before. It damn near lit up my body and set it aflame. I wanted all of him, so when he warned,

“I am close to spilling my seed, so if you do not...”

“Give me it all!” I stopped long enough to issue this demand before I started sucking his cock with more speed and definitely more suction. Because I knew he was close and I, in turn, was readying myself to swallow every last fucking drop!

“Yes... fuck yes, you want it my queen? Then here it is... swallow it all!” he demanded, now holding the back of my head, so he could tilt it back and feed me his cock.

“Open that pretty mouth wide for me, for I want to watch you take it!” he snarled as he took hold of his cock and pumped it a few times before filling my mouth with spirits of his cum. It spilled down past my lips, there was so much of it. I swallowed it down best I could at the same time the tunnels were awarded with the sound of a HellBeast roaring his release, as he continued to ‘feed his queen’.

I swear there was nothing hotter and I felt the quivering between my legs. One whisper of contact, and I would come right along with him. Hence why I could stand it no longer and reached under my skirts to pleasure myself. Then while I was sucking him back into my mouth, I brought myself to orgasm, only letting him go when I had to call out my own release.

I would have fallen to the ground had he not reached down and quickly lifted me before hitting the floor. Then he spun and pressed me up against the wall with his hands tucked at my armpits like I was nothing but a doll he wanted to ravish.

“Gods, woman, you are insatiable... *and you are fucking mine!*” he snarled before kissing me and tasting himself from my lips that still glistened with his cum spilling from them. His growl vibrated against my mouth, and I opened up to him like I knew I always would.

Yet one thing to freeze my heart was the moment he pulled back long enough to issue the eternal vow...

“AND I AM NEVER FUCKING LETTING you go!”

OWNING THE FATES



This time when we walked back through the tunnels her journey was taken on her own two feet, despite me wishing I had the excuse to carry her. Although after what she just did to me, I had little reason to prove her to be unsteady on her feet. Now if I had given into my impulses and taken her there and then, there would have been more than one reason for her shaky legs.

I would have ensured it.

But I didn't want my first time with her to be on the cold stone floor of my prison. No, I wanted her in my bed, a place of enough comfort that I could keep her there for days without a reason for her to leave other than for basic human needs. I wanted to lock her in that room and rest in the knowledge that she couldn't ever leave me. A fear that now weighed heavily against my soul considering she had fooled Smidge enough to do just that.

I hadn't lied when I told her that I was furious with her. For putting herself in danger like this, it was unacceptable. In fact, the only reason I hadn't burst out of this form in my anger had been because of *sheer, blind terror*. An emotion that had overridden all others the moment I realized she was lost down in my prison.

It had taken far longer to realize that she hadn't just left and stepped out into the mortal world. But that she had been foolish enough to go to the one place she had displayed fear of. Meaning she had played Smidge like a fiddle. And

therefore, it had taken me far too long to realize my mistake of underestimating just how far she would go into in trying to free her friend.

She had risked her life for him.

A realization that slammed into my chest the second I saw where she had been standing. The most dangerous place in Devils and dead center of the Well of the Damned. Mere seconds away from being consumed. I had never felt fear like it. Hence why I knew, in that very moment, I was but a hairsbreadth away from losing her, and the conflict I had held onto in regard to losing my wife had swiftly left me. A single moment of clarity was all that was needed to realize what a fool I had been. Because I knew now, and having the Fates play their part seemed insignificant in light of the truth, one I had denied myself of for far too long.

I had fallen in love with her that day.

Just as I loved her now.

I had been a fool indeed and now was my chance to atone for my sins against her. Or at least that had been the plan, until she opened her mouth and started arguing with me. Gods alive, but she knew how to rattle my Demonic cage more than any other being alive!

But then she had lit a fire in my veins the second she kissed me and I knew I would have been willing to burn in the pits of Hell when she lowered herself to her knees. Because that had been it...

I had come undone.

The talent of her tongue and mouth had me somewhere between murderous and willing to worship at her feet. The worship part an obvious choice and the murderous side solely from the jealous snake injecting venomous thoughts into my mind. The ones that had me asking where she had learnt such a skill. How many lovers had she had before for her to perfect the talent?

Well, I wanted to kill them all! Every fucker that had ever tasted that mouth of hers. Every single soul that had felt the

silkiness of her tongue as it made its way up their cock... Gods, it had been the closest fucking thing I had ever come to experiencing Heaven!

But despite this next step taken in our relationship, I also knew we still had more problems to overcome. For one, I still didn't trust that she was telling me the whole truth. She was still yet to explain how it had been possible for her to even be here without ageing a day!

Yet I knew this was only one of many things she kept from me. And I knew it was something important enough that she continued to risk her life for it. Hence why I was so determined to discover what it was, even if I had to go behind her back to find it.

Of course, I had tried to get it out of the Fool but even after receiving a beating he wouldn't reveal it... no, the fucker just laughed through it all. I didn't know whether to have him committed to some mad house or ask him to join my council, as I couldn't help but admire the strength of the man. His ability to take hit after hit and merely swing back into my fist laughing as he did was... *well, it was impressive.*

He was one hard nut to crack, the skin on my knuckles doing so long before his lips would speak the truth. At the very least, I knew he could maintain the type of loyalty that was rare to find in a being. As he would welcome the pain before welcoming the reprieve that came from spilling one's secrets.

Damn it but I was most definitely warming to the Fool, something greatly helped after I had known the pleasure of having my cock sucked by my Fated. The satisfaction in knowing she was mine and mine alone helped cool the jealousy I had once felt watching the both of them together.

However, this didn't eradicate my problem as the reason she had gotten herself lost to begin with was his fault. She had tried to free him and save him from his fate, one she thought I had sealed by calling for the King's brother back here. She had panicked and acted irrationally, and I could not have that again. I wasn't lying to her when I said I would save her from herself if need be, and if it took chains to do so, then so be it.

Although next time, it would be my own wrist I would chain her to, not my fucking wall!

The overwhelming need I felt to sling her over my shoulder and run back to my chambers was almost too much to repress. In fact, I think the only thing that was keeping me centered enough to function right now was the fact I still had her hand firmly in my own. And of course, the delicious memory of her lips wrapped around my cock certainly helped.

Yet despite the blissful moment, I still didn't feel sated in my desperate need for her. But then again, I knew it was likely I never would. I certainly wouldn't feel centered with my Beast once more, not until I fed her my blood and claimed her fully. Not until after I had first devoured every inch of her, tasted her skin, lapped at her cream and drank down the heavenly elixir that was her blood. Gods, but just remembering the first time, taking it on that bridge, I'd had no idea what effect it would have... *for both of us*. The first taste of her had been like nothing I had ever felt before. How would I save myself from becoming addicted?

At the very least, I knew I wouldn't be in fear of draining her dry, not after I had felt the first wave of her body screaming out it'd had enough. The fear of the Gods it had sent through me was enough of a lesson learnt, and not one I would ever need to repeat. I still felt like a bastard over the whole thing. In truth, I felt like a bastard over a lot of things when it came to her. I knew I had handled things wrongly. Of course, had I had her cooperation from the start, then things between us would have gone a lot smoother. Perhaps not from the beginning, as there was nothing that could change the past between us or that fateful night where I had held her life in my hands. But our time since then, things could have been different.

Yet even as I thought it, I knew I couldn't condemn her completely for her reactions or the lashing of her tongue. Nor could I for her reasons to hide her true self from me. No, her reasons for doing so were valid. For she had feared the very reaction I had given her. Only the lie she told herself was the one she believed would mean her death. But she had been

wrong, as I didn't kill her like I had threatened to do if ever I saw her again. No, that I couldn't do, despite having wished I could for a time. And now I understood why.

She was mine.

Just like she had always been destined to be. It was also this fact, along with what she had told me, that had me questioning all I knew of the past. But again, I would be merely exchanging one villain for another and neither one of the two women I had loved was I eager paint that label across. Unconsciously, the thought made me tighten my grip on Ella's hand, the fear of losing her still too fresh in my mind.

I felt her look down at my hand encased around hers but if she thought something of the possessive hold, she didn't comment. Perhaps she could tell that my mind was elsewhere. Just like how I started to ask myself how it was possible she survived so long in the Well without dying? Something that should have happened instantly. In fact, when I had jumped in there to save her, I had heartbrokenly been prepared to emerge with her dead body, void of any soul left. But when I heard her struggling for breath, I knew there was a chance. Which was why I tilted her head back, placed my lips over hers and used my powers to suck the water straight from her lungs.

Thank the Gods, it had worked.

But her incredible survival hadn't been the only puzzling thing I had learnt. As now I was questioning how on earths plane had the souls of the Damned communicated with her? She shouldn't have been able to hear them. Yet not only did it seem as if they were reluctant to touch her, it also seemed as if they were speaking with her like she had some ability to save them... to set them free.

It made no sense.

She was human.

We walked back in silence and the heavy weight was baring down on us both the longer it took for either of us to speak. There was so much still left to say between us, but it seemed as if neither of us wanted to start. I could tell even

without looking at her stunning hair color, that this would be a fiery relationship between us. And in truth, I wasn't used to it. With Lerna, she had been quiet, sweet, and gentle, the type that wouldn't have even slapped away a fly for buzzing too loudly around her. But as for Ella, then Gods, but she was something else! She wasn't afraid to stand up to me and even strike me, as I had no doubt she would a wild beast for growling too loudly if it stood in her way.

She was a force to be reckoned with and fuck me, but if it didn't make me hard in seconds! But after that first relationship and what happened to me only to emerge as a King, then it was easy to see that I wasn't used to people standing up to me. No, only my brother dared to do so and, even then, we fought until blood was drawn. But now I had this little fire spark fighting me at every turn and I couldn't tell if the fact annoyed the living hell out of me or caused me to be more aroused than I ever had been in my life before.

Yet I hadn't lied when I told her it was a shame she didn't fear me, even if just enough to do as she was told. For I knew it would be a constant challenge trying to get her to concede to my way, if only ever to keep herself safe. Because being human made her vulnerable. And frustratingly, most of the trouble she encountered was though her own foolish mistakes made. Hence why the second we entered my bedchambers, I wanted to lock the door and declare her to be my prisoner once again.

But then she had also hit a nerve when shouting at me how she was not one of my subjects, nor was she a puppet to be played with. And in all honesty, she was right, for I didn't want either one. No, I wanted an equal to stand by my side and rule this world together, human or not. Yet I also knew that this was a contradiction in itself considering I was also more than happy to make her my prisoner. Something far worse than all I had been accused of making her.

Damn these fucking feelings warring inside of me!

But no matter what, I would never damn my love for her again.

However, the biggest matter remained... *I still couldn't trust her.* The weight of the coin still on my person was testament to that. Which was when I had an idea, for if she knew how, would she still try and steal from me? Well, there was only one way to test such. Which was why as soon as we walked into my room, I made a point of walking to where I kept the rare coins that were used for far more than just currency. For they were viewed as more a currency of power.

I had a lot of power for a reason, and it had nothing to do with the collection of coins I stored in a small, locked chest I had designed to open via my blood. Something she wouldn't know. But just in case she thought to even try, I would be ready.

Which was why I felt at ease now revealing my secrets by removing the piece of stone that hid an empty cavity behind it. Unless you knew it was there, then it simply looked like another piece of the wall. I dropped the stone onto the side table and grabbed the small chest from inside. Then, whilst keeping my back to her, I brought forth one of my talons. I curled the tip inwards so as I could drag the dangerous edge across my palm, cutting the skin open as easy as shredding paper. I let my blood soak the lid, and by the time it opened, I was healed, and she would be none the wiser. I turned enough for her to see as I deposited the coin inside and closed it before replacing it back in the hole.

Once my bounty was secure once more, I turned to her and didn't have to wait long before she said,

"We have to talk about Marcus." I swear the urge to smirk was strong enough that I at the very least I allowed my lips twitch.

"That we do," I stated in return.

"What is it going to take for you to free him?" she asked, and I had to admire her ability to cut straight through the bullshit and just come out with it. Of course, my answer was easy, yet I found myself wanting to punish her by dragging this conversation out. I knew what I wanted, and it was simple.

But for her, I knew it would be less so, which was why I would enjoy watching her squirm.

“That depends.”

“On what?” Again, I wanted to grin.

“On what you are willing to offer in return,” I replied calmly, feeling the spike in her heartrate, for she knew as well as I did what I wanted. Hence why she started to stumble on her words,

“Wh-what do you want, Jared?”

Fuck but how I loved to hear my name coming from her lips. She had a beautiful voice, and I couldn't decide what made my cock harder. The fiery sparks lashed my way by her tongue or the sweet, unsure endearing way she tried to feign her bravery. She feared me as much as she didn't, and now I understood which I faced. She didn't fear the physical pain a powerful being my size and strength could inflict.

She feared the damage I could do to her heart. I knew this to be a certainty when I could stand the distance between us no longer. I swiftly cut the space between us, feeling once more the life race beneath her flesh. Was that a shiver? Good, then she wasn't immune to me just as everything in my entire being felt attuned to her.

Even when I failed to recognize her, I had already started to fall. I had become addicted to our little playful interactions with each other. The way I looked for any excuse to touch her. How it pained me to see her injured or even grogged as she had been and enough to bring up all she consumed. It all made so much more sense now. Why the depths of my fascination with her had spiraled quickly into a growing obsession. Why it was one that even managed to grow like soul weed around what I once considered as being nothing more than a heart of hatred for her.

But now here I was, marveling at even the slightest of reactions to me. Addicted to her responses to me and giving me comfort with each and every one of them, for then I knew I was not alone in my own towards her.

A craving I decided to partake in, as I mused, *let's try for one more, should we*. A thought that prompted my hand to rise before I ran the backs of my fingers down her flushed cheek, making a delicious glow dust her pale, freckled skin. Fuck, but I didn't know whether I wanted to kiss her there, lick her, or bite down like holding a velvety peach in my hand.

"I think you know what I want," I told her, my voice thick and under the mercy of my lust and desire for her. I welcomed the smirk this time when I watched her delicate throat work harder to swallow, one I wish I had collared with my hand so as to feel the struggle for myself. Gods, but I was a sick bastard to delight in putting her through this struggle. But it was undeniably all the same, as I relished that I wasn't the only one under the spell the Fates had weaved between us.

I wanted her to suffer just like I was.

I wanted her to feel this burning need. The very one she had back in the tunnels. She had seemed desperate for me just as I was for her, and I wouldn't let her back away from it. I wouldn't let her hide her true self, not for even a second. She was mine to discover, to toy with, play with... *she was mine to consume*.

"I...I..." Again, she struggled with her words so instead of relishing too long in the sight of her obvious discomfort, I relieved her of it sooner than I would have liked.

"Your life for his," I told her, making her suck in a quick breath.

"You wish to..."

"Own you...?" I grinned at this before hooking a hand at the back of her neck and pulling her closer to me, so as I could whisper the answer to such over her now quivering lips,

"...YES, I FUCKING DO."

BLOOD FOR BLOOD



“Own me?” I repeated as if I had heard him wrong. This was of course after I had been dominated by the power of his kiss. One that seemed to want to seal the deal before it was even made. It was also one I broke away from as I took a step away from him, trying to shake both his words and his kiss from fogging my mind. Although, I was under no illusion that he hadn’t allowed me to do this, because if he had wanted it any other way, then I would still be in his arms this very second.

He had been strangely quiet during our walk back through the tunnels. Although his grip on my hand had never lost its strength along with the meaning behind it... *he wasn't letting me go again.* Of course, our moment in the tunnels played on my mind, making me wonder if it had played on his?

Did he want more, like I did? Was he afraid of wanting more if he did? I was still the enemy or his prisoner or both. I just didn’t know.

But as for now, well he was spelling it out for me pretty damn clearly.

“A life for a life seems fair enough and there is no other life I want more than yours,” he said and yep, once again, there was no mincing his words or beating around the HellBeast bush.

“To do what with exactly?” I asked, making him smirk again and damn, but if that wasn’t hot enough then the way he raked his heated gaze down my body would have done it! I

wouldn't mind but he hadn't even seen me naked yet, and I was hardly a looker in this damned soggy dress that was still clinging to the water at the bottom of the dirty skirt. My wild hair had unfortunately dried and was now untamable... a little like a HellBeast I knew now looking at me like I was his favorite snack. A thought he read well enough in my anxious gaze.

"You look like I am about to eat you," he commented instead of answering my question.

"You look like you're about to eat me," I countered and this time that enticed a full grin from his lips.

"Oh, sweetheart, when I eat you, it won't be something to fear and when you beg me to stop, it won't be because of pain, but only from too much pleasure." I nearly choked on my saliva at that, but managed to cough once and push past it enough to feign some sass,

"You're very sure of yourself," I said, making him hold back a knowing smirk as he again started to walk towards me, making me fight not to scramble backwards away from him. Yet even with calm, measured steps, his damn chuckle told me he knew I was fooling no one.

"I'm sure of a lot of things, Ella... just like how your fluttering heartbeat does not lie like your lips do." I gulped at that because, well, he certainly had me there.

"I also know that if we are to set a bargain for the freedom of the Fool, then I want assurances in return, starting with a vow that you will not run."

"I won't run." At this he chuckled again and after glancing down at my retreating form, he made another point,

"Forgive me for not being in a rush to believe you."

I stopped moving like this would prove my own point for he was right, how could I ever make that promise?

"No, what I want from you will ensure that you are tied to me." I frowned at this before questioning,

"Tied to you?"

“I want a blood oath.” My frown deepened because that didn’t exactly sound like anything that would be fun for this time traveling novice.

“A blood oath... what’s that? Is it like being blood brothers, when I cut my thumb, you cut your thumb and we rub them together or something?” At this he couldn’t help his reaction as soft laughter escaped him, the amusement also easy to see in his eyes and how they now shone with mirth. He reached for me, cupping the side of my face with his large hand and threading his fingers through the curls by my ear, pushing the strands back.

“No, Ella, that is not what a blood oath is. But what it will ensure is that your life is tethered to mine in a way you will not be able to escape me.” At this I gasped, again taking a step away from him and leaving his hand held suspended there for a moment longer before it curled into a fist.

“So that’s my choice!?” I snapped.

“No, *that’s your only option*, that is if you wish to save your friend from his fate.” I swallowed hard at this, knowing this felt like walking on dangerous ground for a reason.

“But you’re the one choosing his fate.” I tried, knowing that if he wanted, he could just let him go. But he was *choosing not to*.

“No, he did that long before he stepped foot into my domain. He chose his fate, Ella, when he helped steal the King’s Electus and got himself title of the most hunted being in the supernatural world. And you are asking me to go against my King and harbor a known fugitive and put all I have built here at risk.”

“But he...” My excuses for him were quickly cut off.

“Something I am willing to do, but for something far greater to me in return... *you*.” I suppose when he put like that, then yeah, I guess I was asking a lot of him.

“But why not just let him go if that is the case?” I asked, thinking this would be far simpler, without taking the risk to himself.

“I could do this, yes... but if I do, then you should know it will only be a matter of time before he becomes the means to the coin that fills some bounty hunter’s purse.” I released a heavy sigh at this before deflating down onto one of the chairs he had situated at the end of the room signifying a sort of sitting room. Of course, I had been in here before, as this was where he had first brought me when finding me drunk off my ass in a tent. It had also been the place I had danced for him before he realized who I really was. Had he thought back on our short time together and regrated it?

A moot point now, as this was a stupid question to ask myself considering the deal he wanted to make.

“So, you must decide what is it to be, will you honor this bargain with a blood oath, or should I simply hand him over once the King’s brother returns here?” I looked up at him and narrowed my eyes before saying bitterly,

“It looks like I have little choice.”

“If you are intent on saving your friend’s life, then no, you don’t.” Of course, I had no idea what this meant for my future with Jared. As I had no clue if this blood oath would be something strong enough to prevent me from going home or not. I just wished I knew what would happen when I eventually did get home, as the biggest question of all was...

Would time reset itself?

Because if I knew the answer to that, then just trying to leave would have been priority number one. Especially as that way I would know for certain that whatever decision I made now would not affect the future I was so desperately trying to get back to. None of this would have ever happened to Marcus the second I stepped back through that fountain.

But what if it didn’t?

Could I really take the risk, especially when the life of Jared’s best friend was on the line? The answer was no, I couldn’t. Which was why I had no choice but to agree to his terms. So, after rising to my feet, I held out my hand ready to seal my Fate.

“Alright, I will do it.” His eyes widened for a moment, as if he had been preparing himself for more of an argument.

“Excellent,” he replied. The way he said it sounded as if I was way in over my head here, and I had no clue what I had just agreed to.

“But... I want to talk to him first,” I said before he could take my hand and seal the deal. Although when his face hardened, I wasn’t surprised when he answered with a firm,

“No.”

“Why not?” I asked in an unsure tone as to why he would be so set against this.

“I will not have you going down into the dungeons again, it is no place for a lady...”

“But I...” I was just about to argue when he interrupted me again,

“And it is certainly no place for my Queen.”

I jerked back a little by the bold statement.

“And when exactly did I agree to becoming your Queen?”

At this he growled low as he stepped into me and before I had chance to retreat, he wound his arm around my back,

“When you stepped foot back into my life and gifted me a second chance to make things right between us.” Then before I could protest further, he kissed me. Meaning I was soon clinging on to his biceps as the feeling made me light-headed. It was as if his need for me was riding him hard and the more time we spent together the more our restraint was slipping. A control I fought to gain back as I pulled back and panted for air. His fists were curled by the base of my spine in the material that sounded as if he had ripped it in the heat of the moment.

“*Gods but you are addictive, girl...*” He hummed, making me say,

“I told you not to call me...” This ended as he pulled me in for another kiss and, this time, my argument morphed into a

blissful moan, giving him the green light to deepen it when I opened my lips. I felt as if he were trying to brand the taste of me to his senses. Of course, it could have just been an effective way of shutting me up as well. Which was one I think Jared had cottoned on to quite quickly. Something I couldn't complain about too much. Not if the end result meant a heavy dose of lust slamming into me.

“So, you won't let me see him?” I asked after the kiss had ended... well, I say ended, but that didn't mean he stopped touching me. His lips quickly travelled down to my neck where he groaned into my flesh the moment, I asked this.

“I see I am not to hear the end of this, am I?”

“Probably not, no.” He released a large sigh and finally he caved by saying,

“Fine, but I will have him brought to you, for you are to go nowhere near those dungeons ever again... are we understood?” I smiled sweetly and said,

“Understood, my oh mighty beast.” Then I playfully kissed him on the nose making him groan. Despite the fact I could still see him fighting a grin, he complained,

“And now she mocks me.” So, I teased him, whispering behind the back of my hand,

“Who are you talking to... is it the ghost of someone who cares to hear you complain?” At this he looked shocked before a mischievousness crept across his handsome features, causing him to narrow his eyes playfully,

“I will show you someone who cares!” he shouted before putting a shoulder to my belly and hoisting me up over him, making me giggle as he tickled me up the backs of my legs as he strode towards the large four poster bed.

“Put me down, you brute!” I shouted, keeping up our game before I felt my body go whoosh as I was dropped forward on to his bed, making me bounce.

“With pleasure, especially since I remembered so fondly what happened shortly after the last time you called out such things.” Then he leaned over me, holding all his weight above

me with his hands flat either side of my head. He then wagged his brows in jest making me burst out laughing. A sight he seemed momentarily enamored with. He even seemed to have to shake his head as if I had entranced him.

“What?” I braved to ask.

“You are dangerous,” he replied, as if admitting some weakness or fear of his and it instantly put me on edge. But then before he would let me retreat, he took hold of my wrists and lifted my arms above me. He had them pinned in such a way so all his weight wasn’t pressing into them, as he bent his arms, putting his elbows to the bed and bringing his face closer to mine. Then he started to run his nose up my cheek as he whispered,

“A danger to my heart and one... I gladly welcome.”

I closed my eyes and let his words flow over me like a soothing balm to my soul. Then when I forced the tears to stay away, I cleared my throat and told him,

“Yes, well you’re dangerous too, buddy... ahhh!” This ended on a cry of shock, as he took over holding both wrists with one hand so he was free to fist his other hand in my hair. Then he forced my head to the side so he was free to bite down over the claiming mark he had made. I cried out at the zap of pain that only ended up adding to the lust building in my belly and quickly making its way down to my sex. I loved it when he was dominant like this almost as much as I loved it when he was playful. Because, like this, it only added to the sexual high he created, along with his mere presence.

“Mmm... You were saying, pet of mine?” he hummed against my skin after first soothing the sting by licking along the grooves he had made with his teeth. The bite had healed quicker than it would have had I not had any of Jared’s blood in me left over from the future. But it hadn’t healed the scar, leaving it as just a tender reminder of how he intended on keeping me.

“I think if you’re the one biting me then you’re more like the damn Pe... ahh... ah... ah... okay, okay!” I ended this in burst of short shrieks, after he took more of me into his mouth

and continued to apply enough pressure that made my toes curl.

“Now let’s try this again and see if she can’t be tamed... *you were saying, pet of mine?*” I swallowed down hard and fought the urge to insult him or even comment at this point. He rewarded me with a shit eating grin before going back to my abused flesh and praising,

“Ah, there’s my good girl.” Now this pushed me over the edge, and I snapped back,

“Screw you and your good gi... AHHH... *Oh Fuck!*” This ended in me screaming because, this time, he wasn’t messing around.

Now he dove in and bit me, piercing the flesh and drinking me down. The intense pain morphed into unbelievable pleasure almost instantly, making the orgasm build at a startling rate. Which meant that I was soon writhing beneath him, feeling the desire flooding my system until I knew it would soon burst. Each draw of my blood was as if he were sucking my clit into his mouth and assaulting it with his tongue.

Hence why after only a minute or two I was crying out, arching against his hold at my wrists that remained impossibly strong as he kept me pinned to the bed beneath him.

“Yes, oh yes... Ohhh God yes... Coming... Hard... Arhhh!” I screamed loud enough I was surprised the rock above didn’t crack! I panted through the spasms assailing my sex before finally relaxing back to the bed. Now enjoying the euphoric waves washing over me, as though my body were spent.

In reality I had done barely anything at all to help the process, but that didn’t matter as my body felt like it had ridden him for hours. I was exhausted and enjoying my sexual high as Jared removed his fangs and started cleaning me up, clearly not wanting to waste a single drop.

But then Jared must not have got the memo of my new lethargic state, as the next I knew he let go of my wrists and

sat back up on his knees. Then he pulled his shirt up over his head and my mouth went dry at the sight before the urge to drool set in. His muscles were tense and looked strained beneath the skin. His shoulders bulged and met the powerful biceps of someone who looked as if he benched pressed semi-trucks for the circus. Corded arms void of tattoos dropped down to his sides after tossing the shirt to the floor.

And if the very sexy sight of him wasn't enough to snap me out of my drowsiness, then the next words out of his mouth most certainly were...

“Oh, Pet...”

“...I am far from done with you yet!”

THREE WORDS



“**Y**ou devour me with your eyes, little one.” His gravelly voice shook me from my obsession with his chest, making me blush after having been caught out staring at him. The sight was one he chuckled at before reaching for my hand and gripping me at the wrist. Then he pressed the length of his thumb up my palm, applying enough pressure that it automatically sprayed my fingers wide. Fingers that he wanted to feel on his body. I knew that when he lifted my hand to the hard planes of his chest before dragging my fingertips down to the deep groves of his abs.

But that wasn't the only part of him my eyes were fixated on, as my necklace, my carved wolf, still hung from around his neck. I so badly wanted to reach out and touch it, missing the feel of it nestled against my skin. Yet now it seemed to have a new owner and it took everything in me not to ask about it... *like why he had kept it on him all these years.*

“I am yours to touch, Ella,” he told me softly and my eyes broke contact with his body by snapping straight to his heated gaze, a pair of eyes that were glowing more silver than grey. All thoughts of my necklace were lost in sight of his need and the strength of his words.

“Y-y-you're mine?” I asked, having first the need to clear my throat.

“But of course, this bargain of ours is for both sides of the coin.” The moment he said it I couldn't help but look past him to where he had not so secretly stored away the coin I stole.

“Look at me!” he demanded roughly and I did instantly, unable to deny the tone.

“There will be no payment made for your freedom to go home, Ella, so you must decide now, for once I complete my claim on you, there will be no going back.” I swallowed hard at the seriousness in his statement, one that he wasn’t yet finished making.

“The Fool’s life in exchange for an eternal life lived with me.” Well, that wouldn’t have been a difficult decision to make if only I was staring at the future Jared. The one that I was trying desperately to get back to and save. So, I told him,

“You’re my Chosen One.” He looked surprised by this until I lifted my gaze and whispered the truth,

“Who else would I want to spend my life with?” His reaction to this was to growl before passionately taking my lips in a bruising kiss, stealing my breath. Of course, I gave myself to him gladly, feeling our hunger burn hotter with every minute that passed. Because in that moment, I didn’t care which Jared it was above me, I wanted them both. He was the same man, just one tethered to his time period and still in the process of learning his way in this world he ruled in. He had held onto his hate for so long, his bitterness, all I wanted was for him to heal from both. To let it all go and stop with all the blame cast my way. And right now, being locked in his arms, I knew I had finally made it through.

“What are you doing, little one?” he asked on a chuckle when I started trying to twist enough to get to the back of my dress.

“Well, I’m not doing Yoga.”

“Yoga, what is...?” I shook my head and my stupidity bred from my time traveling forgetfulness. Doing so long enough to say,

“Never mind... I am just trying to get my dress off and you know... move things along,” I said, giving him the look that might have included me wagging my brows at him. This therefore caused him to throw his head back and laugh. Jesus

but did he have to be so damn handsome when he was laughing at me. Hence why I huffed and folded my arms across my chest.

“I’m glad you find my attempt at getting naked for you so amusing!” I snapped, making him smirk down at me and suddenly that mischievous glint in his eyes was back.

He rose back to his knees, creating enough space between my body and his crotch that it made me frown. But then he suddenly used this new position of his so he could flip me over, meaning my chest was to the bed. I let out an unattractive ‘humph’ sound, making him chuckle again. Something I would have commented against had he not stolen my breath the second he leaned down close enough to show me what grew from his blackened fingernail.

“Make no mistake, I am as impatient as you are to get you naked,” he hummed over the shell of my ear, making me shiver in an anticipation at both his words and the sight of a long, curled, razor-sharp talon pushing passed his human nail.

“I also find these most helpful in the task,” he added as my eyes grew wide at the sight.

“Hold still for me,” he ordered after he pulled back enough to get to work on slicing through the laces of my dress, although he didn’t just stop there because I felt the tugging all the way past my waist. He wasn’t just cutting the laces, he was slicing through it all. Which meant when he was finally done, he gripped me tight and rolled me back to facing him, awarding me with heated eyes.

“Now we will have nothing between us!” he snapped as he grabbed a fistful of the material at my chest and yanked it so hard, it lifted me off the bed. This was before the material on my back slipped free and I fell back with the dress still in his hold, one he threw to the floor after he had literally ripped it from my body. The brutal action left me naked and near panting. My chest heaved at the look of pure lust on his face as he scanned down the length of me, seeing me naked for the first time.

But then as soon as he reached my legs, my mind clicked back into place, and I squirmed trying to hide from him.

“*Easy.*” He cooed down at me before doing the last thing I ever wanted him to do. He shifted his body so he could now inspect the large scar on my leg, one made from a grueling surgery that left me with enough pins in my bone, my X rays looked like a toy ladder was stuffed up there.

“How did this happen?” he asked in a gentle tone, flinching when I felt his fingertips graze the thick white line that marred my skin.

“I erh... I don’t like to talk about it,” I told him, causing him to sigh deeply.

“Just answer me this... *did someone do this to you?*” His question took on a dangerous tone, making me answer him quickly,

“No... no one was to blame.” He nodded once and looked to have forced himself to relax before shifting back up the bed so as now he could focus on another scar. I felt the tips of his fingers run along my forehead to my newest edition before he asked,

“And this one?”

“Oh, now this one there was someone to blame alright,” I told him, making him narrow his gaze to near murderous, which was why I added quickly,

“Me... I was to blame for this one.” And wasn’t that the truth, as there was no one else putting me at risk by forcing me to drive when exhausted in a snow storm. Another memory that had come back to me the moment I made it here in the past and just one more foolish mistake to add to an ever-growing list. He raised his brow down at me, making his own scar lift with the action.

“And this, is it also one you will not tell me about?” Now it was my turn to sigh, as I knew he felt a little bitter about me not wanting to open up to him just yet. I could tell by the look of disappointment in his eyes or the slight bite to his words.

“Perhaps another day but as a woman naked for the first time in your arms who wishes to please you, then talk of my flaws is not how I want to remember this moment.” At this he frowned before looking down at my body and up once more before telling me,

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and your scars speak to me only of your endurance and strength. So, hear me now when I say that they would never hold enough power to take away from even a single second of your beauty.” At this I felt like crying, the emotions his perfect words invoked settling deep within my soul and staying there for what I knew would be for all time.

Which was why, I raised my hand to his cheek and told him in earnest,

“Thank you, that means a lot to hear you say that.” He nodded once before looking down at my body again, telling me,

“Thank you for the beauty you bring to my bed, for it means everything to me to finally have you in my arms this way.” Gods but this man was trying to kill me with his love, for I didn’t know this Jared was capable of such gentle tenderness in this time period. It was such a contrast to how he had been with me most of the time. Gifting me with only glimpses of it here and there. But now, it was like he had cut himself wide open, allowing me to see every side there was to him, inside and out.

Speaking of sides, there was one that quickly took over all the rest, and that was lust as his heated gaze scanned the length of my body for what felt like the tenth time. Damn but he looked like he was trying to memorize every inch of me, and I was left looking up at him like some helpless doe in sight of a hungry wolf.

I was close to wondering if he would ever touch me, when as if reading the question in my eyes, he reached out, placing his large hand around my throat. It wasn’t done as a threat, his touch was gentle as he held me there, as if fighting with himself and not wanting to scare me but satisfying his own

needs also. This was his compromise. As for his other hand, this was the one that started to travel down the length of my body in an agonizingly slow way that had me near squirming beneath him. I felt the heat bloom from my cheeks, painting my pale skin with a rosy tint as his eyes followed the path his hand made down to my breasts.

The first touch of my nipple and I exhaled a large breath, closing my eyes and arching up to his palm that covered my breast. My nipple was caught between the stretch of his fingers before he leaned down to lick one though the line of flesh that framed it. I sucked in another breath, this time using the air to plead with him.

“Please,” I urged, making him hum in satisfaction.

“Tell me what you want.” The deep roughness of his voice spoke louder than his touch or his words. Because with it I knew what he wanted... *me.*

“You know what I want,” I breathed and, with it, he removed his hand, slipping it beneath his awaiting lips, so he was free to take more of my nipple into his mouth. I cried out at the first nip of his teeth that became a cage around the aching pebble of flesh.

“Ahhmm,” he hummed around it before using his tongue to ease the sting.

“Beautiful, the way your body speaks for you... but alas, I still want your words, little one,” he told me, speaking directly over my heaving breast.

“I fear my words will soon be incoherent against the weapon of your mouth,” I said, making him chuckle before he told me,

“Then let the assault on your senses truly begin, for I look forward to winning the fight,” he said before he flicked my nipple one last time and leaving my breast in favor of his favorite place of war. He shifted down the bed and my anticipation grew when he gripped my legs in his large hands. He then lifted them enough so he could pin them to my belly. This left me wide open and as exposed as I could ever be.

“Don’t move them,” he ordered, sternly enough that I could only nod in my submission. Something he looked more than pleased to see. He started this ‘assault’ of his by swiping the back of his finger up my center, the knuckle skimming between my folds and finally grazing my aching clit. I looked down after first dragging air through my dry lips at the delicate touch.

“Soaked and ready for me... *this pleases me, girl,*” he rumbled, making me reply breathlessly,

“Don’t call me G... oh god!” This ended with a loud sigh of pleasure as he cut off my reprimand by using his thumb to rub my arousal on my clit. An action that made it wet and slick for the delicious friction he was ready to create. I arched my back at the sensation, unable to stop myself from moaning,

“More.”

Again, his reply was a satisfied chuckle causing me to look down at him. My god what a hot fucking sight it was, this large man pinning me wide open with his shoulders and that heated look on his face. As if he was faced with a buffet of his favorite food. Like all his Christmas’s had come at once. As if...

I was his salvation.

Gods alive it was almost too much to witness and had I closed my eyes because of its intensity, then I would have missed the way his burning gaze found mine as he made a sexy show of sucking his thumb into his mouth. Then he was the one to close his eyes as if he hadn’t just found Heaven, but he had tasted it as well.

And now time to drink from its well, I thought as he suddenly moved, and you would have thought him being between my legs was warning enough. Yet I still cried out in shock when he latched onto my clit and sucked it in deep. He swirled his tongue around it before flicking it in such a way I knew I wouldn’t last long. Hence why I found my hand fisted in his hair, holding his face to my sex as I lifted my hips.

“Fuck, woman! You are insatiable!” he snarled, making me reply,

“Shut up and make me come, HellBeast!”

He growled again, and I felt his smirk against my quivering flesh before he did just that. Which meant that thirty seconds later and I jolted with the force of my orgasm. I swear I felt it traveling up from the bottom of my toes and shoot straight to my core like a rocket. I came so hard, I instantly tried to free myself of the intensity of it, by squirming from his hold.

However, my HellBeast was having none of it, snarling,

“And just where do you think you are going!” Then he gripped my hips and dragged me back under him where he wanted me. Then his lips were back, and I was crying out, begging him to let me go,

“No! Please... please I can't... not again... it's too much!”

“I will tell you when you have had enough!” he snapped before sucking me back into his mouth and, this time, using his teeth to roll the sensitive nub between the pressure. It was torture... *sweet, delicious torture*. But then when he started to fuck me with his tongue I swear if he hadn't had a firm hold on me, I would have flown off the damn bed! I came screaming once more, and it rolled from one orgasm right into the next until I was nothing more than I muttering fool. Begging him one second to stop and then the next begging him never to.

I lost count how many times I orgasmed and in my euphoric fog, I felt him lapping at my sex as if trying to drink down every drop of release my body had produced. This was when I became his meal. My body jerked and jolted with every swipe of his tongue on my over stimulated clit, making me finally beg for mercy this time,

“Please... no... more... no... more.” At this he placed a gentle kiss over my quivering soaked lips before shifting his body up the rest of me.

“Kiss me and taste how delicious you are... *how fucking addictive.*” He fisted my hair and forced his kiss upon me, making my cry of surprise an opening for him. This causing me to moan the second I did what he wanted... which was to taste myself from his tongue.

During this kiss, I felt him reach down so he could free himself of his breachers, hearing the fall of material swiftly after his boots hit the floor. And as if this was the only signal I needed, I parted my legs further so I could feel his length slide down my belly as he shifted so as he could line himself up with my dripping core.

“And now, I finally make you mine,” he pulled back long enough to tell me, as his hand guided the wide girth of the head of his cock inside me, telling me,

“I can’t hold back... take a quick breath, do it now!” I did as he asked, one that ended on a cry as he thrust his full length inside me.

“*Gods!*” he hissed before giving me more of his weight and using a hand to stroke back my hair from my forehead where I was beaded with perspiration. He stilled inside of me, giving me time to adjust to his size, making me question how long it had been since I’d had this. Since I’d had all of him. I swear I nearly allowed tears to fall, a sight that must have concerned him, as he took it for other reasons.

“If it is too much I can...” He started to shift away from me, making me quickly grab onto his biceps to stop him.

“No, please... I... I have wanted this for so long... these... they aren’t tears of pain,” I admitted, feeling like I was being cut wide open and being laid bare for all to see. And it didn’t go without merit. His gaze quickly softened to one of tenderness as he leant down to kiss away the first tear to escape.

“Then you honor me, for your sentiments are not alone in their feeling,” he told me before placing his forehead to mine and closing his eyes, sharing this beautiful moment with me. A moment that was only enhanced when he started to move, making me moan with every drag of his cock against the walks

of my sex. Internal muscles that gripped onto his length like they never wanted him to leave.

“*Jared,*” I whispered his name like a prayer, like it had the power to center me in the storm he created between our bodies.

“Gods you are so tight... I fear the strength of my will won’t be enough to hold back... I have waited for so long to be inside you,” he admitted, making me reach up my hand and cup his face before telling him,

“Don’t hold back... *give me everything you possess.*” The response to this whispered plea was answered with a growl and a bruising grip on my waist as he started to move with earnest. Each long drag of his cock was then combined with a deep, brutal thrust, making me cry out and cling on, digging my nails into his arms just so I could hold on and prepare. It felt incredible and I knew I would not last long before I came apart around him.

“*Gods yes! Fucking perfection!*” he growled as he hammered into me and with every second he was seated inside me, I felt my walls quivering around him, gripping him so tight I could feel it building.

“I want your release, girl... I want it in your grip, I want your warm, sweet cunt to mourn the loss of me before I fill you up... you will keep my seed inside you... won’t you, my good girl?” His crude words added to the bite of pain when he fisted my hair, turning my head so as he could utter these dirty thoughts directly in my ear. I didn’t have the power to speak and could only feel myself nodding with what little movement he allowed.

But it wasn’t good enough. Which was why he was quickly demanding harshly,

“Speak it!”

“Y-y-yes,” I panted, making him grin against my ear before slipping lower and just as he knew I was close, he latched onto my claiming mark and once again pierced through the flesh he had healed with his tongue not long ago. I

came screaming his name along with clamping down on his cock, just as he had wanted me to. My walls spasmed around him and this was enough to send him hurdling over the edge with me.

He pulled his fangs from my flesh to roar up at the ceiling. His hands left my body so he could embed them in the covered bed beneath us, shredding the material with the side of his HellBeast that had slipped thought. The thought that I could do that to him, along with the feel of his seed filling me up, only drove my own release to flow seamlessly into the next.

I was near mindless for long moments as I lost myself into the pleasure, nearly close to blacking out because of it. But then as he relaxed back from his own high, he lowered his lips to mine.

Then he crushed my perfect moment with three wrong words spoken...

“I FORGIVE YOU.”

BELLY OF THE BEAST



I froze the second he said this, but he was so deep in his own euphoric state that he missed it. I knew that when he told me,

“Now it is time for you to feed from me as we complete the bond.” I swallowed down my sob and let anger replace the hurt before I told him in a hard voice,

“*No.*”

“Ella?” he spoke my name like he was suddenly questioning who I had just turned into, and he was surprised.

“Get off me,” I demanded in return, making his growl his displeasure. Yet when he didn’t react quick enough, I pushed at him and squirmed enough that he slipped free from my abused sex, making us both moan at the feeling.

“*Calm down!*” he snapped before I managed to slip free of him, breaking my promise to him the second I felt him trickling out of me.

“What is the meaning of this!?” he demanded, twisting his body to face me as I scrabbled for the remains of my dress so I wasn’t standing here naked in front of him. I felt far too vulnerable this way.

“God but could you really be this fucking clueless?!” I shouted, making him growl.

“Careful, girl, for I fear the feeling of your sex caressing my cock will only last so long and therefore allow you only so

much of my patience,” he warned, making me give him a disbelieving look in return.

“Seriously?!”

At this he simply folded his arms, his still erect cock very much looking ready for the next round. Yeah, well good luck with that, buddy, was all I would say! Especially after what he said to me after sex, well I doubt he would be seeing much action after today... not from me anyway!

“I am still waiting for an explanation, Ella,” he demanded, making me grit my teeth.

“Fine, you want it, then here it is... you’re an asshole!” I yelled, making him narrow his eyes.

“Careful, girl.”

“Fuck your careful girl’s! I am so damn sick of this... *I am your King bullshit!*” I ranted, making him get to his feet and, in turn, I started walking away from him.

“But I am your King!” he said in a forceful tone.

“No, *you’re not*. You’re simply playing my judge, jury, and prison warden. And I am nothing more than a past you think you needed to find forgiveness for!” I snapped, making him still.

“So that’s it.”

“If by *it* you mean *you* making *me* feel like shit seconds after one of the best experiences of my life, then yeah, that’s it, Jared!” I snapped, putting emphasis on key words and he at least had the gumption to flinch at that.

“Then it is your own guilt that speaks to you, not that of my forgiveness,” he stated pigheadedly. At this I could no longer keep it in, as I screamed,

“I AM INNOCENT!”

At this he sighed and shook his head before walking over to where his clothes remained on the floor. Then I watched, still panting and clutching the ruined dress to my chest, as he

began to dress before he walked to the door, stopping long enough to turn back to me and say,

“In my world, you are guilty until proven innocent.”

I swallowed down the pain of those words, wondering if he would ever let go of his past and the lies that fueled the bitterness. Which was why I told him,

“And that is why in your world... *you will lose me.*” I watched as he flinched and closed his eyes against the clear intent.

“Then you can go back to the title of prisoner in exchange for Queen. It matters not, Ella, for you are still mine regardless.” I would have screamed at him had this not been the last thing he said before leaving out the door and locking me inside the room.

Meaning once again there was nothing left for me to do but to slump onto the bed and cry. I wanted to ask myself what was the point of it all? Why was I trying so hard to make this version of Jared love me? Why was I trying so hard to prove to him that I wasn't the villain in his story like he thought I was. After all, I had a Jared at home who loved me and knew that I had nothing to do with the death of his wife. Why did I need this one to do the same?

Because no matter what time I found myself in, it was still the same man, and I would fight for his love regardless. But just how far would fighting get me if he wouldn't ever let go of other people's lies told?

I just didn't know anymore.



I DON'T KNOW how long I lay there on the bed we had made love on only to have the perfect moment shattered, but it was enough for Smidge to find me fast asleep curled up in the sheets. The moment I felt a hand gently rock my shoulder, I woke with a start and the first name that left my lips was foolishly his,

“Jared?!” I was met with Smidge’s kind face making me instantly feel guilty for deceiving her.

“Smidge! I am so sorry, I had no choice, you see he is my friend and he...” She started to wave her hand at me before saying,

“I forgive you.” I couldn’t help tense at the word, still feeling it like a lash against an open wound. But of course, she had no clue.

“Besides, I understand. You are loyal to your friend and only wished to help save him... something I heard you did quite successfully,” she said, adding a wink and making me frown in question.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Well Marcus was released and is currently nursing his wounds with Madame Geneva.” At this my mouth dropped open in shock, ignoring the bottle of gin he was drowning himself in.

“He...he released him?” I asked as if needing to hear it once more. At this she grinned and said,

“See, so whatever has your mind gripped in worry, it cannot be that bad, for your friend is free... unless there are other... oh... *oh I see*,” she added after I gave her a look that all girls knew. That heartbroken look that says, it’s about a guy and, yes, it is utterly hopeless.

“That makes sense then.” She mused almost to herself.

“What does?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Why he has been in such a foul mood and already beaten two competitors bloody... *brutal*,” she muttered this last part with a shake of her head as the memory was still fresh in her mind no doubt.

“Was he really that angry at you when finding you trying to get to the prison?” she asked, making me admit,

“No, it was... after.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, sitting down and patting my knee as I was now sitting cross legged up against the wooden headboard, making it creak with every sigh that left my lips. I shook my head before deciding to ask her something instead.

“Smidge, is there any way a person can see another person’s memories?” She scrunched her nose up at that as she clearly thought about it.

“I am not sure. I know many of my kind can read the minds of others and it should be easy for them to do this with a human... no offence.”

“But Jared can’t do this with me?” I already knew this, making her sigh before nodding.

“I suspect it is because you are his Chosen One... Gossip gets around,” she said, adding this last bit when I raised my brow in question.

“Then there is no way for him to discover the truth,” I exhaled, saying this more to myself than for Smidge’s benefit.

“Leave it with me and I will see if there is a way but until then, it’s time to get you dressed.” I looked down at my discarded dress and agreed that, yes, I needed clothes, but I didn’t think we were talking about the same thing. Hence why I asked,

“Why do I feel like you want to dress me up again and then lead me somewhere?”

“Because I do... His royal grumpiness has requested your presence in the club tonight.” My incredulous look said it all.

“Ah, well, if it’s a request then the answer is no,” I said, wrapping the sheet around myself and walking towards the screen that I knew would have a bedpan behind it or, praise the Lord, an actual toilet throne like I’d had next to my room. But then Smidge stopped me by the arm and said,

“Alright, so I might have embellished a little... and think of it as less of a request and more of an order.” I rolled my eyes at this.

“And if I don’t?” I asked, folding my arms over my chest now the sheet was tucked tight above my breasts.

“He also might have added the part about coming in here and taking you out there kicking and screaming if need be,” she said wincing.

“Right... well you can go back and tell him that until he actually gives a shit enough to feed me at some point this century, then he can think twice about me going anywhere!” I snapped, making me feel bad as it wasn’t her fault. Yet her eyes grew wide before groaning,

“Gods, we forgot to feed you! This won’t do... right I will leave this here for you to dress and go and tell him not to expect you soon.”

Or at all, I thought stubbornly, before making my way around the screen and nearly weeping for joy at being able to sit to pee again. I also saw a bowl and some water in a jug so I could wash off... the evidence of our time together. But then I stuck my head from around the side and called her name,

“And Smidge...”

“Yeah?” She paused by the door and looked back at me.

“Thank you, for caring.” She gave me a soft smile and nodded before leaving. This left me to ask myself what was next and how was I going to endure seeing him again?

What was next for my heart and how much more could it take before cracking completely? Well, at the very least, he had done the right thing and released Marcus from the prison. Though I very much doubted that he was free to go off on his merry way. And perhaps that was a blessing, as like Jared said, how long would he last without his help keeping him hidden from the King’s men?

A little time later, a flurry of activity happened, starting with a copper bath being brought into the room, led by Smidge giving orders. Orders that included instructing some Demon that had the power to fill it with a mere thought before leaving the room without saying a word. Another servant brought in two trays of food, and I swear the smell had me near drooling.

Seriously, but when was the last time I'd had a proper meal? I didn't know anymore. This not counting the small offerings that Marcus had brought me when staying in our tent together. Bread and butter being one of my meals. Well, now I was looking at bowls of hot beef stew, buttered rolls, a whole roasted chicken and creamy potatoes. The other tray held a choice of desserts, like the steaming pudding or the dainty custard tarts decorated with frosted sugar berries. Of course, Smidge hadn't even finished explaining what everything was before I was already tucking in, having first finding one of Jared's shirts to wear so I wasn't just waiting around butt naked. Thankfully, they were massive on me, so it looked more like a nightgown.

"Right, I will leave you to eat and bathe before coming back to help get you ready."

"You don't have to do that," I said, making her smirk before pulling playfully on one of my curls.

"What, and miss the opportunity to play with this pretty hair...? Not a chance." Then she winked at me, making me giggle as she left me back to my thoughts, that admittedly were currently more on food than on the night ahead. Although that didn't last, as soon my belly was full, and I was in the bath knowing that if the hot water couldn't help me relax then nothing could. Because I was wound up so tight at just the thought of seeing him again.

It was always push and pull with us when all I was looking for was a constant. I thought back on my life since walking inside that bar in Germany and finding him at my back, wondering if it was like this for all Chosen Ones? Did they all face such a turbulent existence after meeting the one the Fates declared destined for them? Was there always to be some life-or-death quest for them to face or did it ever go smoothly. And what when it was all over... *what then?*

Was there ever to be a normal existence in my future?

"Of course not, Ella, you're dating a HellBeast for fuck sake!" I snapped at myself, letting my fist drop to the water in frustration and causing the water to splash.

“What’s dating?” I shrieked when I noticed Smidge standing there, arms full of material once again.

“Jeez, you scared me,” I told her with that same hand now held against my racing heart.

“What’s dating?” she asked again, ignoring my complaint.

“I guess you would call it courting.”

“Ah,” she replied nodding, before dumping what I assumed was even more dresses on the bed and taking a long length of linen ready to hold out to me.

“I thought you already brought me a dress to wear,” I said nodding to the other one.

“I did but after I realized we needed to teach the HellBeast brute a lesson, then I decided on something better to... *punish him,*” she said behind her hand making me smirk. Although I had to say, I didn’t feel the same confidence as she did. But I didn’t have the heart to discourage her, so I let her help me out of the bath and she soon had me sat in a chair before her.

Meaning an hour later and I once again dressed up in the kind of finery that my modern mind was trying to make sense of. Like half of me still expected to walk out these doors and straight into some kind of period drama. Only this time I half expected to be walking into the middle of some lavish ball, as it was most definitely the most daring outfit yet. With its lower, ruffle edged neckline and the thick heavy corset underneath, it certainly gave my girls some height. In fact, I feared it would only take for me to bend slightly and they would end up making too much of an appearance.

The dress was a stunning ruby-red satin that was edged in a ruffle decoration in the same color. The ruffle design also zigzagged down the side of my breasts and down the sides of my top skirt, leaving the one underneath bare and flourish free. The dress also had half sleeves that ended just past the elbows where red lace flared out around my forearms. Little silk shoes matched and tied with red ribbon just like the tops of my white stockings did.

As for my hair, this had been swept to one side and pinned so as all my curls cascaded down the left side of my face and neck. A few loose curls framed the other side, but my neck still felt too bare at the center making me miss my stolen necklace. There had been so many times asking for it back had been on the tip of my tongue, and I wondered if tonight I would finally get out the words.

A swipe of red lipstick that came from a small tin and a little pink powder at the cheeks gave me just a hint of color, and I was done. Which meant that before long we were walking out the door and I gave Smidge a sideways glance when I saw our escort. Two of Jared's guards that I vaguely remembered being some of the HellBeasts on the Bridge, as well as the ones that had chased us through the club when first escaping. Each one handsome in their own right but neither looked half as friendly as any of those on his council from the future, making me miss Chase and Otto the most.

"Hey, don't blame me, I told him I could handle you but, well, after you gave me the slip once, let's just say he didn't trust me to get the job done." I rolled my eyes at this but didn't comment. No, instead I just let history repeat itself. Because I remembered another time just like this, just after he had fucked up and ordered me to be ready and by his side the same night.

Well, it looked like things didn't change much, not even with over two hundred years between them. Which meant that as I was led back into the club and straight to his VIP area, I was faced with the same arrogant, obstinate HellBeast I had that night.

As I was once more back inside...

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST.

BLOOD OATH



The moment he felt my presence, he lifted up an arm and jerked two fingers as a way to motion for us to approach.

Again, I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes, having enough of his Kingly bullshit. Yet I also knew that this Jared didn't yet know me like I knew him and therefore I doubted I could get away with half the shit I did or said back in my own time. So, I swallowed whatever snide comment I wanted to reply with and approached him instead.

As usual he was wearing all black but this time, his casual state of dress was accompanied by a black jacket in the style I had seen all men wear. Thick, turned back cuffs showed a softer material lined the jacket, making it appear slightly lighter than the starless sky black the rest of his outfit portrayed. A black shirt was minus a cravat, revealing his corded neck and hints of the hard planes of his chest. However, this view stopped short thanks to the tight waistcoat I could see hugging his frame beneath the open jacket.

His hair had been tied back from his face, giving his harsh handsome features a far more dangerous edge. The black cord of my necklace still around his neck peeked through as he moved and was also another reminder who was in control in this situation.

And speaking of control, he rose from his throne and snapped,

“It is about fucking time! I was about to...” He suddenly stopped the second he saw me, even going so far in his shock

to falter in his steps. His eyes widened for a moment before they started making a very slow journey down the length of me. His brother saw this and didn't miss the opportunity to tease him,

“You were saying something, brother?”

“Huh?” was his only reply, and I couldn't help but try and fight my grin, something Orthrus didn't even bother to try and hide.

“Um, yes, I... I was... shall we.”

I had to say it was nice to know I had the ability to render him speechless or make him fumble over his words. Even if he did manage to find his composure enough to offer me his arm to take. I decided not to be a bitch about it and take the offering instead of telling him where to go, like I wanted.

Naturally, I was still harboring on to feeling hurt by what he had said but I also knew when to pick my battles. And besides, it looked as if I might have won a round with this dress anyway, so why push it for the time being?

So, I let him lead me over to his throne where a spare chair was situated. I then scanned the rest of the club, only to find it looked just like it had before all the chaos created by my friend.

“So, you summoned me and here I...”

“You look so beautiful, exquisite,” he said interrupting me, and I couldn't help but blush.

“Thank you... although I feel as if your praise should be directed at Smidge as this was her handy work,” I told him honestly.

“I have no need to do anything of the sort, not when it was your natural beauty that graced the canvas before ever the need for paint.” I swallowed hard, unable to fight against the warmth his words ignited in my belly.

“I... erm... thank you, but I...” He started to grin as I fumbled for words.

“I am happy that you are not the only one with the power to render the other speechless... now relax, the evening is for enjoying and all past conversations can wait... besides, I have arranged for something special that I think you will find most entertaining,” he said, and this time that grin of his turned into something wicked and sinful. It was also one that instantly put me on edge, because I knew it was dangerous and foolish to trust that it meant anything good was coming.

Yet, despite these fears, I slipped on my mask of indifference.

“That sounds ominous,” I commented dryly, making him smirk before raising his hand and motioning at some of his men. They stood near the large doors at the back, and this was a place that I knew the contenders entered through. They respectfully bowed their heads to their King before they pounded on the large door.

It looked different to my own time; these doors looked as if they had seen a battle. As if they had been ripped from a conquered castle and then hung here as a reminder of the war. Thick panels of marred wood held in place by hammered iron bars and spiked metal was an intimidating sight. But the second they swung open, something far more terrifying emerged and I gasped. A creature the color of ash was dragged in by multiple chains tied around various parts of his body.

It was hideous, despite it being mostly a humanoid body, although it chose to walk on all four limbs. However, the closer to the ring it was dragged, was when I could see another two limbs that seemed to be tied behind its back. These were more like weapons, and I could instantly understand why they had been restrained.

Instead of hands, the creature’s wrists morphed into curved blades that looked carved straight from the bone. They looked like a grim reaper’s scythe, only the underside was jagged and serrated like it had teeth of a shark. These natural weapons were crossed over and created a crossed arc at its back, adding to the multiple gnarled horns that twisted from its head like wayward antlers. Similar spikes continued down its arched

spine, growing smaller and traveling all the way down its saw-toothed tail.

It wasn't its body that terrified me but that of its face. Its face was triangular, with protruding cheekbones, a pointed chin, and a nose to match that connected to its forehead in one long slope. It was wrinkled and folds of its skin deepened when it snarled at the guards as they continued to force it to the center of where all waited for the fight.

However, the second it got there, it raised its head and sniffed the air, quickly snapping its head my way and making me shrink back as its ice blue eyes burned into me. Then while it was still down on its hands, it grinned at me. An unsettling smile that spread so wide the corners of his lips met the points of its ears. It showed a long line of hundreds of thin teeth like a mouthful of toothpicks. The malevolence coming from it was petrifying, making me rub my bare arms to fight the chill.

Although that grin of his didn't last for long, as Jared saw where its attention was aimed and snarled low and dangerous at it. It looked to the King and made a strange clicking sound like it was swallowing live crickets.

I shivered and turned away from its piercing eyes that looked at me as if I were soon to become its next meal.

"What... what is that thing?" I asked, the disgust dripping from each word.

"That is the Slavic Bukavac of Sylvania," Jared told me, before nodding to his men once again.

"And who is going to fight him?" I asked, having a bad feeling about this. Especially when Jared turned to me and gave me a grin that was just as chilling as the Bukavac.

"Who do you think?" he said, and my reply came as a gasp of horror when I saw Marcus being escorted into the club. He was lined by two guards either side of him as he made his way towards the ring.

"No! NO!" I shouted in horror, this last one when getting to my feet and taking quick steps to the edge. However, I didn't get far, and it was most likely a good thing seeing as the

Bukavac circled the ring before snapping at me. Jared grabbed me from behind and pulled me back to his throne. A second later he began forcing me to sit on his lap and held me firmly with a hand to my belly.

“Tut tut, little dancer, your time to grace the stage is at an end,” he said from behind me, making me squirm against him to try and free myself.

“You can’t do this!” I shouted, making him chuckle behind me.

“I think you will find that I can indeed do this... now sit and enjoy the show,” he said before shifting from beneath me and dumping me back in his seat without him. Then he nodded to his brother before walking to the edge of the VIP platform. I of course made my move to scramble out of his throne, when suddenly there was a thick, corded muscular arm blocking the way. Orthrus had reached over, and I turned wide eyes on him to find him smirking that damn handsome smirk of his. Honey amber eyes glowed before he warned,

“Not wise, human.”

I tore my eyes from his and gritted my teeth when I heard the bastard chuckle. Damn but I missed future Orthrus.

“Loyal subjects, as you know, a place on my council is only reserved for the strongest of beings and tonight is another contender with his sights set on a seat at my table. And if not, he will simply die trying, either way, this is his rite of passage and well...” he paused to look back at me, so he was sure that I didn’t miss the next words that were obviously meant for me.

“...*Blood is blood!*”

The crowd roared in response to their King’s proclamation, yet my mind was still hanging on the part he said about making Marcus a part of his council. What was Jared doing? Had this been his plan all along? To simply make a bargain with me not to kill him because he knew something else would eventually do it for him?

Meanwhile, the crowd was still cheering as Marcus took to the stage, and I could see the shambles of his outfit, torn and

stained with blood. The evidence of the beating he had received by who I could only imagine was Jared himself. Which meant that by the time Jared walked back to his throne, I was up and out of it like a shot, about to storm off, telling him,

“I refuse to be a part of your sick games!”

However, just like last time he grabbed me around the waist and sat down with me trying in vain to get away from him.

“Tame your claws, pet, he is exactly where he needs to be,” he told me calmly, but I was anything but calm by this point!

“Fight against that... that thing! You will get him killed!” I snapped, making him groan behind me.

“For someone who claims to be such a good and loyal friend, you don’t have much faith in his abilities, do you?” he pointed out, making me wince.

“Yes, well maybe if he hadn’t been beaten within an inch of his life then he would have a better chance!” I snapped, finally giving up on fighting to get free and crossing my arms over my chest instead.

“Hmm, beaten within an inch of his life... I like the sound of that statement,” Orthrus said, causing me to glare daggers his way, making him chuckle.

“She has spirit, this one... I declare you should keep her, as it will be fun watching you tame her... *or her tame you,*” he added this last part into the tankard before drinking it back with a grin.

“Oh, I fully intend on keeping her, brother, especially after what I suspect will be a victory on both sides, his and mine,” Jared replied with a knowing grin.

“I don’t understand, why do this?” I asked in what I knew was a deflated tone as it was no use trying to escape him. His arms felt like iron bars wrapped around me, and even one of his legs had hooked over my shin and pinned me down to prevent me from kicking.

“You wish for me to offer my protection for your friend?” he asked evenly, and my reply was instant,

“Yes, of course.”

“Then the only way to ensure such is for him to have a seat on my council as this will declare him to be off limits, a law not even the King of Kings can fight against.”

I finally stilled in his hold and watched the Bukavac. He was currently fighting himself free of his chains that the guards had let slip through their hands now that both contenders were in the ring.

“You’re doing this for him?” At this, Jared raised his brow in question before telling me,

“No, I do this for you and for the blood you bargained for in return.” My eyes widened.

“The blood oath,” I muttered quietly.

“You didn’t think I forgot, did you?” he whispered in my ear. I didn’t respond to this but instead bit my lip as I was forced to watch Marcus prepare for the fight ahead, praying for him to survive it.

“Why couldn’t you just accept him in your council without fighting?” I asked, my voice pained and hurt by it all.

“Because everyone in my council must first prove themselves worthy in the ring. Like I said, it is a rite of passage and not one I will forsake... *even if it is to please you,*” he told me, and his hand at my belly tightened, pulling me closer at the word ‘please’.

I also shivered at the way he spoke in my ear, like it was an unspoken promise he would be making up for later.

“Now watch.”

I really didn’t want to, but then Marcus was like the flame that all moths couldn’t help but be drawn to, even if it meant death. And I was no different, as he made a show of himself in front of the crowd, clearly born for the stage.

He spun on a heel and as he came full circle, he was opening up his torn jacket. Then seemingly out from nowhere, he pulled free a long staff that he shouldn't have physically been able to hide there. Just like the moment he snapped the end on the ground, the magic that traveled up the length of him transformed him completely.

Now instead of the Marcus that had been beaten and wearing disheveled clothes, he was the figure of foolish perfection. The imperfect state melted away into the Marcus I was far more used to seeing. However, as the new material travelled up over mere glimpses his naked form, you couldn't miss the abundance of pale muscle that were as white as his face. The red lines through his eyes were mirrored on his body like symbols had been etched into his very skin. They even glowed like an incantation whispered over runes from some magical artifact. He was now wearing a dark red leather suit that looked as if it had been made from some skinned Demon, as the small bumps were more like scales.

It was in the style of some sexy pirate with wide cuffs edged with black piping, and two lines of brass buttons down each side of his jacket. Tight breachers in the same material were tucked into high black boots that folded at the knee. Black leather gloves matched the piping around the edge of his jacket and the line down the side of his breachers. This, as well as the black shirt he wore that was complete with a black silk cravat tied at his neck.

But it wasn't just his outfit that morphed into the fiber of perfection. His face was now void of any trace of Jared's beating. Even his hair was back into its usual twisted points, with the bells intact. Like this was a form he would forever be chained into. The crowd went wild like he was putting on a magic show and not about to fight.

And speaking of fight, he spun around in an elaborate show, before bending at the waist, his staff tucked under his arm as he looked up at me and winked.

Then the enraged creature broke free of the last of its chains and...

LAUNCHED AT HIS BACK.

THE FIGHT



I tensed the second I saw the creature leaping through the air, aiming for Marcus who looked too busy trying to reassure me with a wink.

“LOOK OUT!” I bellowed but a second before Marcus reacted to this, Jared held me tighter and whispered in my ear,

“*He knows.*” And well, he wasn’t wrong. Because Marcus calmly slid his body to the side with a calculated step and crouched the very moment the creature should have ended up on top of him. Meaning that instead of the deadly impact he had intended, the creature ended up flying over his bent form. Marcus then used this opportunity to hit the creature with his staff under his belly mid-flight. This was a bump strong enough that it meant the Bukavac didn’t land gracefully at all, but instead in a rolled in a heap hard against the cage walls that had been erected. The whole thing rattled, and I shivered right along with it.

However, Marcus simply brushed off some imaginary dust from his shoulder and made a show of looking bored. But then when the creature finally got back to its legs, it whipped its head around and snarled in Marcus’s direction. Not that this affected Marcus, not in the slightest as he kicked up his staff so it was now being held out to the side in both hands. Then he ran a hand down its length and a magical veil fell from it like a curtain. It shimmered as if it were just a ghost of material and soon, I gapped at him as I couldn’t believe what he was doing.

“He’s crazy!” I groaned, making Jared agree,

“Yes, and well, annoyingly the bastard is rubbing off on me.” I couldn’t help but grin at that, although it didn’t last long. Not when Marcus started to taunt the Bukavac like a bullfighter. He waved the curtain of magic and said,

“Come on, little beastie... Olé!” He shouted this the second the Bukavac charged and foolishly ran straight for Marcus’s trap. Then at the very last second, he gripped the staff and twisted it so the material suddenly transformed into a net, one that broke off and wrapped itself around the creature. This once again made the creature trip and go skidding into the metal walls.

The crowd went wild. One look back at Jared and it was clear that he too was not missing the way the crowd kept growing with the show. So, I decided to make a point of saying,

“This is what he was talking about, you know.”

Jared narrowed his eyes at me in question.

“It could be more than just a brutal fight club... *it could be so much more,*” I muttered this last part, as unbelievably, I missed the future version of Devil’s Ring.

“Is that so?” he asked, as if wanting to know more.

“He is the key to it all,” I said, and it couldn’t be denied, as Marcus was now raising his arms and trying to get the crowd to chant for him, which they readily did. Which I also noticed made the bets come in even quicker as everyone seemed to want in on the gamble. Marcus noticed this too and, for some reason, he nodded to Jared making me tense. I looked back just in time to see Jared acknowledge this with a slight dip of his chin in his direction.

“What was... oh shit!” This question ended when the creature rose up and quickly started to grow in size. Meaning in seconds he was now the size of a fucking stallion! As for Marcus and his response to this, he comically looked up and up and pulled his collar to the side, swallowing hard and making the crowd laugh. However, I wasn’t laughing with

them, not when it looked like Marcus had purposely not dodged the next charge from the Bukavac.

Which meant that this time he was the one to go flying back and with it, landing hard on the caged walls.

“Marcus!” I shouted his name and tried to scramble from Jared’s lap, something that was impossible with his tight grip on me. But then when he had me back against him, he secured his arm, banding it around me.

“Just watch, Pet,” he told me, making me growl and Jared chuckle before telling me,

“That was adorable, little one.”

I gritted my teeth at this to stop myself from hurling a string of curse words at him. Besides, I was too concerned about my friend right now and ignored the comforting strokes of Jared’s fingers at my neck and shoulder.

“Come on, get up!” I shouted, making Marcus do as I said, now saluting me when he was back to bouncing on his feet. He then started pretending to be a boxer. Doing so in over-exaggerated movements like some clown pretending to fight. He then pulled magic from his staff and created a giant boxing glove over his hand that was made from the same shimmering magic the red flag had been. It was the size of a large watermelon and when he used it to hit the creature, it barely had any affect at all. Meaning he got hit just like last time, making the crowd cheer for the beast. Even more bets were exchanged and no doubt these were more in favor of the Bukavac this time.

Marcus again got to his feet and dusted himself off. Then he righted his cravat before pulling more of the magic from the staff and this time the boxing glove grew to the size of a car wheel. Marcus then circled his giant glove a few times in a comical way like he was gearing himself up for the hit. It was slapstick comedy at its best, making the crowd laugh as he hit the creature giving it an uppercut. But then when it hit the creature’s spiked chin, he also made it burst on purpose as the magic deflated around the space, flying off in every direction like a burst balloon.

Again, he got hit and I wondered how much he could actually take before the joke was over for good.

“I must admit, this is quite entertaining,” Jared commented, taking a swig of his own tankard before bringing it around to the front of me. I grabbed it with both hands and started gulping it back, needing the alcohol to get me through this.

“Now that is entertaining” Orthrus said, laughing at me downing Jared’s drink before he took the now empty tankard off me with a chuckle.

“I don’t know whether to be concerned or aroused,” Jared said, making me comment,

“Be whichever one you want to be, as long as you get me another.” My dry-witted reply made his brother howl with laughter. As for Jared, his hand collared my throat and used that to bring me back flush against his chest so he could rumble down at me from behind,

“Then I will pick the latter and enjoy the feel of you sitting squirming on my cock for the rest of the night.” My cheeks heated at this, and I replied in a quiet voice,

“Then I will definitely be needing that drink.” At this he threw his head back and bellowed with laughter, at the same time now gently stroking my neck. Then with his voice still full of amusement, he ordered,

“Get my woman a drink!” This was aimed at a passing waitress who bowed her head to him.

“For she will be thirsty indeed,” Jared added as a sexual whisper in my ear, chuckling softly when he felt the shiver it caused. As for Marcus, he was now creating a new boxing glove and this time it was one so big that it was the size of a small car. The crowd ooo’d and ahhh’d as it grew and grew. But then when Marcus tried to swing it, it comically took his body with it, spinning him across the stage and missing the creature’s attack. Then he lifted it from the ground, making a show of it being too heavy to hold as it caused him to stagger around the space.

The crowd went wild laughing at the spectacle. Especially when he seemed to choreograph this in perfect timing so the creature kept missing him and he too kept missing the creature. Even as much as I was worried for him, I too couldn't help laughing at one point, when he managed to lift the glove so high his face was prematurely triumphant. But then his eyes went wide as the glove started to fall backward over his head and to the floor behind him, taking his arm with it.

The Bukavac was on the other side gearing up to charge again and Marcus feigned a panicked face, one that looked to the beast before looking to his giant boxing glove. Then he started to pretend that he couldn't budge it, using his other hand on his arm and trying to pull his hand up from the ground. He kept tugging frantically while looking at the beast who was about to run for him. He then comically added a foot to the glove, as he tugged and tugged like a... well, like a clown putting on a show.

The Bukavac, however, was not impressed by this as it had murder in his eyes and started to charge at Marcus who was still acting the comic. But then just before the beast could make contact, Marcus freed the car-sized boxing glove at just the right time. Meaning the whole thing slammed into the beast so hard that it knocked him flying sideways and into the cage wall hard enough that it created a beast-sized dent.

The crowd went crazy once more as Marcus exchanged his boxing glove for fake magic flowers he then started to toss into the crowd. He kissed the air in thank yous and before the magic hit the crowd, it flew off in a beautiful array of glittering butterflies.

Marcus then started to bow to his audience as if the fight was over and already won. This despite the creature who was already getting up and shaking off the hit, doing so by getting angrier and angrier. I knew this when it suddenly rose from its hands and stood at its full height on two legs, being easily over ten feet tall. But this wasn't the only thing it changed, as it started to twist its body before bending slightly. This was

enough to see the arch of its spiked back with the cross of curved bone being the most prominent.

I watched as its muscles bulged as it fought the restraints keeping his weapons tied to its back and all the while, Marcus continued to bask in his premature glory.

“Turn around, you idiot,” I hissed, making Jared squeeze me as if I needed the reassurance. But then I wasn’t the only trying to alert him to the fact the fight wasn’t finished. As even the crowd was pointing to where the creature was now trying desperately to free his weapons and power up so to speak. And just like this was nothing more than some comedic pantomime, Marcus continued to play dumb. Doing so until he heard the roar of victory from the beast as the restraints finally snapped and its long, deadly arms were freed. They reminded me of the arms of some giant preying mantis, as they were longer than the rest and swiped out in front of him like this was the next level of running a gauntlet.

“Gods,” I whispered before my hands covered my mouth when I gasped and the crowd gasped right along with me.

“And now things get more interesting,” Orthrus commented, making me shoot him a deathly look, one he shrugged his shoulders at and smirked. I was about to shout to Marcus to look out again when suddenly Jared’s hand covered my mouth, stopping me.

“That’s not playing fair,” he hummed, making me mumble my insults at him and he simply laughed through them all. Which was why I elbowed him in the stomach, making him grunt and it was enough to get him to drop his hand. Then I shouted,

“Turn around, you idiot!” Marcus heard this and feigned a hurt look, before placing his hand at his chest and mouthing,

‘Who... me?’ I rolled my eyes and was about to shout again, when Jared’s hand was back and this time, he avoided the elbow hit by shifting to the side.

“It’s all part of the show, now calm yourself and watch,” he told me, and that’s when I could see Marcus knew exactly

what was happening behind him. Because I hadn't noticed before but the power he controlled was now swirling up his legs, as if he too was powering up. Then at just the right moment, he turned to find the beast charging and this time, he meant business. Those large bone carved weapons of his were held out to the sides, as if at the ready to chop Marcus in two.

However, as Marcus spun on a foot, his jacket flared out to the side at the same time he spun his staff around so fast, it blurred like rotating blades on a helicopter. Then he let it rest under his arm and motioned with the creature to come at him. Seeing this taunt, it ran even faster but before they collided, Marcus made his move and this time...

He wasn't fucking around.

I knew that the second all theatrics were lost and replaced by the movements of a deadly killer. He jumped over and vaulted through the hair-raising gap as the blades swung inches away from chopping his body in two as he sailed between them before they crossed over.

That meant he could slide straight under the creature, using his staff to slow his movements as the bottom drew a line on the ground and the top drew a mirrored line along its underbelly. The electric sparks connecting with its skin caused it to howl in pain. Marcus skidded right under it and was soon up on his feet the other side as the creature started to convulse and spasm from being electrocuted by whatever power Marcus commanded. A hint of what I had seen when he had been fighting Jared's men on the bridge.

Of course, Marcus wasted no time, not like before as he simply walked up the back of the fallen Bukavac who was still trying to stay conscious through what looked like agonizing pain. Then once Marcus was at its neck, he raised his staff up with both hands, holding it central to his body.

"I give you all the blood of Bukavac and with it, my payment on the King's council... all hale the HELLBEAST KING!" Marcus roared, causing the crowd to do the same as he hammered the end of his staff down with so much force, it impaled into the Bukava's skull. Blood oozed from beneath,

soaking the floor as the beast died, its once twitching body stilling instantly.

The fight was done.

But it wasn't over. Not when Jared whispered from behind me,

“Now it is time to hold up your end of the bargain.”

I tensed in his hold not only from his promised words, but mainly as I felt him pulling a large blade from the sheath at his boot.

One he soon held rested in my lap before he added...

“NOW IT'S time for your blood.”

BIRTH OF AN OATH



I gasped the moment I looked down at the large knife, one made from what looked like black steel with Demonic symbols forged into the blade. It also looked as if it was double edged, equally as deadly from both sides. It had a black handle that looked as if made from some creature's horn, and had been carved in such a way it appeared like hundreds of souls were trying to escape. Therefore, the sight made me shudder for more reasons than just the obvious one, as it also reminded me of the Well of the Damned I had not long ago fallen prey to.

He must have been able to hear my hammering heartbeat as he stroked a gentle hand down my cheek and neck before taking my chin in between his thumb and fingers. He used this hold on me to turn my face his way, and once there, his eyes scanned my features, taking on a gentle expression.

"It will hurt for a moment, but I will heal it soon after." I swallowed down what felt like a walnut-sized lump and forced myself to nod my head.

"*Brave girl,*" he hummed in my ear after keeping my chin in his hold and using it to bring my face closer. His trimmed beard scratched against my flesh and forced me to try and hold back the quiver in my response.

"More like foolish for making this deal," I replied, because I didn't like him thinking of me of weak and the 'brave girl' comment sounded more condescending than praise. However, his smirk told me I just added to his respect, making him huff

in response, despite getting the feeling like he wanted to say much more.

“Foolish or not, the deal is soon to be done, now give me your hand, Ella Connor.” I took a deep breath and placed my hand in his much larger one. He then ran a single fingertip along the lifeline on my palm, looking down at it as he did, focusing on the scar I had there. One that thanks to my trip back to the past, I now remembered. It was one I had given myself when Jared had tried to trick me into staying in that cabin. Gods but it felt like a lifetime ago, and in a way... well, *I guess it was.*

But I was caught with the motion, wondering when he was going to pick up his wicked knife and inflict another scar to join the other.

“This scar, where did it come from?” he asked just like he had done with all the rest. But unlike then, I gave him his answer,

“It was the result of trusting a lie,” I told him, making him raise a scarred brow at me but before he could ask, I cut him off,

“And no, I won’t tell you any more than that.” He scoffed in annoyance but at the very least, he conceded by not pressing me to say more. No instead he told me,

“Then I get to rewrite another scar with one of my own making,” he said, running his fingertip down it and having no clue that he had been the cause behind both of them... *just like he was now.* It had me questioning whether our lives were so entwined, that we were forever Fated to relive parts of the past, no matter what time period we met in. Because there were so many similarities it was hard to keep count. But on the other end of that time travelling spectrum, there were also too many parts to count of my own past that made me pray never would come to pass for a second time. It had been hard enough the first time and I didn’t think I would survive it all again.

But a Blood Oath, well that was something new, and in all honesty, I didn’t know how I felt about it. Well, other than it

being yet another way for Jared to force my hand in something.

And speaking of hands...

“I vow with the blood we exchange to keep your chosen friend in the sanctuary of my kingdom and to ensure his safety, I have accepted his loyalty and given him a seat on my council. And in return...” he let his vow trail off, now giving me an opening for me to make my own.

“Erm... I give you, my blood?” I asked in an unsure tone, not knowing what he wanted me to say. He smirked and mirth lit up his eyes, making them glow for a few seconds before he said,

“And in return you will remain by my side, giving yourself over to me for an eternity.”

I gasped and quickly asked,

“And what happens if it gets broken?” At this his smirk turned into a villainous grin, making me want to shiver under such a look.

“Our blood will be forever tethered. Entwined as one. Which means you will freely give me the means of hunting you down should you ever foolishly choose to run from me again... now do you accept these terms?” I sucked in a quick breath and let it out again on a shudder.

“And if I don’t?”

“Well then, your friend’s victory means nothing for he will be forced to leave here and face whatever Fate is to become of him... but be warned, Pet, I do hear that the King of Kings will never stop looking for the one he holds responsible for the loss of his Chosen One. A sentiment I can very well account for being the source of murderous thoughts indeed,” he added, knowing this would be enough for me to make the decision he wanted me to make. Which why he grinned when I sighed in defeat. He knew he had me backed into a corner.

“Now once again, do you accept my terms?”

“I have little choice,” I replied in a defeated tone.

“That is not the answer I require,” he corrected, making me bite my lower lip before nodding and giving him the words he needed to hear.

“I accept your terms, Jared Well... *Cerberus*.” I quickly changed the last name when he gave me a hard look that told me he wouldn't have been happy had I finished my vow with his human name. Of course, this look had also been added to by the tightening of his grip at my side and both were enough of a warning.

“Then repeat after me... I accept your terms and leave my blood onto you as it lays witness to our treaty made.” I took a deep breath and repeated,

“I accept your terms and leave my blood onto you as it lays witness to our treaty made.” Then before I even could brace myself, he took the double etched blade, placing it between our hands and linked his fingers with mine, keeping them locked around the sharp edge. Then before I could pull back, he pulled the blade from beneath us making me cry out as it sliced a line down our palms at the same time.

I tried to pull my hand away, but he dropped the blood-soaked blade to my lap so he could use his other hand to secure our hands and ensure I didn't manage to pull away. I felt the shock as our blood mixed and the feeling of heat washed over me. A spark of something stronger, like magic entering my veins and washing over me. A thousand tingles wracked my body before disappearing just as quickly.

“The Blood Oath is complete,” he said after I was left panting through the pain and overwhelming power of what he just did. I snatched my hand back from him the moment I felt his fingers loosen their hold. I then held my bleeding hand to my chest, looking down at the blood pooling in my palm that surrounded the line of deeper crimson. I heard him grumble his displeasure at the hurt on my face.

“Give it to me so as I may heal it.” I started shaking my head and when he reached for me, I pushed him back as my anger spiked, allowing me to scramble free of his lap. He tried to reach me but just as the waitress was bringing him his ale, I

grabbed the tray and flipped it up over him, soaking him and pushing the waitress in his way so I could make a run for it.

I just needed to get the hell out of here. The feeling of the blood oath still pumping under my flesh and trying to bury itself deep, only felt like a net tightening around me. I just wanted a moment to fucking breathe. A moment of freedom where I felt like I could take a breath on my own. I wanted the kind of freedom that dancing brought me, where my steps weren't dictated by anyone pulling my strings.

These fucking Puppet Masters!

I wanted to cut the strings, not add to them.

“Hey, Cookie... whoa, where are you...?” Marcus said as I barged past him as he had been making his way up to the VIP, no doubt ready to claim his new title. I knew he wasn't to blame, he would have warned me against making such an oath. But what else could I have done? I didn't know what could affect the future or not. It could take only one wrong decision to potentially fuck up the whole thing!

And as for Jared, he didn't trust me enough to stay here with him of my own free will. Not that I could really blame him, considering our past, and this was clearly too good an opportunity to miss out on. Not when he could freely abuse the situation and coerced what he wanted out of it. Which was why I was so furious and found myself running to the back of the club in hopes of getting back to my room.

No surprises though, this didn't happen, as a furious HellBeast was hot on my escape.

“Leave me alone!” I shouted back over my shoulder once I felt him charging after me. He growled for me to stop, pushing people out of his way that weren't quick enough to do so on their own. However, my answer to this was the whoosh of air I felt as my world tipped upside down when I was unceremoniously tossed over his shoulder. I banged my fists on his wet back, stopping due to the pain in one as it still bled, now no doubt leaving bloodstains on his jacket. He smelled of beer and soon, so did I as I felt the wet material clinging to his shoulder seep into the belly of my dress.

“Put me down... whoa!” I cried out after being jostled and jerked when Jared kicked open a door and slammed it shut again. The stale smell of damp earth, oak, and ale soon filled my nostrils before I was crying out once again when my world upended. A second later I felt my ass hit a wooden barrel, which was when I realized that this was where they stored all their booze. Rows of barrels filled most of the space with only lanterns hanging from chains attached to the ceiling, offering enough light to see an angry HellBeast now ridding himself of his wet jacket. One he tossed to a nearby barrel like the one I had been dumped on that was up on its end. He then started rolling up his sleeves and the sight of his strong forearms held my attention until he spoke.

“Already you wish to break the vow you made!” Jared’s furious tone was one I could scent, as he breathed his resentment my way after hurling the accusation at me. I flinched back, making him snarl,

“Don’t you dare be afraid of me!” At this I snapped,

“Then stop fucking shouting in my face!” And the second I did, he looked instantly more relaxed because of it. His chest had stopped heaving and the air he dragged into his lungs looked easier to do.

“Why did you run?” he asked, making me scoff.

“I have my reasons!” I shouted back, making him growl,

“No fucking good enough!”

“Tough shit, HellBeast, it’s all you’re gonna get!” Again, this was the wrong thing to say.

“That’s where you’re wrong, because *I will have all of you.*” I huffed at this and scoffed,

“You sound so sure of that.”

“And so I should, especially when I know why you ran.” A shiver of surprise ran through me, but it was one I was smart enough to mask with my sarcastic response.

“Oh, so why do you ask then?”

“Because I want to hear you admit it,” he said, making me turn my face away. Something he didn’t allow for long when he gripped my face and turned me back to face him.

“Screw you!” I seethed.

“I know not where you adopted this most colorful language of yours, but it means little when I know it is used as nothing but pointless armor against me.”

“How about fuck you, my King!” At this he smirked and brought my face closer to his so he could whisper,

“Now that I like better, for it sounds more like a promise.”

“You wish!” I mocked, even if I had to admit that the words lacked the heat of truth. But then his lips tipped into a knowing smirk before he dipped to my neck and spoke over my sensitive flesh,

“Oh, but I don’t need to wish any longer, or have you forgotten what I am capable of accomplishing with my lips...” He kissed me there, pausing before using his teeth and adding the words,

“...Teeth, and...*cock*,” At this he dragged my hips to the edge in one swift action. At the same time stepping into me and letting me feel how hard he was for me, even through the multiple layers of my skirt. Then my pinned curls were captured in his fist so he could pull my head back and he could stare down at me.

“Now tell me why you continue to run from me?” At this my will broke and I admitted the truth.

“Because I am afraid!” I snapped, making him grin.

“*Good girl*,” he praised, making me open my mouth ready to tell him not to call me that, when he swooped in and took advantage, invading me with his kiss. One that he knew held such power over me.

Which was why my curse turned into a needy moan, one he swallowed down greedily with his kiss. My head was held back and became a prisoner in his unyielding hold, making me near breathless by the time he pulled back. Then, like he

always did when his emotions were driving his words, he placed his forehead to mine and told me fervently,

“Never fear me.”

“I...” I never got anything more out as he kissed the argument from my mind, and this time, I knew it wouldn’t stop at just that. Not when I started to tug at his clothes, trying to free him of his length, giving him all the encouragement he needed to assist me. We barely broke away long enough for him to tear open the buttons of his breachers as I tried to hoist up my skirts. Now hiking them up to my waist and shifting from one cheek to the next so I could try and find the middle of my damn thighs!

“Damn dress!” I cursed, making him chuckle before helping me by tearing a line down the material, a sound that echoed in the room’s tall ceilings.

“Soon I will have nothing left to wear, HellBeast!” At this he grinned and told me,

“Good, I prefer you naked.”

“Umm, perhaps the rest of your club will also,” I said, making my point and he growled at the very thought.

“If anyone else ever sees you naked I will gorge out their eyes with my claws!” At that I pulled his face to mine and teased,

“You say the sexiest of things.”

He grinned, and it was one I felt as I ran my tongue over his lips, silently telling him to give me access. Something he did as he gripped my hips and lifted me onto his cock, impaling me suddenly on its length.

“*Fuck!*” I moaned harshly, making him chuckle.

“You curse more than a HellBeast,” he commented, causing me to laugh at that, one that was soon lost when he started to pound into me. An action forceful enough to make the barrel I was sitting on groan and creak as if moments away from splitting.

But if only he knew that in this single moment, a fleeting wave of sadness washed over me when thinking back to my own HellBeast. An irrational guilt was one I had no choice but to chase away. And admittedly, this was helped by the feel of Jared's cock stroking my nerves with every drag of his length. I let my head fall back as he dug his claws in the gathered layers of my dress, using it as leverage to pull my body to meet his at every mind-blowing thrust.

Not surprising then, that I was so close to coming it made my head spin with the speed it rose. Something he must have known as he purposely slowed his thrusts, making me cry out in frustration.

“Damn it, don't slow down, I am so close!”

“Oh no, this time we chase our release together and I am not done with you yet!” he told me, clearly pleased at my neediness. But then before I could argue, wanting to remind him one of the good things about being a woman was multiple orgasms, he lifted up my blood-soaked palm and brought it to his lips.

“I want to spill my seed into you while tasting the vow you made with your blood.” At this he shackled my wrist and kept my hand to his greedy lips, first kissing the wound and making me shudder around his length. An action that made him groan in pleasure. He then licked up the entire length of the scar at the same time rearing his cock deep inside me. He continued to do this until I was near mindless and close to begging him to let me come.

“I own this blood, do you understand?” he demanded in a hoarse voice, one that told me he was so close to his HellBeast breaking through.

“Mmm,” was all I managed to say, and little wonder with how his cock was torturing me.

“Say it, Ella! Say it now... say I own your blood!”

I cried out when he thrust even deeper, holding himself right to the hilt of me.

“Ahhh!”

“*Say it!*” he practically roared, and I swallowed my panting breaths long enough to tell him what he obviously needed to hear.

“It’s yours... my blood... is... yours!” At this he dropped my hand, one I knew he had now licked clean and healed to a point it no longer hurt. However, the small amount of blood he had just consumed was not enough to feed his addiction. Which was why he gripped the front of my dress, dragging it down without tearing the material and freed both my breasts. Then once the bounty was his to take, he gripped one in a brutal hold and lifted it to his eager lips, biting down around the nipple and taking my blood from the bite.

I came screaming as a blinding light exploded behind my eyes just as he did the same, roaring his release and letting me feel every stream of semen that burst from the tip. I felt the pulsing of his length ripple inside me, drawing out my own orgasm until I was left with barely any voice left.

I was actually surprised the barrel survived, along with my senses as Jared seemed to have the unwavering ability to steal them from me. Although from the looks of him, he wasn’t the only one with this talent. As he now dragged in a long, deep breaths after first winding his arms around me and holding me so close that I felt encased in muscle. It was as if he feared someone would come in at any moment and try to tear me from him. Well, I doubt they would have gotten far, because his possessiveness over me was hitting new heights and I wondered how long it would be before I felt trapped.

I tried to tell myself that this was all because he didn’t trust me yet and he simply feared I would run again. Hence the Blood Oath he had forced my hand at giving him. I was trying so desperately at understanding this man but at times like this, it was making my head whirl. However, despite all this inner turmoil, I couldn’t stop myself from offering him comfort. Not when he still held me to him, as if trying to breathe through his addiction.

My blood.

So, I gently ran my hands up and down his back, wondering if I should stop when I felt him tense. However, the second I felt him release a sigh and relax, I took it as my cue to continue, knowing now he liked it enough that he didn't move away. We continued like this for long, silent minutes. Just the beating of our hearts and the feel of our love making still merged as one, as we remain locked together in all ways we could.

Then I told him softly,

"I'm sorry I ran." He pulled back enough so to look down at me, running the back of his finger gently down my cheek.

"I'm sorry the fear of me caused you to do so." I blushed at that before looking down and picking up his hand, seeing the same line there that still marred his skin as it did mine.

"It is more the fear of us as this is... it's all very... *intense, Jared.*" I whispered this part after lifting my unsure gaze back to his.

"I understand that there is still much to learn of each other, and I am... well, admittedly, I am used to getting my way."

I scoffed a laugh at this, making him grin before I myself admitted,

"Perhaps you're not the only one in that." At this he feigned surprise and reared his head back a little before teasing,

"No... surely not, for you shock me. I believed you to be most forthcoming in all my wants and needs." I laughed at this and again, he seemed utterly fascinated by it. But then, it certainly was a unique laugh with its hiccupping sound and, well, the Jared from my own time had seemed just as fascinated by it like this one seemed to be. It was as if he was quickly becoming addicted to the sight. Of course, the thought made warmth course through me.

But then I looked back down to his hand, one that was still held in my own, tracing all the old scars like discovering the map of his life. The hands of a hard-working blacksmith and now the hands of a fighter.

“Why haven’t you healed this?” I asked in a gentle tone.

“Because I wanted it to mirror your own as a reminder of the greatest gift received... *your vow to be mine.*” He paused to swipe his thumb over the blood that had dripped down my breast from his feeding, a wound he had already sealed the moment he removed his fangs. I then watched as he lifted it to his lips and sucked his thumb into his mouth to taste me again. He even closed his eyes and hummed in pleasure before telling me,

“I will never sate myself of the taste of you.” Again, the admission felt like a caress against my soul. But then he reached up to his own neck and told me,

“And soon I will hold another scar as well, for I will wear your claim on me with as much pride as it brings me to see my own branded upon your flesh.” At this I let my head fall forward to his chest, and muttered,

“Stop being so nice.” He chuckled before tipping my head back and telling me,

“Why would I do that when I feel such happiness?”

“You’re just saying that because of where your manhood is still hiding.” At this his grin was so big it nearly took my breath away with how handsome it was, making little lines appear at the corner of his eyes. Then he pulled me closer, and I felt it hardening once more inside me, making me gasp with the motion.

“Oh, trust me, little one, it is not hiding.” I laughed at this and pulled him to me, hugging him and taking him off guard once more. But then he wasn’t the only one, as I lifted my eyes from his shoulder and found...

ANOTHER PAIR of eyes looking straight at me.

HELPING THE CAUSE



The face of Ari was such a shock that I sucked in a quick breath. This before biting my lip to stop myself from alarming Jared to the fact that Ari was currently hiding behind one of the barrels and shaking her head frantically at me.

“Ella?” Jared asked, pulling me back to look directly at me, clearly questioning the sound. Of course, my mind was whirling with my own questions, and well... a bucket load of embarrassment considering what she must have just witnessed!

“I might admit to being a little sore,” I told him, hating the lie and feeling guilty for it, especially when he looked surprised before a tenderness washed over his features. But then, what else could I do? I knew he was just as ready for round two as I was. Something that now knowing Ari had already been forced to play audience to the first sex show, I didn’t think it wise to put her through the encore.

“I was too rough with you?” he asked, making me shake my head and tell him on a heated whisper,

“I like it.”

“This pleases me... however, not if it is to give you discomfort. In time your body will adapt, for I will warn you now, I will need to take you often, if only to feed my growing addiction of you.” An erotic shiver was the result of the sexual promise he painted and his grin told me he didn’t miss it. But then he pulled himself from me and started to redress as I did the same. Which, granted, only consisted of stuffing my boobs

back in the corseted top part of my dress and shimmying my skirt down over my stocking covered legs. A part of the reverse peepshow he didn't wish to miss or refrain from commenting on, for that matter,

“Such a shame,” he hummed.

“Again, I could go back out there with them out and saying hello to the world if it pleases you, *my lord*,” I said this in a sarcastic tone, mocking him playfully and making him growl.

“If murder is what awakens your arousal, then be my guest.”

I pretended to get them back out, making him cover my hands over my breasts and apply enough pressure that he forced me to squeeze myself.

“They are mine!” he growled, making me smirk in triumph before I said,

“I thought so too.” Then he gripped my chin, forced my face up to his towering height and said,

“Good answer.” It was a claim he finalized with a kiss, forcing me to sigh into him once more. But again, I was also very aware that we were not alone, making me wonder how it was that Jared hadn't yet scented Ari. Was it part of her own supernatural power? How did she even get back down here? I thought she had been on her way with the King's Brother, unless she had managed to escape him?

Well, I had no clue what had happened, as it wasn't like I could just ask her. For starters I knew Jared wouldn't let me walk back alone, even if I told him I needed time. No, I had a feeling that Jared wouldn't be letting me out of his sight any time soon. But then I also knew that I had to do something to help her. Especially when he focused on tucking his shirt into his waist band under the waistcoat and I saw her mouth a desperate,

‘Help me,’ over the top of the barrel. Then her eyes shifted to the door, I knew what she was asking. She wanted a way out. Which was when I knew I was going to have to get creative here.

“So now that everything is cool between us...”

“Cool? I don’t know what that is supposed to mean?” I swear I wanted to smack myself upside the head.

“I mean all is good, well, I mean good like no more running on my part,” I said, messing this up already as he stood to his full height and folded his arms across his chest. Damn, but did he have to make his muscles bulge like that... it was too distracting.

“Ella?” he said my name and my eyes dragged themselves away from his muscular arms.

“Hmm?” The moment I made this unfocused sound he chuckled once and said,

“It is pleasing to know that my Chosen likes what she sees, but I believe you had a trail of thought you were in the process of expressing.”

“Oh, yeah, so anyway... I just wanted to promise you that I wouldn’t run again and to prove it, I was going to say that I wouldn’t be setting foot through the main entrance into the club. Nor will I be trying to sneak out of the secret door by the side of the stage that not many people know of, but one I know winds up a long staircase that leads to the street,” I said, hoping I had given her enough. But then she wasn’t the only one as Jared’s eyes narrowed after first showing his surprise.

“You are right, there aren’t many who know of such a door.”

“Well, I thought telling you would bring you one step closer to trusting me,” I told him, and he nodded his head the once as if this had meant something to him. However, what did come out of his mouth confirmed what I had already gathered would happen.

“It matters not, for you will remain at my side at all times... at least until I am assured that these are your true feelings... but I thank you for trusting me with the truth on this occasion,” he said, interrupting me twice when I opened my mouth to speak, no doubt trying to prevent the argument from spilling from my lips.

“You’re welcome,” I said before looking down at the ground that my feet wouldn’t touch and trying to decide the best way of doing this without tipping over the barrel. Jared chuckled when noticing my predicament and took the problem into his own hands. He gripped me by the waist and lifted me easily on to my feet as if I weighed nothing at all. Then he patted me on the top of my head in a condescending way and said,

“You are so little.” I huffed at this and looked him up and down before replying with,

“And you are a big ox.” He raised a scar brow and repeated,

“A big ox, am I?” I stepped away from him, trying to ignore the growly voice and what it did to my still dripping core. Now instead focusing on trying to salvage the ripped part of my dress. Thankfully there was enough material that I wasn’t walking around with my lady bits on show and could therefore tie it to the side, creating a drape of material in a kind of gypsy style.

“I didn’t hear you complaining about how big I was moments ago when you were screaming for more from me,” Jared growled into my neck from behind after first placing a hand flat on my stomach, spanning across all of my belly as he tugged me back into the front of him.

“A moment of delirium no doubt,” I replied, tossing him a cocky grin over my shoulder and making him chuckle.

“I will remind of you that later tonight when I repeat the act and make you beg even louder next time.”

“Promises, promises, Beastman,” I said, forgetting myself by calling him this nickname. He raised a brow in question but before he could ask, I took the hand at my belly and entwined my fingers with his. Then I pulled it away and started to walk towards the door, hoping he would get the hint. I also sneaked a quick look back as he opened the door for me, and his back was turned to Ari.

‘Thank you,’ she mouthed silently at me, making me nod subtly before walking away and hoping that for her sake, she made it out okay. But I knew there was little else I could do so I walked out of there with Jared’s hand firmly in mine. Or at least, that was how it started as he quickly shifted so his grip was on mine, not the other way around. Then he walked us both back to the VIP and I couldn’t help but look back, shocked to see which room it was. This being the exact one back in my own time that Jared and I had shared our first sexual experience on the couch.

Ironically, what would one day become... *Marcus’s office.*

And speaking of Marcus, there he was, sitting in the VIP, waiting with a scowling Orthrus looking less than happy about their new addition. Of course, he had also managed to get Smidge to sit on his lap and was paying her a lot of attention that she seemed to be lapping up. Causing the burning question as to what did the future hold for these two and where did it all go so wrong?

“I see you don’t waste any time, Seeker,” Jared commented dryly as we passed them, and Jared once again pulled me straight into his lap, disregarding my seat all together. Well, at least Seeker was a step up from Fool, making me wonder if he was making an effort on my behalf?

“Life is a thread woven or cut at the will of the Fates. So why waste a weave?” Marcus replied wisely, making Jared scoff.

“Indeed, I must concur.” Then he pulled me tighter to him as if making his point, causing me to comment,

“I do have a seat.”

“Yes, and it is right here in my lap.” He replied with a pointed look that dared me to argue. Something I didn’t do and in turn something he looked smug about. It was a look that didn’t leave him even when he motioned for a different waitress to come over, making me feel bad for the other one that I threw Jared’s way. Speaking of which...

“Didn’t you get enough ale the last time?” I teased, making him snap his teeth at me, making me jerk as he rumbled,

“Behave, little pet of mine.”

“Ha, little chance at that,” Orthrus commented before swigging back his own ale.

“Um and all the more entertaining for you, no doubt,” I commented, making him smirk and raise his tankard to me before drinking it back and draining it dry. As for Jared’s ale, he took a full cup for himself, before passing it to me so I could take the first sip, as clearly, we were back to sharing.

So, I mentally shrugged my shoulders and drank his ale, taking it down to halfway I had been that thirsty.

“Your girl has a healthy appetite at least,” Orthrus commented, making me grin at him and raise the tankard to his brother this time. But this just reminded Jared of something, causing him to say,

“I am sorry I allowed you to get hungry.” Of course, because he was referring to the first time we made love, I couldn’t stop myself from asking,

“And is that the only thing you are sorry for?”

“No, for I am sorry you did not like hearing the truth of my words.” He replied in return, making me frown down into the swirl of amber liquid.

“Words that hurt me,” I reminded him in a quiet voice, causing him to retaliate with his own feelings on the matter,

“No more than your past actions have hurt me.”

“And round and round the not so merry go round we go,” I commented bitterly before taking another drink and no longer caring if half of it was for him.

“You speak in riddles, girl,” Jared commented with a frown.

“And you continue to push my buttons, HellBeast,” I replied after first gritting my teeth at the use of the word ‘girl’ again. After this he shifted me to the side so he could look at

me, and the feel of his eyes searching out mine were getting heavier by the second.

“My Lord?” Someone spoke from behind him and without taking his eyes from me, he ordered,

“Speak.”

“You wanted to know of the tax on the bets made from the last fight.”

“And?” Jared inquired, now raising his brow at one of the men that escorted Smidge and I here.

“They have exceeded all before it.” At this Jared grinned as he made a satisfied sound.

“Then perhaps you were right Marcus, and I must concede when I am proven wrong... perhaps you should be charged with directing the entertainment for the club in the future.” I stilled at this and looked to Marcus who was showcasing a shit eating grin.

“J! Are you serious?” Orthrus snapped in protest.

“You heard Carter, Orth, and may I remind you that half of that profit is yours,” Jared argued calmly.

“We are already rich, brother, what do I care for change?” At this Jared looked at me, running his fingertips across my collar bone, and said,

“Like I am discovering, brother, that change can be most... *exhilarating*.” Of course, I didn’t miss the way he said this or the way his glowing eyes rose to meet mine at the word.

“You mean exhilarating for your cock,” Orth muttered bitterly, making Jared snarl his way before snapping,

“*Enough!*” Then he snaked his hands under me and scooped me out of the chair as he stood.

“I am not to be disturbed... and you, Seeker, you have work to do, so do not waste it away on drink or corrupting my council members.” He gave a pointed look down at Smidge who just huffed in return.

“Understood, my King,” Marcus replied before winking at Smidge, who giggled as Jared continued to walk from the room with me in his arms. And instead of reminding him that I had legs, I commented,

“You seem to have changed your tune.”

“Another riddle,” he replied, making me want to keep smacking myself when I would say shit from the future.

“You actually said his name this time,” I said, nodding back to Marcus, making Jared follow my gaze over his shoulder.

“Perhaps you were right...” He paused, keeping my friend in his sights before finishing with another admission...

“HE ISN’T THAT BAD.”

IMPOSSIBLE FATE

JARED PRESENT DAY



Niece, she was his fucking niece... *what the fuck?!*

I had played that bastard Geryon's poisonous words over and over in my head long since being dragged back to my fucking cell. A prison that now held a few too many family inmates. My brother was in the cell to my right and Marcus the one to my left. As for Asher, he must have been moved to another part of the prison as I hadn't seen him since my last fight. Well, it wasn't like there wasn't the room for him, as I had fought and won against most of Niniane's prisoners. Each soul consumed in that book of hers had meant the prison had become emptier and emptier.

I didn't know how many hours it had been since being thrown back in here, fuck most likely a whole day had passed. But what the fuck did I know as time worked differently here. What I did know was that my best friend had still not woken from his unconscious state and my worry for him grew as well as my impatience.

I needed to talk to Marcus to find out what he knew and more than anything else, ask him why the fuck he hadn't ever told me that he was a fucking, damn oracle!

At the very least, I'd had the chance to discover the events from my brother, who had told me of the first part of Ella's escape, with the help of the coin and wad load of cash he had given her. Cash I would have hoped she would have used to get her ass to the temple in order to seek out her uncle, not take a fucking life-threatening trip to the past!

Gods alive but what had she been thinking!?

But more importantly... *was she safe?*

I was near out of my mind with worry and that was quickly becoming the closest I had come to breaking apart the seams containing my HellBeast as I ever had before. Thank the gods my brother was there to help calm me, for if it hadn't been for him then I would have eventually killed myself trying to get free of this fucking cell.

I think it was the longest sleep I had allowed myself to have, as finally the toll on fighting the summoning magic took it out on me enough that I pretty much passed out. But only after my brother threatened to fight just as hard if I didn't calm the fuck down. A threat that worked as my concern for his life was the only thing that stopped me in the end. Because I knew that he would have done it, the crazy bastard, if for no other reason than to prove a point.

So, I had finally stopped.

But now I was once more wide awake and back to questioning everything I had learnt. Namely, who the fuck was Ella and what had been done to her to make her forget? I knew for a fact that she had been born into this world to two human parents, so how the fuck had she become the obsession of that fucker Geryon?!

Could he have the wrong girl? Devil's blood but I fucking hoped so, because I just didn't know what I was dealing with here and the damage that could be done from harboring secrets was a lesson I had learnt only too many times with the girl.

"You're grinding your teeth again, brother," Orth commented dryly, still lying flat on the floor with his arms behind his head, most likely dreaming of his bed. Fucker loved his sleep, especially if it had a forbidden human female in it. But then, ever since meeting that coffee shop girl in Nelson, then surprisingly, he hadn't touched another. Of course, I had tried to talk to him about it, but the stubborn asshole was tight lipped and didn't want to discuss it. Which in itself, told me all I needed to know... *He had felt something.*

“Yeah, well it’s not exactly surprising, is it?” I grumbled.

“Well, unless you want to be reunited with your girl looking like some gummy fucker, then I would knock it off.” He had a point there. Didn’t stop me from kicking out at my bars though and welcoming the spark of pain in return. The metallic taste of it filled my mouth, which made me want to spit it out and swear. But I swallowed it down as there was more than enough shit and piss in this place than to start adding to the filth.

“Has he come to at all?” I asked, nodding to my friend who was laid out in the same position where the chains had dumped him on the floor.

“Not even a lip twitch, which I have to say, is weird as fuck not to see.” Wasn’t that the fucking truth as even in battle that twisted grin of his never left him. Fuck, but that one’s last breath would have been used to laugh his way to the grave.

“He is alive, right?” I asked, knowing my tone expressed my concern.

“Been keepin’ my eye on him, and he’s still breathing, now I’m no doctor but I would say even for him, that’s a good sign,” my brother replied without even opening his eyes.

“Gods but how can you be so fucking calm?!” I snapped, frustrated by his relaxed state and secretly envious of it.

“Because, brother, all we can do is save our energy for the real fight and, well, it won’t be in here punching the shit out of the bars that never tire of fighting back.” Damn him but he had another good point and I wanted to slap him for it. Damn Orthrus logic biting me in the feral ass again.

I muttered my response, calling him a smartass asshole which rewarded me the sight of a grin spread across his relaxed face from where I lay. But even as I said it, I also knew that he offered me comfort just by being here with me, even if I wished he were free from his cage. There was no getting away from the fact that he helped center my Beast and calm me in a way that only one other person was able to. But right at this moment my girl was unreachable... *untouchable*.

My only comfort in this was that if I couldn't touch her then neither could that fucker Geryon, as thoughts of him laying a single finger on her made me murderous.

“Do I have to make an appointment for a dentist when we get out of here?” My brother asked after sighing and shifting his body to sitting.

“A dentist... really?” I asked incredulously. At this he shrugged his massive shoulders before hearing one crack and prompting him to roll out the ache gained from lying on the floor for hours.

“I'm sure we can get one on retainer.”

“Any fucker that comes near my mouth with a drill and I will bite off his hand.”

“Suit yourself, gummy bear.” I rolled my eyes and growled, making him chuckle. But then I also knew what he was doing by teasing me. He was trying to take my mind off our situation and, well, it was kind of working. Not that I would admit it to him, the smug git. In fact, I was just about to throw some more insults his way when, thank the fucking Gods, Marcus started to stir.

“Marcus!” I shouted his name before he could slip under again, causing him to moan louder this time before snapping,

“Sweet Ghandi's tits... do you have to be so fucking loud?” Marcus groaned as he held his palms to his eyes as if he feared they were ready to pop right out of his skull. I took a relieved breath knowing that if my friend was cracking jokes already, then he would be fine.

“How you feelin', pencil dick?” Orth asked him, making him admit,

“Like the fucking Gods had a fucking party on my head.”

Yeah well, he didn't exactly look in the best of shape, although his injuries had healed at least. But in the end, I couldn't allow him the time to get that same head back in the game, before I found myself asking,

“Why didn’t you tell me, Marcus?” My tone was accusing and, honestly... *hurt*. He released a heavy sigh before shifting his body so like my brother, he was now sitting up, even if he had to drag his exhausted body closer to the wall so as he could use it to lean against. Then with his knees bent, and his forearms resting upon them, he lifted his hands at the same time shrugging his shoulders in defeat.

“I don’t know what to tell you, J.” I swear my mouth dropped at this before I snapped,

“Over two hundred years, Marcus!”

“*I know,*” he admitted in a beaten tone.

“Over two hundred years since your ass sauntered into my club and declared you could make it better. Demanded a seat on my council and fought for your place.”

“I know,” he replied in frustration.

“All these fucking years and I had a fucking Oracle on my council!”

“I know, I know!” he shouted, this time lifting his head and looking directly at me.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Marc?” At this he let his head hang between his outstretched arms still resting at his knees before lifting it and answering me,

“Because... *I killed the wrong King.*”

I frowned at this, before shaking my head as I was about to ask what the hell, when my brother got there first.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Marcus took a deep breath and told me,

“The Fates chose me, a long fucking time ago... so long I don’t even remember my fucking name.” I was speechless. As far as I knew he was at least seven hundred years old, but this didn’t sound like a man that had only known this time.

“But Pythia... there can only be one,” I said, mentioning the name of the only Oracle ever known, at least until Lucifer claimed her as his Queen. Since then, the new Oracle was still

somewhat of a mystery. But there had been whispers and what my world knew of Oracles had been shrouded in lies for the sake of many. Rumors that there were actually multiple Oracles at any given time, but only one was ever named, so as the light shone her way keeping the others safely in the shadows. Was this it? Prompting me to ask,

“Unless the rumors are true and you’re just one of many?”

“The rumors are true, and trust me, I wished that was part of my story.” I frowned at this.

“Then why?” I asked, trying to keep my anger in check.

“Because I was the first and, well, I fucked up.” Again, my mouth dropped at this startling revelation.

“Erh... come again?” Orth asked, seemingly having just as hard a time with it as I was.

“I’m talking thousands of years ago, J, fuck but I couldn’t even give you a date. But what I do know is that I came from what was a primitive world and in it, I was touched by a God... *the God Janus*.” I swallowed down my shock and forced myself to ask,

“What happened, Marc?”

“Many millennia of servitude is what happened, until one day, I got tired and went against the Gods.” I swallowed hard, knowing part of what came next,

“Your curse,” I uttered, but he soon corrected me,

“My punishment.”

“Explain,” I pressed, and my brother did the same.

“Yeah, it’s time to hear your tale of woe, Marcus,” Orth added, and saying his name was something he rarely did.

“Ah my tale of woe indeed, very well. Like all good tragedies, I will start simple with... the year was 975 in England, when some bratty teenager took the throne, despite many believing his half-brother Æthelred held the right. I was among them, especially considering Edward was a twisted son

of a bitch.” Gods, but he was talking like a thousand years ago was nothing.

“I was, no surprises to you all, the court Jester, and my job was not simply to entertain but more to spy for the Fates to ensure the continued rule of this little asshole,” he said, shaking his head as if the memory of this King still disgusted him.

“Umm, I can see where this is going,” Orth commented, making Marcus sneer.

“Yes well, when I caught first-hand his sickening perversions mainly directed at young girls, too fucking young I might add, well then I could take it no more. I stabbed the fucker in the back on his way to his stepmother’s home and as a result, went against the Fates,” he said, his tone serious for once.

“I bet that pissed them off,” Orthrus replied. Naturally, Marcus huffed at this before commenting sarcastically,

“You think so?”

“What happened next?” I asked, pressing on and knowing that without a fucking doubt in my mind I would have done the same, fuck the Gods.

“Edward the little shit stain, was forever known as Edward the Martyr, and his half-brother took the title and well was known as Æthelred the Unready for a reason.”

“Ah,” I said, seeing now where this was going.

“Ah is correct, for what followed was the St. Brice’s Day massacre and the death of a particular important soul that never got to fulfill a prophecy. Hence blame was swiftly pointed my way and I became the first Oracle to be cursed to an eternal life of a fool... *literally*,” he said, gesturing a hand down his body.

“Seriously?” Orth asked in shock,

“I didn’t always look like this, dickhead,” he snapped, making both me and my brother look at each other.

“And the Oracle gig?” Orth asked.

“Ah well, it turns out that Oracles can’t be fired from the job. No, they can be cursed as a punishment, but they can’t actually stop the fucking Gods from keeping me as their fate seeing bitch... go figure,” he replied with bitterness coating every word.

“I thought you were just a fucking Seeker?” I accused, still hurt to know that we had been friends for hundreds of years and he had never once told me any of this.

“How could I? No offence, J, I didn’t fancy the next curse being to have my staff stuffed up my ass for all eternity.” Well, that was a fair point.

“Besides, all I have seen, I am forbidden to intervene in any way where it might change the thread of destiny... I already learnt that lesson the hard way,” he muttered this last part while hanging his head once more.

“But as a Seeker...” I let the question linger for him to fill in the gaps.

“Yes, as a Seeker I was able to guide certain events in the way the Fates would allow. But anything more and...”

“And?” I questioned.

“And I end up in a place like this being used by some tyrant with a God complex as a monkey see monkey do, idiot!” Marcus snapped, losing his cool.

“He’s got a point there,” My brother said.

“Why thank you, Captain Obvious, how very lucky I am to have your intelligence at hand for show and tell,” Marcus commented dryly, making Orthrus mutter a curse,

“Still makes you a monkey’s asshole.”

“Okay, so I understand the why but now I need to know the how?” I said, ignoring their usual snipes at each other.

“How what?” Marcus asked in a deflated tone.

“How the Hell did all this happen...? How did my girl end up in the fucking past, and more importantly how the fuck did she end up holding your hand in that fucking arena?!” I

couldn't help myself from keeping my own bitterness from my voice or the frustration, anger, worry... fuck, but there were too many emotions to pinpoint just one.

“Well, she didn't get the idea from me, but I will tell you this much, if she is there, J, it's because she needs to be. As for our connection, I can only assume it's because she made one with me in the past and linked herself with my life... stop fucking growling, you idiot! I don't mean in that way!” he yelled when I started acting like a possessive asshole growling at the implications of his words.

“*Linked how?!*” I gritted out the sentence and hoped like fuck Orth didn't dare with another tactless, toothless comment.

“How the fuck do I know? I wasn't there, remember? Shit, but if she went back in time then until we are back living the same timeline, then her time is still mirroring our own.”

“What do you mean?” my brother asked with a frown, once again, getting there before I did.

“I mean she has created another branch of time and until she's back, then it will continue without affecting ours. The cross over I can't explain, but I do know that she is alive and still living it.”

“And what becomes of this timeline once she has returned?” I asked, hoping like shit it just fucking disappeared.

“It evaporates into nothing more than a memory only held by that of Janus and Ella. She will be the only one who holds that thread.” My sigh of relief was heard by all.

“Then whatever she does in the past will have no impact on ours?” Orth added, feeling the same relief I did.

“Well, I wouldn't say that, for there must be a reason the fountain accepted her,” Marcus added, giving chase to my musings. My look said it all and enough for him to answer my unspoken question.

“It could have killed her, but it didn't. The reasons why Fate allowed it to happen must play an integral part in her future.”

“Perhaps it was for her safety,” my brother said coming up with his own reasons.

“Safety she found in you,” I almost snarled this at my friend.

“Oh, I don’t think she only found it in me, not if she time jumped and made her way to Devils,” Marcus pointed out and again, I felt murderous.

“Explain!”

“I don’t know exactly what is happening to her but when she broke through, I did see enough to know where she had come from, along with where she had started.” My heart felt like it was on the verge of pounding its way out of my fucking chest at this.

“Marcus, cut the bullshit, can’t you see he’s on edge.”

“She started at the beginning, J, she went back to Jared Weller’s cottage, and something happened there that made her run from it. Then for reasons I can’t yet explain, she ended up skipping thirty years forward in the timeline and on the exact date I myself was headed to Devils. This I do know.” I held my breath the entire time he said this and let it out again on a shaky exhale. Fuck, but she was in my club and stuck in the year 1799 with the Gods only knows which version of me she encountered.

“And now...?” Orth too let his question linger.

“Now she is trying to find her way home.” He finished what I myself couldn’t say. Because I knew myself now, just like I knew myself then. Which meant that if I discovered her intent to leave or more to the point, *to leave me*, then her biggest obstacle in getting home was...

Well, *it was me*.

Something that was confirmed moments later when I suddenly grasped at my chest as a feeling washed over me, and it was one I had felt before but never as powerful.

“J, what is it?!” My brother called out as it must have looked as though I was having a damn heart attack. Hell, but it

felt as if it had the power to induce one, as my blood felt as if it were trying to burn its way through my mortal vessel!

“J, answer me, for fuck sake!” Orth shouted, now being the one to fight the bars. I fell to my hands, before being able to lift one and gesture that I was okay, just to stop him from causing damage to himself.

“It’s... it’s Ella,” I stammered, barely believing what I was about to tell them had actually happened.

“What?! What about Ella?!” My brother asked, only it was Marcus who answered for me, his eyes glowing bright with the vision that no doubt assaulted him seconds after it had hit me. Which was why he told my brother,

“Fate happened.”

“Fate?” I nodded at Orth and finally pushed out the impossible through trembling lips...

“SHE JUST GAVE ME A BLOOD OATH.”

ALL IT EVER MEANS



By the time I carried my Chosen back to my bed chambers, she was half asleep and yawning in her exhaustion. Naturally, I found the action adorable and even that in itself was somewhat disconcerting. Because I was swiftly becoming a slave to her, and she had not one clue as to my inner turmoil. For I was quickly falling in my addiction and with it, I knew without a shred of doubt that I had quickly fallen in love with her.

But then, this part didn't come as a surprise as my instant attraction to her, the draw to her very soul, had me enraptured a long time ago. Much to my shame considering I had already believed myself to be in love with my wife. It was also why I felt the betrayal as strongly as I did. As there was no other explanation or way to describe the guilt. Not considering I had only known Ella for what felt like mere moments before acting upon my instincts to kiss her. It was why I couldn't end her life when I had the chance to, and thank the Gods that I hadn't, as for now I could not ever see my life without her.

I didn't care for what the Fates had deemed her to be to me, it was the woman, the very essence of all she was as a person, that I had fallen for. She had quickly become my everything and, in truth, she was the moment she set foot back into my domain. I just didn't want to admit it to myself.

I knew she was still keeping something from me and, well, she was nothing short of an enigma. A riddle that needed unraveling and soon, for I feared that she was a danger to herself. The past few days were testament to that. But

exchanging one problem merely left me with another. Because I had made the decision to free the Fool, solely so as it would prevent her from trying time and time again to save him. And considering she owed him her life, then I knew she would risk her own to do right by him. But in truth this hadn't been the hardship I first believed it to be, as after watching his strength and power in the prisons, then I knew the ring would be no difference. I loathed to admit it and my brother even more so, but he would be a powerful addition to my council and that was one fact I couldn't ignore.

Along with the need to test my Chosen and the strength of loyalty to the blood oath she made. Even now I could feel it weighing comfortably against my soul. The taste of her blood forever there, branded to my mind and always wanting more. I had not been lying when I admitted never being sated, never having enough of her. I had taken her. I had forced her hand and made her mine without shame but still... *it wasn't enough.*

I wanted her to be mine willingly.

I knew this would come in time, but it was that very time that felt like my enemy. As if I were chasing it and trying to get ahead only so as I could cut her off from making her own misguided mistakes. She had admitted to me that she was trying to get back home, thirty years into the past. Something I knew wasn't possible. But fear had my heart gripped in its unyielding grasp and it wouldn't let go until I found this witch who cast the spell in the first place. I needed to do all in my power to prevent her from leaving or getting herself hurt in the process of such a task.

If it were even true.

Because no matter how much I tried to ignore my HellBeast instincts, I couldn't help but cling on to the lie I had scented in her story. Of course, it was one that gave me only a hint as if it was being masked by truth. Which told me elements of how she came to be here were true. But there was an undercurrent of deceit that I really focused on and that was something I wouldn't... no, more like, *couldn't*... let go of.

Just like I couldn't let go of her.

Gods but even placing her down on my bed had me gripping on tighter for just that little bit longer. Even though I had no intention of leaving her, I still needed to wash the scent of stale ale from my skin. Ale that after she had thrown it in my face, she had taken off running from the intensity of our blood bond made. I knew she was overwhelmed. That she was frightened. And like a bastard I had fed from it instead of soothing it. But that had been my mistake, and one I hoped I had fixed, despite it being on the top of a barrel.

Devil's blood but I hadn't lied when I told her that she was insatiable, as she seemed to be a slave to her desire for me just as I was a slave to her. But I adored how different she was to other women. She didn't shy away from her feelings, from her passionate reactions. She didn't hide her thought behind that of a coy smile or the veil of societies countenance. She freely gifted me that side of her and in truth, I relished every second.

Which was why I couldn't wait to get back to her, after the short moments it took me to relieve myself of the ale consumed. This before ridding myself of my shirt so as I could pour water over my head, making quick work of watching my torso free of the ale that had showered me. I couldn't help but grin at the memory, for she was certainly a feisty one my Chosen One.

I walked from behind the wooden screen that created a private space to complete such a bodily task and the moment I did, I found her sitting up in bed waiting for me. I also had to admit to feeling a great deal of satisfaction the moment her eyes widened before taking the time to rake them over my body with an unbridled yearning. I tried to hide my smirk, somewhat unsuccessfully as her reaction to seeing me pleased me immensely.

It was gratifying to know that she wasn't immune to me anymore than I was to her. Which was why I tested this theory, purposely prompting the response I wanted from her when folding my arms across my chest, knowing my muscles would draw her eye. I was by no means a small man, not even in my human life, for the trade of a blacksmith certainly kept me strong.

But ever since my change, it took shape upon my vessel as well and gave me the tools needed to take an opponent down even without having to morph into my other form. Well, if it satisfied my Fated, then there was just another reason to add to being thankful for. The reaction she gave me was to bite her bottom lip, as well as holding her breath.

“Is there something about my body that speaks to you?” I asked, delighting in the way her cheeks flushed with natural blush and she tore her eyes from me in what looked like bashful reserve. So, I allowed my body to be drawn closer to her. Close enough so as I could take possession of the graceful dip of her chin and I could force her exquisite green eyes back to me. Eyes I had lost myself in long ago. Just as I had done with the sight of her blazing head of red curls that seemed as untamable as her fiery spirit.

She was my perfection.

“I tease you, Ella,” I said, my voice thick and full of the same desire I had seen in her appraising gaze. Her name now being one that easily rolled from the tongue and made it past my lips in more than a snarl of anger. Because in truth, I had started to question the past more and more from the moment she stepped back into my kingdom. As if at my heart, at my core, I knew who she truly was. It had summoned up the turbulent past between us like a storm needed to clear the air of such stifling heat. And like I said, now I questioned everything. I also knew I would continue to do so until I knew the truth of where she truly came from and what she was sincerely doing there that day. Although right now, I knew that these were answers for another day, for she had been through too much today as it was. Too much without me adding to her heavy mind and what seemed like an even heavier heart.

I did not wish to feed her fear.

So, I simply let these thoughts go and buried them back to the dark recesses of my mind... *for now.*

“Are you... erm... coming to bed?” she asked timidly, making me grin, as she was like flipping a coin. Both sides a face I could only predict I would find facing me when the gold

landed. For now, I was dealing with the shy, nervous side and as much as it was near too much temptation to pass by, I ceased my teasing. Instead, I ran the backs of my fingers down her pretty, freckled skin, and resisted the urge to kiss each dusting of the lightest brown stars. As if she had been sprinkled with something extra special at birth by the hand of the Gods that gifted her to me. For I didn't want the flawless porcelain skin of some doll I was apprehensive to touch for fear of shattering. I didn't want the perfectly coiled hair hidden by some gaudy embellishment like a hat or feathers. I didn't want the painted rouge to hide the natural blush of what my words and actions did to her, hence why I rubbed it away with my thumb. And I didn't want a woman who hid her desires to drink ale like a man and curse just as loud as one.

Like I said...

She was my perfection.

In the end, I let my actions answer her, doing so by ridding myself of the one piece of clothing left, making her eyes this time drop to my throbbing length that once more begged for her talented mouth. And no words were needed as she eagerly took my cock in hand and made me hiss as the pleasure rose from my toes. The soft, delicate skin a contrast to the firm hold she had of me was near maddening. But then she leaned forward, getting to her hands and knees before me as I stood at the edge of the bed. Her mouth opened and I was a lost man.

A forsaken Beast.

There was nothing else in the world, for it could have burned around us and I wouldn't have stopped her. I was incapable of any other thoughts but her and what she had the power to do to me. Gods but I had a job not to fall to my knees before her and beg her for mercy. Especially given the way her tongue caressed the length of me, from bottom to tip as if she were trying to brand every inch to her mind.

"You wish to kill me, woman?" I moaned freely, something that turned into a deep reverberating growl of pleasure when she grinned before taking the whole length of me in her mouth. This before sucking me deep enough to gag around the

girth hitting the back of her throat. Gods she was beyond all I had ever experienced!

So much so, that my hand found itself embedded in her curls for fear that she would release me and never take me back to the heaven she created. She hummed happily at this dominant hold, causing the vibration to add to the delicious sensations. Sensations that tipped me over the edge, for I couldn't last like I wished. This time giving her no warning when I erupted into her mouth and forcing her to swallow me down. Something she did with a needy eagerness.

“My greedy little dancing girl,” I praised swiping the release off her lips and forcing her to suck it from my thumb like last time. I wanted her to taste it all and not miss a drop. A primal urge to brand her from the inside out. It was a carnal need that I knew would result in her taking my blood soon but not tonight. For in truth, I didn't know how her human body would react and I wanted to be assured that it would not cause any ill effects.

She was mine to protect.

Mine to love. To keep. To adore.

She also was...

MINE TO PLAY WITH.

CAUGHT RED HAIDED



The moment I move, I have to stifle a moan as my body ached in the most satisfying of ways, thanks to Jared and his ability to make me come more times than I thought myself capable of. But of course... *he knew best.*

Well, my sex definitely agreed with that statement, even if I was sore. Despite this, I stretch out like a contented cat and pushed past the part where my body begged me to stop. But then what felt like a lifetime of pain came rushing back and I found myself crying out for a different reason.

I need medication.

As it was clear to me now that I had been too long without his blood and therefore, I have been too long without a means to control my Gaucher disease and all its debilitating symptoms and repercussions of not having any treatment.

Basically, in a nutshell I was running out of time. Of course, what hadn't helped was the promise Jared had whispered against my temple when he thought I was asleep,

His promise to never let me go.

But he must, as there was no other way of saving the Jared I loved from my future. There was no other way of saving myself right along with it, because even though he had hinted at me drinking from him, it was still yet to happen. Making me wonder what was holding him back?

“Stupid, Ella, he still doesn't trust you, that's why,” I complained aloud, being free to do so seeing as I woke to find

Jared missing from our bed. How quickly it had become ‘ours’ opposed to just being ‘his’. I suppose that’s what happened when he flipped you on all fours and took you from behind like a wild beast as you begged for more. Yep, my lady parts weren’t singing his praises now, were they...? Okay, so yeah they were, but I was still sore.

I wondered where he could be but more than anything, how long it would be until he came back. And for a moment, the thought was simply because I missed him. But then I remembered that it was in this very room that he had stored the coin I had stolen, and my mind suddenly flew into overdrive. Hence why after one last unsure look at the door, I threw back the covers and then made a quick, fumbled attempt of getting dressed. This after having the fastest pee in history. I also ignore the fact that I spotted food covered in silver domes on the table, and instead of running to the table I instead made my way to the wall I knew the box was hiding in.

I didn’t know how much time I had and therefore the thought of being caught made my hands shake as I reached for the loose piece of stone. I placed it down on the sideboard like he had done and pulled the box from its hiding place. I instantly recognized it as being the same one Orthrus had opened when giving me my first coin so as I could escape.

The miniature treasure chest was ornamented with strips of spiked metal that curved over the top. As for the wood in between, this had been carved with symbols I had no hope to understand, I just knew these were the key to opening it... that, *and my blood*.

Which meant that I did the same as he had that day, now slapping my hand down on the top and making the spikes dig in deep. This meant that soon my blood was flowing enough so as I could bleed all over the symbols, making streams of crimson travel their way into the lock. I also wondered why Jared hadn’t done the same as I remember him raising his hand to his lips to bite to get the blood flowing, and I wondered if this was so he could hide the way for me opening it.

“Fuck! This is getting old now!” I complained as I waited for the box to open.

“Yes, yes!” I shouted when I heard the lock turning. However, the moment I was free to flip the lid, I was left to only stare down at the box in horror.

“*It’s empty,*” I muttered to myself in shock. However, what shocked me even more was when a voice answered me from behind,

“I know... I had them moved.” I froze and mouthed a silent ‘oh shit’ down at the box before slowly closing the lid. Then because I knew that I had no choice, I turned to face the consequences of what I had just done. I swear but the look on his face nearly crushed me.

“After everything we shared, you still try and steal from me?” I deserved that, flinching as the first lash whipped at my heart. Question was, how many more could I take before I crumbled and broke down with the truth?

“I didn’t... I mean, I was trying to... it’s not how it looks.” I settled with this, making him roar,

“*Stop lying to me!*” I flinched back and dropped the box, seeing my blood spill and pool to the floor. I couldn’t help but fist my hand, needing the pain to center me, only he looked to where it dripped from beneath my fingers and just like that, he was storming his way inside. I backed up as much as I could, despite knowing it was a hopeless endeavor, as his furious strides ate up the distance in seconds. Then he took my wrist and snatched my hand up, peeling back my fingers and seeing the damage for himself.

The first sight of my blood and he lost it. His eyes started to glow molten silver as his fangs grew in an angry snarl before deciding he wouldn’t waste the meal. He brought my hand to his face and licked me clean, his furious gaze never once leaving my one of both shock and fear. However, the moment it had healed, and the blood was consumed, he let go of my hand with an abrupt movement before stepping away from me. He then ran his hands over his head, pushing back the hair that freely hung loose around his face and shoulders.

“How could you do this...? How could you betray me yet again?!” he snapped, making me sniff back my tears. He

looked at this release of emotion as yet another betrayal, and I was helpless to argue my point. So, in the end I went with a slither of the truth,

“I have to go home.” At this he roared and, in his anger, he flipped the table so it crashed into the wall. Sequentially food flew in the same direction, hitting surfaces like edible shrapnel.

“NO!” His Demonic tone vibrated off the stone hard enough that little clouds of dust floated down from the ceiling.

“You don’t understand, if I don’t, then all is lost.” He started shaking his head and told me harshly,

“There is nothing left for you to say, for there is nothing left for me to believe!”

“Then there is no point to any of this,” I stated, making him growl.

“No, for I will never get the truth from you, this much is clear now. But there is yet still one person who knows it all and I will beat it from his dying lips if I have to!” he snarled, now walking to the door and fully intent on taking his rage out on Marcus.

“You promised!” I reminded him, making him freeze at the threshold.

“Well, it seems as if between us, promises are always meant to be broken.” Then he started to walk through the door, and I had finally hit my limit on keeping the truth from him. I had no choice but to break my vow, only this time, it was the one I had made myself.

“Fine, I will tell you!”

“Tell me what exactly, for there is nothing you could say to save yourself the...” I rushed ahead and irrevocably told him...

“...I AM FROM THE FUTURE!”

PASSING OUT ON JUDGEMENT



“**W**hat!?” he hissed, the second I said this. And I had to say, as far as reactions went, I didn’t exactly take this as a good one. He remained immobile in the doorway with his back to me and I saw the muscles tense from where I stood, wondering what his next move would be. So, I released a sigh and repeated,

“I am from the future.”

“Impossible!” he snapped, finally turning to face me and making me groan in frustration.

“It’s true, I am not from this time.” He narrowed his gaze at me before slamming the door shut with enough force it rattled on its frame like a storm was coming... *and the hurricane was named Jared.*

“What trickery is this?” he asked making me frown.

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“You are somehow masking the scent of you.” I didn’t understand that so decided to ignore it and press on.

“I mask nothing. You wanted the truth, and this is it.”

“You are from the future?” he asked in a way that was nothing short of mockery.

“You don’t believe me,” I obviously concluded.

“Of course not, for I am not a fool!” he snapped, making me close my eyes for a few seconds as I tried for patience.

“So let me get this straight, you believed that some witch cast a spell on me and brought me thirty years into the future but you won’t believe that some magical fountain actually brought me over two hundred years into the past?”

“Two hundred years! Gods but you are out of your mind... magical fountain, for fuck sake, Ella, do you really believe I am just some Jolterhead for that is the only name for one to believe such nonsense!” I rolled my eyes and muttered,

“Firstly, I have no idea what a Jolterhead is and secondly, you wondered why I never told you.”

“Oh no! Don’t you dare twist these fowl lies into a weapon for casting blame!” he snapped.

“Okay fine, ask me anything and I will prove it.” At this he jerked back a little as if I had lost my mind.

“And how would you ever prove such a thing?” Okay, so maybe he had a point there.

“That’s what I thought,” he scoffed before walking back to the door and I panicked, knowing he would drag poor Marcus into all this. So, I suddenly shouted,

“I was eighteen!” He at least took pause at this, so I took that as I sign to continue.

“I snuck into your club, it was the first time I ever saw your kind. I freaked out but instead of being able to escape, I was pushed onto your stage and had no choice but to dance.” At this he looked back at me over his shoulder before turning his body to face me before he crossed his arms as he continued to listen. No doubt waiting for the next hole I would need to dig myself out of... *after he had first been the one to push me in it of course.*

“You saw me, you hated humans and didn’t take to well to the idea that one was now dancing on your stage. You leapt across the platform and picked me up, throwing me over your shoulder before then pushing me up against the wall. You then threatened me with what would happen should I ever step foot in there again.” I could see his eyes working through the story

no doubt looking for the voids of truth. Oh, and he thought he found one.

“This happened not long ago, Ella, do you really...”

“You let me go, Jared. Fast-forward eleven years later and I ended up walking into another of your clubs, this time it was in Germany.”

“Germany?” he jerked back a little.

“I don’t know what it is called in this time period, but my point is you found me at the bar, but I didn’t know you would be there. I was in trouble with some Hellhounds, and you agreed to help me.” He started to shake his head and just before he could open his mouth to argue again, I rushed on,

“I got kidnapped and you saved me. But they never stopped coming for me, so you took me back to Devils for my protection.” He dragged a hand over his hair and growled in frustration.

“This is... it is...”

“I know it sounds crazy but ask yourself, do I really sound like I am from your time? I mean, I drink beer like a fish and swear like a sailor. I say shit you don’t understand all the time and don’t exactly need a fan to waft away a delicate constitution. Christ, I am a Ranger for God’s sake, I know how to throw a mean punch, rebuild an engine and carry a gun... I am about as far from a lady as you can get!” Of course, the part he focused on was the only bit he understood,

“You carry a pistol?!”

“Yes, and I am a damn good shot!” I told him, making him shake his head once more.

“This cannot be true... you only wish to make excuses to steal from me.”

“And ask yourself why would I steal from you?” I asked, only he of course had an answer to this.

“These coins aren’t easy to come by, Ella, I know exactly why someone would want to steal one,” he replied dryly, making me furious.

“I wouldn’t dare steal it for money! How dare you?!”

He growled at my anger, but I carried on regardless.

“I stole the coin because it is the only thing that will get me home! I need to get back to the temple of Janus and to the fountain, it is the only hope I have left at making it back to my own time!” He suddenly narrowed his gaze at this and demanded,

“How... how do you know of such things?”

“Because I am telling you the truth!”

“And if that is true then why did you appear thirty years prior? And you say you don’t have the means without a coin, did you use one last time and only made it this far, because I find that more than a little hard to believe!” Okay so granted, that was much harder to explain.

“I don’t know why time sent me back to that day, but I tried to save you and I know you don’t believe that but that’s the only truth I know.” He tore his face from mine at this, so I continued,

“What happened after that was not... *successful*.”

“*Explain!*” he gritted out.

“I found someone I thought would help me, but in the end, they used me to get what they felt they needed. And in exchange, I was sent here.”

“That makes little sense, just like the rest of your foolhardy tale,” he snapped, making me sigh in frustration.

“I don’t know what to tell you anymore, Jared, as this is all I have. My uncle thought he could exchange me for his Chosen One and we switched time frames.”

“Your uncle?” at this I froze, knowing this was when things were going to get even more difficult for him to believe. I even winced a little as I said it,

“My uncle, he’s... well, he’s the King of Kings.” At this Jared’s eyes turned wide with shock before narrowing into

clear mistrust. And that was when I knew that I had truly lost him.

“Good Gods, woman, do your lies know no bounds!” he growled before turning and this time, I knew nothing would have the power to stop him. However, the last thing either of us expected was that when he opened the door this time, he found it wasn’t as empty on the other side.

“*You!*” Jared snarled when he found Marcus standing there and this time his gloves were off. Because before Jared could even make a move, Marcus placed his hand over Jared’s face and released a bright red glow that blended into thick black shadows that soon covered the entirety of his head.

“Marcus, NO!” I shouted in shock at what I was witnessing. But then I looked into the glowing eyes of a man I hardly recognized and gasped at what it could mean. Especially when he looked directly at me and told me,

“*There was no other way.*” Marcus then let go of Jared who instantly fell backwards as if the life had just been drained completely from him. I screamed and ran to him, before looking up with blurry tear-filled eyes. I started cradling Jared’s head in my lap before speaking in a completely heartbroken voice...

“*Y-Y-YOU... you didn’t have to kill him...*”

FIGHTING THE FUTURE



As soon as I opened the door, something happened that I could not explain as anything other than Janus himself taking hold of my mind and crushing it between his hands. The pain was unlike anything I had ever experienced before but then once it started to fade, I was left with a mirage of images that, at first, I couldn't understand.

Flickers of someone's past, like looking through a ship's eye glass and seeing shore in the distance. But then the image grew bigger and my view of someone's past grew with it. It started with a raven-haired beauty, talking up towards a tree I seemed to be sitting in. I had never seen her before but from the state of her dress, I could tell it was not of this time. She looked like a servant girl who soon needed saving from some heavy-handed steward. My vision then changed as the eyes of the person I was witnessing this memory through took charge of the situation.

Then the next image changed as there was the King of Kings, with a beautiful young woman with kind blue-grey eyes and hair that looked like spun gold. She looked unsure before eyes of shock caught sight of me. No, not me I soon realized... *but Marcus*. This was something I only realized after catching my reflection in the mirror I had just passed. That's when I started to understand what this was...

He was showing me proof.

After that came a conversation that took place in a bed chamber, with Marcus surrounded by women. Astonishingly,

the King's sister was there, along with the raven-haired girl, the beautiful blonde, and a small, admittedly, adorable girl that looked no older than seventeen with the strangest hair I had ever seen. It soon became clear that they were all trying to enlist Marcus's help.

They were trying to get home.

Just like Ella was.

After that, the rest was a flicking recapitulation of Marcus as he created a diversion so as he could aid the woman in their request. He was in a village surrounded by mortals, with him at the center telling them all of the Demonic horrors that lay behind the castle walls. He was riling them up to a near frenzy of panic, instilling in them that they must act now in order to rid the world of such evils.

Something that seemed to have worked, for as the rest of the village panicked, others picked up whatever could be used as a weapon before marching towards the castle seen in the distance. This thus becoming the very reasons behind why the King of Kings was hunting him.

He had aided in the escape of his Chosen One. After that, time seemed to race forward until he came across a girl screaming at the side of the road. I suddenly felt as if my heart was going to cease its beating as I wanted to reach through his vessel and take control so as I could be the one to save her.

Two men about to rape my woman was enough to burn my insides and I seethed with so much hatred, so much rage, I was shocked that it still felt contained to this memory. I wanted to be the one to crush their skulls and gorge out their eyes. To rid them of their filthy hands that dare to touch her! Dared to see her, speak to her... *hurt her!*

Yet in the end, I was helpless to do anything but watch and was forced to endure as the truth she had been free to tell me came to fruition. The rest flittered by until it came to her being at my club with the clear plan to steal from me all along. She had feared for her life, truly believing I would only be too happy to rid her of it. I would have closed my eyes as bitterness and guilt washed over me.

But then, as if Marcus knew there was more for me to see, the memories changed. Those of a softer nature as there was no mistaking whose eyes I was seeing things from this time and that was...

Ella's.

I swear if I had control on my body, I would have fisted my hands in preparation for what I may see and taken a shaky breath. One that would no doubt continue as the first image I saw from her was facing an impossible sight. That of a great fountain whereas the water magically flowed in reverse. There were the others there also, the women from Marcus's memory. The one with raven hair shouted for her not to jump but Ella clearly hadn't listened. For the next memory I saw was...

Well, it was of me.

She had been telling the truth. She had time travelled and that time had brought her right to my door. As if Fate had meant to entwine us, even then. I watched the interaction between us be relived through her eyes, despite not needing to, for I would never forget this day as long as I lived. The sight of her, I remembered the feeling it in my gut. The spark of such desire, it had been near overwhelming. The growing need to feel her against me, and all despite having a wife I had only ever been fateful to.

I would have swallowed down my guilt desperately had I been in control of my body. But this was a prison of the mind, and I was locked inside it to the bitter end. I watched our first kiss in reverse, seeing how she saw me and then was rewarded with what came next.

The harrowing truth.

Ella was hiding with a clear sight of the meeting happening right in front of her. The same men that came to the cottage that day. But then nothing could have prepared me for what came next as my heart was ripped in two when Lerna revealed herself.

She had been involved in it all!

Pain and heartbreak hit me all at once. I would have fucking howled had I the ability to do so. I watched, unable to look away despite knowing that I would have endured regardless. Because this was what I had needed to see all this time.

The true villain.

Gods but how I had blamed Ella for the crimes of my treacherous wife! My heart no longer broke for her but instead for my Chosen. The years wasted where I could have simply found her in that old lady's cabin and instead of chasing her away, I would have taken her and declared her as mine, there and then. Thirty years I had wasted believing her to be the cause of my Demonic rebirth and the death of my wife. When, in fact, she had been the one to try and save me, just like she always claimed.

I had been the biggest of fools.

Because now, I saw it all.

She had not been to blame. All these years and I had felt her betrayal when it was only ever meant for someone else... *that of my wife*. Lerna had done this to me, and I had no fucking clue why! But I couldn't focus on that part now. Not when I had just learnt the most important part about all of this.

She had tried to save me. Save me of the life I never had a choice to accept but was, in fact, forced upon me. She had loved the man first and foremost. Not just the powerful King I had become. This meant something to me, something deep and profound. It resonated within my soul and buried itself there for eternal keeping. But with it then came the guilt that I hadn't done the same for her.

No, shamefully, I had done the opposite.

I had cast her aside and like I said, wasted the chance at thirty years extra spent with my Chosen One. I had denied the Fates and left her to fend for herself.

I was utterly ashamed of myself.

After this came the endless journey as she made her way to see her uncle, someone who had also wronged her. And well,

if it were the other way around, I knew that I couldn't entirely blame him. Not when if I had been in the same position, I too would have done anything in my power to be granted my Chosen. I would have sacrificed all for Ella. But I knew from Ella's side of things, it must have been a hard bitterness to stomach.

Which brought me full circle and when the last image of her faded, a broken-hearted Ella was left crying in her desperation to make it home, my heart broke alongside her. For now, I understood.

I understood everything.

"I think he's coming around." I heard Ella's soft voice lulling me back towards my reality. I even felt her gentle touch as she stroked back the hair from my face, one that felt cradled in her hold.

"As I said he would... *many times,*" Marcus answered her in a sarcastic tone, and she growled at him... *actually growled.* Even without seeing it, I found it adorable.

"Yes well, if he had been dead like I feared, then so would you be, right alongside of him!" If I had been fully conscious, I knew I would have grinned at this.

"Yes, I remember the knife you wielded my way, quite explicitly." Wait, Ella had been willing to kill in my honor? But of course she had, for could I really be surprised considering all she had endured in my name? After all, my girl was a fighter.

"Well next time I would start with, oh look, Ella, he's still breathing and then I wouldn't have to hold a knife to your throat!" she snapped and again, had I been able, I would have chuckled at this. In fact, I would have liked to have seen it for myself.

"Really? You wish to do this now or do you wish to continue to try and rouse this Beast from his slumber?" Marcus snapped, making her sigh and concede.

"Fair point... come on, baby, time to wake up," she said and my thoughts mirrored that of Marcus's verbal expression.

“Baby?” Ella groaned in annoyance before telling him,

“It’s a term of endearment in my time, okay? But, well, I suppose good point as he would most likely throw a tantrum if he heard me calling him baby... how about... come on, Beastman... that better for you both?” Again, this time I would have laughed had I been given the opportunity.

“Well, the shoe certainly fits, so yes, I think that is more than a little appropriate.” She ignored this, gasping the moment I felt myself strong enough to start to open my eyes.

“He’s waking up!” she cried with relief, and I swear the girl was going to kill me with her caring heart, one she had clearly given to me long ago. Even if I had foolishly doubted it for far too long myself.

“Yes, I have eyes, Ella dear,” Marcus commented, and I don’t know why but my bodily functions chose that moment to come roaring back to me and the second they did, the first thing I found in my grasp was Marcus’s neck.

“Whoa! Jared!” Ella’s voice was one of pure panic but as I brought the Fool’s face even closer to me, I snarled,

“Ask me next time.”

He nodded with what little movement I allowed him before just as quickly, I let go. It was only a heartbeat later that Ella’s breath left her on a flight of surprise as I grabbed her to me. I was sitting up in bed and she was pulled into my lap so I could hold all of her, cradling her head to my chest, not willing to let go. Then I looked over her to Marcus who was straightening his tie, so as I could tell him,

“Thank you, for I am forever in your debt.”

“Yes well, keeping your hands from around my neck will suffice, I am sure.” I had to scoff a laugh at that. But then he bowed his head to me and knowing that we needed the time, he left the room without making a sound.

I released a comforting breath as the weight of lies and mistrust had been lifted from my shoulders. Which meant that holding my girl now was offering me a whole different

experience. There were no more barriers between us, nothing but time, and one that I would battle against no matter what.

Because only my truth remained and in it...

THE FUTURE COULDN'T HAVE her back.

PARADES AND SAINTS



I didn't know exactly what Marcus had shown him but by the way Jared now held me and refused to let me go, I could easily guess. It also made me question why he didn't just do this before, wondering if now had been the only time the Fates would have allowed it?

A huge part of me was, of course, relieved but there was also a small part of me that was saddened and disappointed. Because he had *needed* to see, he had *needed* his proof before he had been willing to believe me.

A large chunk of my heart could understand and even sympathize as I had given him little reasons to trust me ever since I showed up. Because I had lied time and time again. But the part I had never lied about was the most important part. And now he knew the truth, not from my own lips but from my stolen memories.

I think he knew this as well, because as soon as he pulled back and saw the tears in my eyes, his gaze looked instantly remorseful.

"I should have believed you," he told me, making me swallow hard and try and force the tears to stop building. He cupped the side of my face and told me in a tone that was filled to the brim of every ounce of guilt and sorrow,

"I believed the wrong girl... Ella, I know this now. And even as I ask this of you, I know I do not deserve it, but will you ever forgive me?" I nodded and let the tears finally fall, some of which made the journey over his fingers and to my

lips. Lips he was soon about to caress with his own, as he pulled my face to his and sealed his forgiveness with a kiss,

“I will only ever love you.” A sob broke free, one that he took away with his lips and the feel of his tongue against my own. I had never cried while kissing before but there was something beautifully raw and pure about it. Like I was letting him taste the root of my pain, the strength of my relief and the vulnerability of my heart.

I let him have it all.

And in this perfect moment we both lost and gained something in return. Which was why I pulled back, took his own face in my hands. and told him,

“I am so, so sorry about Lerna... I am sorry you had to find out that way... that you... that you had to see it for yourself.” He looked surprised for a moment, and I wondered if I had gone too far. If what Marcus had showed him didn’t include her betrayal. But then his gaze softened to a deep tenderness as he asked,

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” I gave him sad eyes and replied with a question we both knew the answer to.

“Would you have believed me if I had?” The guilt in his eyes was answer enough.

“Besides, I wanted to spare you the pain of knowing. I was foolish enough that day to believe I could change your future, what the Fates had always intended for you to become. I just...” I stopped and looked away, wiping away my tears in a failed attempt at trying to stop the flow. I felt Jared hook my chin in his grasp and pull my gaze back to his own. One that was full of concern.

“What? Tell me, Ella, please.”

“I just felt like it was my punishment for even trying. To have you hate me, to blame me, it was my penance and my heartbreak to endure. A lesson from the Gods at what would happen should I ever try and change the way they want things,” I admitted before releasing this emotional pain in way of a sob.

“*Oh, Ella,*” he said my name, and the dam I had been trying so hard to maintain broke. It came crumbling down as I buried my head in his shoulder and cried. His arms enveloped me in a cocoon of warmth and comfort. Meaning I allowed myself to believe, for the first time in what felt like a new lifetime lived, that everything would be alright.

Then as if he wanted to take my mind from such thoughts, he spoke,

“Tell me more of our time together.”

I pulled back and before I had chance to wipe my tears, he did this for me, using both his thumbs.

“What do you want to know?” I asked timidly.

“Why did I let you go when you were eighteen?” I tensed and his expression told me he didn’t miss it.

“It was... well, it was complicated between us.” He frowned as if trying to make sense of it.

“You didn’t know I was your Chosen One,” I elaborated.

“How is that possible?” he asked, clearly shocked.

“Like I said, its complicated.”

“Sounds more like you don’t wish to tell me,” he corrected, making me sigh before shrugging my shoulders. Because the very last thing I wanted to do was tell him of my illness. Not so soon after what felt like the breakthrough we had just hurdled over.

“The important thing is that we fell in love without the burden of the Fates wishes demanding we do so.”

“As we did now,” he added, making me smile.

“Perhaps it was always Fated for it to be that way,” I offered softly.

“I think that you are right, for history seems to continue to repeat itself,” he agreed, and he didn’t know just how right he was about that.

“Tell me then, why was it you jumped into the fountain?”
At this the sigh that came from me was a painful one indeed.

“You were taken prisoner by a Summoner called Niniane. The club was ambushed, and your brother and Marcus got me out before I too could be taken.” At this his eyes went wide as it was easy to see how surprising this would be for him.

“Please continue.”

“I made it to the Temple of Janus and was headed to my uncle to see if he could help me but once there, I did something foolish,” I admitted, making him sigh.

“You believed you could go back a short time and warn me before it happened?” he guessed, making me nod regretfully.

“I had no idea it would send me back so far, but I had to believe there was a reason for it... I still do.” At this he cupped my face and told me,

“Perhaps we were always meant to start from this point in time and the Gods favored me enough not to make me wait.” It was a nice dream, but I knew it wasn’t true. Because I couldn’t stay, despite him thinking that I could.

“I came back to save you, Jared, and I still have that quest to fulfill.” At this his eyes hardened for a moment, before I could tell he was deep in thought.

“What if you could do both?” he asked after a few moments of weighted silence between us.

“What do you mean?” I asked skeptically.

“I will make you this promise, but the one made before it must still stand.” I frowned in question before he reaffirmed,

“The Blood Oath you made, means you will remain by my side and in exchange, I will help in trying to save myself from the future.”

“But how?” I asked, frowning so hard it almost ached.

“This Summoner, tell me of her powers.” I wanted to argue about going home but, in the end, I wondered if this could possibly be the reason I was here. Was it possible to save him,

even before it happened? Either way, I had to at least try, so I told him all I knew about her.

“So, the source of her powers is in this Book of Souls?” he reaffirmed.

“Yeah, she keeps the souls she wins trapped inside it like a prison and pulls them out when she needs them to fight. Think scary, green, soul sucking army at her fingertips.” At this he gave me an affectionate look as if he just found me cute.

“And what reason did she have for taking me her prisoner in the first place?”

“You mean kidnapping.” He gave me a sexy pointed look at this.

“I am hardly a child.” At this I teased him and poked his nose at the same time I said,

“A baby HellBeast perhaps.”

He growled playfully and tried to bite my finger, warning,

“Behave, pet.” Then he snatched my hand and forcefully extended my finger out to his mouth so he could suck on it. The sight made me quickly breathless.

“Okay, so what was I saying?” he chuckled after he let me go and reminded me,

“You were telling me why I became a victim of...”

“Kidnapping... right, right...” I ignored his playful growl and smirked through it before telling him the truth.

“She’s got the hots for you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, she fancies you, wants a piece of the HellBeast candy, wants to make bump in the night with you... sex, Jared, she wants sex,” I said with a roll of my eyes when all else failed. He raised a scarred brow and asked,

“Why?”

“Well, I gather you have a mirror.” At this he smirked and said,

“Yes, Ella, I have a mirror, what I mean is why would she think she even has a chance when I have you by my side?” Okay so this was really sweet, and my face must have said it all, as he reached for my chin, gave it a little gentle shake, and hummed,

“Focus on my question, Sweetheart.”

“Okay, so not that I really relish in telling you this part but you two had history.” At this he jerked back a little before repeating,

“History?”

“You had sex once.” At this he made a quizzical face before saying,

“And now she wants more... I must have made quite the impression,” he teased but I slapped his arm and said,

“Yes, and so did she as I believe it ended by her trying to kill you, so perhaps we focus on that part more before you start to congratulate your cock.” At this his eyes grew wide before he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“Congratulate my cock?” he repeated, making me say dryly,

“It doesn’t need a parade, or a day named after it.” At this he laughed again and pulled me closer.

“Are you sure? We could name you queen of the parade and call it, Saint Ella’s cock day.” Now it was my turn to howl with laughter and the sound, although embarrassing, was worth it when his eyes heated and those fine lines near his eyes appeared. God but he was so painfully handsome when he smiled at me like that.

“Okay, back to more serious topics of conversation.”

“I happen to take my cock very seriously, thank you,” he replied with a wink and making me chuckle.

“Yes well, you’re not the only one, as I do benefit greatly from it... but that is beside the point.”

“That should be the only point,” he retorted teasingly, making me smack his chest lightly and his eyes scanned down to watch the act.

“Will you quit flirting with me?” I chastised.

“I am not sure, when will you cease slapping me?” he countered.

“You’re doing it again, Beastman,” I commented, making his chest rumble and suddenly he slid me underneath him before growling down at me,

“I am very much looking forward to doing it again, my Beast’s woman.” Then before I could open my mouth to continue our playful banter, he kissed my response right out of me. Which meant I was near panting by the time he pulled back enough for me to say,

“Damn but I had a really good comeback to that, and you ruined it.”

“And I intend to ruin even more for I am not done with you!” Then he dipped his head and took my lips once more, doing exactly what he said he would. As the only thing I could think about for the next hour was that he was right...

His cock definitely did need a parade.

BLOODY BAD TIMING



I soon learnt that one sure way of shocking Jared was to tell him about the future, and this shock started after telling him,

“Would you believe that when I met you, Marcus was your best friend?”

“You surely jest,” was his immediate answer making me smile.

“I promise you, I don’t.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the look on his face. It was priceless but then it wasn’t as if I could be surprised. Not considering the rocky foundations of friendship they had started building on. I mean, I had lost count of the amount of times Jared had threatened to kill Marcus.

“Then it must have taken two hundred years for such a thing to happen.” I laughed again and reminded him,

“If I recall, Beastman, it wasn’t long ago that you said he wasn’t that bad.”

“Yes, well it is soon enough for me to take back,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck like he was remembering the pain of the experience. I reached out and rubbed his shoulders before I asked,

“Was it very painful?” I was of course referring to the effects still lingering on him of what Marcus had done. Something that still had me questioning how Marcus had

acquired my side of the memories, as Jared had explained to me some of what he had seen.

“Excruciating but not for the reasons you fear... Ella, the pain I experienced was that of the guilt I felt in not trusting you, as for the physical, it would never have been enough for what I deserve.” At this I threw my arms around him from behind and buried my face in his neck.

“*Oh, Jared,*” I murmured softly. His hand came up to grasp my forearm as I continued to hold him from behind. It was as if he wasn’t ready to let me go in that moment or all moments after that in fact. Of course, he also believed it wasn’t possible for me to get back to my own future and because of this, I knew that he felt relaxed enough that I was therefore going nowhere. As for me, I hadn’t exactly come to terms with the fact this could be true, as I still lived in hope that I would make it back one day. And if I ever did, there was one thing that I refused to leave without.

Which was why my arms loosened enough so as my fingers could find the cord around his neck.

“I do believe this is mine,” I said as my fingers traced the vibrant green stone that was a carving of a howling wolf. At this Jared covered my hand before tightening his hold and using it so as he could pull me around to face him. We were both still sitting in bed after spending quite some time talking about the future I had experienced with him.

“You are right,” he said softly before reaching up and untying it before bringing it back to my own neck. Then once it was back home against my skin, I couldn’t help but sigh in content.

“It means something to you?” he asked after taking in my reaction. I nodded before elaborating,

“It’s carved from agate, which is my birth stone, and was chosen for me because it is supposed to relieve you of bad dreams.”

“Chosen for you?” Jared didn’t miss that part, making me grin. Then I reached for his hand and whilst a small grin

played at my lips I told him,

“You made it for me, Jared.” At this I heard the quick intake of breath before I lifted my gaze from our entwined hands to see the shock in his eyes.

“I did... truly?”

“Truly,” I replied, now grinning from ear to ear.

“Then that is why you looked so heartbroken when I took it from you.”

I nodded, letting my smile drop as that devastating night came back to me.

“I fear my words of apology will never be enough, for I wronged you so deeply,” he said, making me wince at the pain in his tone before I started shaking my head.

“None of that matters now. What’s done is done and there is no point focusing on the past that others are also responsible for, those who manipulated the situation.”

“Ella, you forgive my side of things too easily,” Jared said, shaking his head in gentle reprimand. But at this I just squeezed his hand tighter and told him,

“And you take too much guilt upon yourself.”

“How could you be so understanding?” he asked, his tone laced with frustration as he untangled himself from my hand before moving from the bed.

“How? Don’t you know yet?” I said, now doing the same as him and slipping from the bed. Then I came to stand in front of him and forced his gaze to mine, framing each side of his face. A face so torn and weighted down with guilt. I could see it in his eyes, and I couldn’t stand it any longer. So, I told him exactly why I could forgive him so easily.

“Because, Jared Weller... *I love you...*” As soon as I uttered these three words, his hands were on my face and he crushed his mouth to mine. His kiss told me so much of his feelings but the moment he pulled back, his lips said so much more as he laid his forehead against mine, before telling me,

“As I love you, Ella Connor.”



“FEMALES REALLY WEAR long breaches and dress like men?” he asked a few hours later after we had sealed our declarations made by making love in front of the fire. When he picked me up in his arms and carried me over to the Chesterfields positioned around the fireplace, he whispered over my lips,

“I wish to see every inch of you.” Something he did... *thoroughly*. He stripped me bare and kissed his way down my body before doing so in reverse. But not until after I was a quivering mess and he had exercised his tongue by lashing it against my clit until I could come no more. After that he stood and rid himself of his clothes until completely naked. The sight of him took my breath away as the firelight licked at every inch of his skin, making him look more like a God standing in front of me. Then without a word, he lifted my body so my torso was flush with his, making me wrap my legs around him. He then turned so my back was to the fire before sitting down with me straddling his lap.

I cried out in utter bliss as he thrust up so deep inside me, it was almost too much for me to take. But then with his hands firmly held at my hips, he started to lift me with startling ease before pulling me down onto his length in hard long strokes.

“That’s it... take it, my good girl... you take my cock inside you so well,” he praised before dipping his head and taking my nipple into his mouth to torture until I was once again screaming his name when finding my next orgasm. One that after that just seemed to roll into the next as Jared seemed to be on a mission. A mission to kill me with the weapon that was his cock. Which was why, by the end, I passed out with him still nestled deep inside me, after too many orgasms to count and him whispering against my hairline,

“I love you and I will never let you go.”

But as for much later, we were still talking about the future as we made our way to the club hand in hand. And despite

Jared telling me how he wished he could just keep me naked in bed forever, I was once again dressed and wearing a dark burgundy gown. I was also giggling at the look on his face when I told him what the woman of my day wore.

“Well, they are far more practical for working in than dresses, that’s for sure.” He shook his head as if he was still trying to process all I had told him, and admittedly, it had been *a lot*. Of course, the part he had been most excited about was when I told him of all the different types of vehicles there were... *especially the motorbikes*.

The planes however, he couldn’t get his head around and, well, when I told him about rockets going up to space and landing men on the moon, he thought I was teasing him and refused to believe me. To which I spent the rest of the day silently motioning with my hand like a rocket flying up, making him laugh each time.

Now of course, we were on the topic of women working for a living and doing the same jobs as a man does. This was after he had asked me to explain my previous rant in more details, the one I had when I had been trying to convince him I was from the future. Specifically, the part when I said I carried a gun.

He asked if my job had been dangerous, and I flinched thinking back to when I was attacked, and Jared had saved me. Of course, he had also tried to have those memories permanently taken from me so as to save me the trauma. But in the end, it hadn’t quite worked out that way.

“It has its challenges, yes, but I get to save people and help preserve wildlife,” I told him as we navigated our way through the tunnels I knew led back to his club.

“You enjoy this work, I can tell.”

I granted him a questioning look to which he stopped walking and tugged me round to face him. This was so he could pull me close. Then he ran the pad of his thumb under my right eye and told me,

“Your beautiful eyes dance with excitement.”

I couldn't help but melt into him at this, sighing into his chest as we wrapped our arms around each other. Then he told me sympathetically,

“You will see it again one day, in time, for we will have lifetime after lifetime to experience it together.” I nodded my head, not wanting to spoil this moment with an argument.

“I just want to make you happy, and I vow to do all in my power to achieve this,” he said before kissing the top of my head and again I sighed into him, gripping onto his waistcoat with more strength. Then I looked up at him and told him the truth.

“Being with you is all the happiness I will ever need.” The look he granted me in return was his most tender yet, it was a moment he sealed with a kiss. Every word I said was the truth, because I knew if I was unable to get back to my own time, then I would still find happiness in life as long as I was with him. Of course, I would miss so many things about my life. Mainly my family as that was what pained me the most. The thought of never seeing my mom or my dad again nearly brought me to tears.

Because inevitably, my being here would mean so much change, it was scary. Which was why I couldn't let myself go down that rabbit hole just yet. Not until I was sure that this was it for me. It was it for my own future. As for Jared, I knew he would do everything in his power to keep me here and seemed quite confident of achieving this fact. Which meant I was at war with myself, as I had fallen in love with this man all over again. A loved I now shared for the Jared I'd had no choice but to leave behind.

The Jared I would miss the most.

After this tender, sweet moment, we continued on our way to the club. Where if our plans worked, by the end of the night we would have at least rid the Summoner of her powers before they had the chance at growing too great. Over two hundred years' worth of soul collecting was a lot. So, I was hoping she wasn't nearly as powerful as she had been when attacking the club. We just had to get that damn book away from her.

We'd already had a meeting with his brother and Marcus, who were both in charge of letting the rest of his council members know so everything could be put into place. Marcus believed he had enough power to take the book, if Jared could provide the distraction.

We had also argued about my being there, as he had wanted to keep me locked away in his room until the task was done. I had argued my point enough that finally he gave in to reason. Especially when I pointed out that I was the only one who knew what she looked like, and what if another turned up in her place? Besides, this was my mission and I had been through too much not to see it through to the bitter end. Like I said, he finally caved after that.

But then, just as we stepped out into the club, a wave of dizziness hit me and I knew what was coming next as my legs didn't want to hold me. I started to sway backwards to the sound of Jared calling my name in a questioning tone,

"Ella?" Of course by the time he was forced to catch me, he was no longer speaking... no, *he was shouting*.

"Ella!"

I tried to grip onto him but as my body began to fail me my fingers couldn't keep the contact.

"Ella! What's wrong?!"

"What happened, is she alright?" I vaguely heard Orth asking, making Jared snap,

"I don't know... quickly, go get Marcus!" I felt myself being lifted in his arms before he swiftly made his way back to his bedchamber. My breathing becoming more labored with every forceful step he took. Naturally, in his panic, it didn't take long before I felt myself being placed down.

"Come on, sweetheart, please, try and stay awake long enough to tell me what's wrong," he pleaded with me, and the sound broke my heart.

"*It's... I...*" Of course, what *I didn't have* was the strength left in me, admittedly feeling weak since this morning. And well, I had thought it down to a night with Jared and too many

orgasms. Damn it, but we were so close to setting things right and beating this bitch, why did this have to happen now?!

“I’m here, what happened?” Marcus said, making me try and focus on him as he entered the room.

“I don’t know, one moment we were talking and the next she started to faint,” Jared told him, his tone full of concern.

“Fuck... but she was worried this may happen,” he said, and I wanted to shake my head at him but knew it would be foolish considering he was the only one who knew what was needed.

“Tell me!” Jared snapped, anger quickly replacing his worry.

“She’s sick,” Marcus stated, and this was when Jared lost it.

“*What?!*” he all but roared, however his only reply to this came in the form of an order,

“Give her your blood.”

“His blood?” Orthrus questioned from somewhere in the room.

“Yes, do it now!” Marcus demanded with a growl of words and before I knew what was happening, Jared was tearing into his wrist and bringing it to my lips. The second I scented the metallic tang of his blood, I latched on and started drinking him down like my life depended on it. However, the second I moaned, he must have known what was coming, as he snarled,

“Everyone, out and wait for me in the next room!” I didn’t know who else was in here with us as my eyes didn’t seem to want to stay focused on much. As soon as I heard the door shut, he released a sigh and smoothed back my hair with his free hand.

“That’s it, my love, keep drinking, take everything you need.” He continued to caress my face as I swallowed down his life’s essence straight from the vein. But then as soon as my body started to heal itself enough for me to feel better, the knowing heat from feeding from him continued to build. A

feeling that soon had me tearing my lips from his wounded flesh and crying out as the pleasure hit me. I didn't know what I shouted, as it was all a blur, but the moment I started to come down again, feeling the strength of his blood already taking effect, I flinched at the sight of such worry in his eyes.

"You need more," he stated, forcing me to shake my head as I told him softly,

"I am fine now." I could see he wanted to argue but he must have thought better of it. So instead, he brought his wrist to his lips and licked the length of his tongue across the holes made. Then as he rolled down his sleeve and used it to wipe away the blood from my face, he snapped,

"Get back in here!" Seconds later, Marcus and Orthrus walked back inside his bedchamber. His brother dressed in his usual, smart suit indicative to this time period, whereas Jared obviously preferred a more comfortable and casual state. Meaning Jared wore all black and, like usual, was minus the jacket and cravat. Orthrus wore a navy-blue suit with a white shirt and cravat neatly tied at his neck. As for Marcus, he once again looked like some dashing pirate, only this time with a long sash tied around his waist that was all the colors you would see in a sunset. His red jacket, a beacon of color in the room compared to Jared and his brother.

"Do you want to explain to me why neither of you thought it important enough to tell me this could happen?!" he snapped, looking down to me and then back to Marcus. I flinched at the anger in his tone, but his hands became a contradiction to his mood as he continued to stroke his fingers down the side of my head, neck, and shoulder.

"I am sorry, Cookie..." Marcus said with a sigh before turning to Jared, whose mood did not improve by this statement.

"She told me she has a disease that can only be treated in her time." At this his face snapped back to mine so quick, it was as if I had pulled a cord.

"Is this true!?" I reached up my hand and cradled his face, trying not to be distracted by how soft his beard was or how

handsome he was, even in his obvious concern.

“I am sorry, I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You should have told me,” he reprimanded softly.

“I know but I didn’t think it would matter.”

“Because you thought you would be going home,” he snapped bitterly.

“No, because I thought you would give me your blood sooner.” His eyes widened.

“And this is the cure?” he asked, and I nodded slowly.

“Then if I had known I would have given it to you after your very first dance, Chosen One or not,” he said, still holding onto his anger and frustration. I released another sigh and told him again,

“I am sorry.” At this he let out a breath of defeat and gathered me up so as he could hold me. Then he told me,

“No more secrets, Ella, understood?” I nodded, unable to say the words. Because in that moment I knew that as soon as I was given the chance, I would have no other choice but to leave. Despite feeling as if I would be leaving half of my heart here in 1799.

“Right, we don’t have long before this bitch gets here. Is everything as it should be?” Jared asked his brother, prompting him to reply,

“Everything is as planned.”

“Good, then I will take Ella back to her Chambers to rest and be...”

“What... wait, no,” I said quickly, making him groan,

“Ella, you need rest and the room you were in before is more secure.”

“No, I’m not going and before you start to argue, I have your blood in me and I already feel stronger than I have in days.” A second of guilt flashed in his eyes, making me grip his hand tighter in mine.

“I am not weak, and I still need to do this... let me prove how strong I can be... please, Jared... please don't let me come this far only to shut me out of it when we are so close to the end.” The moment he sighed I knew he would give me what I wanted, even before he said,

“Very well, but I swear the second I see even a foot slip out of place or a slight slur of a word, I will call this whole thing off and carry you back here myself.” I smirked before pulling his face closer to kiss his cheek.

“I promise.”

“Very well, let's get this over with, for the sooner we do, the sooner we can start living our lives more peacefully together.” I couldn't help but laugh,

“Jared, you live underground and own a Demonic fight club, I think peaceful and normal is out of the question.” To this I simply received a wry look in return before he stood and then offered me his hand.

“Shall we go?” I placed my hand in his and told him,

“LET'S GO SAVE THE FUTURE.”

SUMMONING THE COURAGE



This time when we walked into the club, I stood straighter and felt far stronger than before. Stronger than I had in what felt like a long time. Yet I would have been lying to say that my nerves weren't riding me hard. Because I knew that this could all go south, and I had too much riding on this for it to go horribly wrong. And as if sensing this trepidation in me, Jared squeezed my hand and told me,

"There is still time to back out of this plan?" I shook my head and told him,

"I have to try."

"Very well," he conceded with a sigh before walking me to his throne, and I knew tonight was one I wouldn't be sharing with him.

"You remember the plan, right? You know what to say?"

"You have mentioned it a time or two," he replied wryly, something I ignored.

"She will want you to feed her ego, make her feel important. Bargain with her, after all, what you will offer her will be too much of a temptation to pass up on," I said, despite knowing I was repeating myself, as I had already told him this.

"I will distract her to the best of my abilities," he replied in an unenthusiastic tone.

"I don't want to know what that entails," I mumbled, making him growl down at me.

“If she touches me, I will not be pleased but if she touches you, it will be the last thing she ever does,” he warned dangerously, and the threat turned his eyes to molten silver.

“Yes, well if this all goes well, then she won’t even know I am there,” I answered, making him nod, but before I could pull away from him, he gripped my waist and yanked me hard against him.

“Jared, she could show any minute and...”

“I don’t fucking care!” he snarled before crushing his mouth to mine and kissing me in front of his entire club. It was also such a kiss that it made me instantly rise on my tip toes so I could get more of him. Or more like he could get more of me as he most definitely dominated most of our kisses. A fact I couldn’t complain about, not when it made me lightheaded with lust and made it hard to stop myself from trying to climb him like a pole dancer.

Finally, it was the sound of his brother’s voice clearing that brought us apart and realizing where we were.

“Don’t go far,” he growled down at me before wanting to let my hand go, as Marcus was standing back ready to protect me and implement his side of the plan. He was also holding out a long dark-grey cloak for me to wear that would help keep me hidden.

“I promise,” I told him but then he tugged on my hand and my face was soon tipped up thanks to his hold on my chin. This was so as he could tell me,

“A promise you sealed with blood... don’t ever forget it, my Chosen.” I nodded feeling the blush creeping along my cheeks, a sight that encouraged him to run the backs of his fingers down my skin before whispering down at me,

“I love you, little dancing girl.” I melted into him and held him tight before telling him in return,

“As I love you, my HellBeast King.”

He hummed contentedly before having no choice but to let me go. His fingers keeping contact for as long as possible before I was out of reach. I then followed my friend towards

the rest of the crowd that were there ready to watch the next fight.

We kept close to the stage but far enough away that we melted into the masses, with Marcus keeping close enough for others to get the hint. Although I doubted anyone had missed the way their King had claimed me in front of his throne. So, I knew they wouldn't dare try anything. I actually wondered if this had been why Jared had done it in the first place, as an extra measure to keep me safe.

As for the fight, you could tell that my friend had already started to implement Mission Marcus to the club, obviously taking his task seriously and relishing in the challenge. I knew this the moment half-naked female Demons strutted onto the stage with their skirts hiked up to the tops of their thighs and their corseted tops pushing their breasts so high, they came spilling over the top.

“Your handy work, I presume?” I muttered, making him grin down at me.

“What can I say... I have a crowd to please and a King even more so.”

“You're also nothing if not predictable,” I groaned, at least thankful that when I looked to Jared, I saw his eyes were solely focused on me and not on the Demons trying to shake their red-skinned breasts at him like each was a bell to ring. Again, my comment just awarded me another creepy grin, before the dancers finished and flashed their asses as they lifted up their skirts when making their way off the stage. Of course, the crowd absolutely loved it.

After this it was time for the first fight, and it was one between what looked like a snake had swallowed a man who had tried to fight back by pushing all four of his limbs out of its body. As for the other, it looked as if a Demonic bull had had a baby with the Hulk. But even I had to admit, it had been a bloody good fight to watch.

However, by the time the third fight was over I knew Jared was getting restless without me by his side. I had already had a waitress come over and bring me a tankard of ale, one I

noticed belonged to Jared, as his personal sigil was engraved there. In fact, he was just about to get out of his seat after ignoring the shake of my head, telling him no for the fourth time, along with mouthing the words,

‘Give it time.’ Yet this time he looked to be ignoring my wishes as he had hit his limit.

“I don’t think Jared is willing to wait any longer, maybe we should just...” I started to walk back when Marcus’s eyes shone with swirls of power as if he could see what was coming. Hence why he then grabbed my arm to stop me. Then those eyes lowered to mine and in them I could see so much.

“*She is here,*” he told me, making me mutter a curse the second my eyes went from his, back to the stage. That was when I saw the green mist starting to roll in along the floor like some ghostly fog. I quickly covered his hand with my own, gripping on to it and trying not to let my fear bury me under when I saw her stepping through the tear in reality she had created with a glowing green portal.

This bitch had taken everything from me and this, right now, it was time for a little pay back! Which was why by the time she fully emerged I found my fear replaced by seething fury. I watched as she stepped from the portal like she was some kind of queen expecting a royal reception.

Her cruel, calculating black eyes scanned the space before that evil grin of hers emerged like a darkness eclipsing the sun. Her sharp features gave her an arrogance that no one could ignore as she stepped further from the portal. The sweep of her dark green dress followed her behind in a long train, causing the candlelight to dance along the scales it seemed to be made from. But unlike the last occasion, she had not an ounce of armor on her, as clearly, she hadn’t dressed for war this time. No, this time, she had dressed with one objective in mind... *to impress a HellBeast King.*

Meaning the strange scaled-skin material clung to every inch of her, and not in a way that you would have ever seen in this time period. She reminded me more of some evil goddess, with her dress tied at one shoulder in a toga style, adorned

with a thick belt around her waist glittering with green crystals. Her hair had been coiled back and reminded me of snakes, making me wonder if one would suddenly strike out and hiss.

Everyone in the club collectively gasped at the sight of her, and my eyes turned to Jared, who was regarding her with barely restrained rage. I could tell he was trying hard to control himself, but when his claws grew from his nails and started gouging lines in the arms of his throne, I knew he was losing the battle.

“Ah, the mighty HellBeast King, I must say what an honor it is to finally meet you, for I have heard so much... only good things of course,” she said in that overconfident tone of hers. An air of arrogance that filled the room with a near stifling aroma named ‘Bitch.’

“Summoner,” Jared responded harshly, and just when I thought he was going to blow it, she grinned back at him.

“I thought he was supposed to be charming her?” I muttered to Marcus, who replied,

“Perhaps she is partial to an asshole male.” I rolled my eyes when he added,

“What...? You were.” Well at this I had no comment, not seeing as well, yeah, to begin with Jared had been a jackass to me.

“Oh please, such formalities are really not needed between us... no, no, you will know me by name, for I am Niniane.”

Jared bowed his head, although it looked like it took everything in him to do just that.

“I am pleased you accepted my invitation... for I must say, I was surprised you came so quickly, for I have heard of your talents also and no doubt you find yourself in high demand,” he said after what looked like some muttered encouragement from his brother.

“Oh, but, my Lord, you flatter me,” she gushed, making me want to gag.

“But of course I would come, for one such as I knows better than to keep a King waiting, especially when he has an offer to make, one I confess I am most intrigued to hear,” she said while shaking back some of her coiled hair as if this had the sole power to endear him to her.

“Ah yes, my offer, but first before you hear of my terms, I would like to request a small demonstration, a chance at seeing the mistress of souls at work.” At this she grinned like a cat that had just pounced on a mouse she had been toying with enough to let think it could escape. She also took a step back with one foot and bent her body into a low curtsy, one that allowed Jared an ample view of everything else she had to offer. And just like that, the vision of my own past flashed in my mind as once again, history began to repeat itself.

“As you wish, my lord,” she cooed before creating a rift between worlds and, with it, pulling forth the book of souls from the center of the glowing cat’s eye created. Then while holding it hovering above one of her hands, she used the other one to run her palm over its cover, making the book open. I also couldn’t help but notice that many of its pages were empty, meaning that my instincts had been right.

She hadn’t been at this for as long as she had in my own time.

“Behold, the soul of the great son of Buer!” she said, now pulling the soul from within its pages and forcing it to do her bidding.

“What the Hell is that thing?!” I muttered as the ghostly figure of a Demonic snarling lion emerged with what looked like eight twisted goat’s legs giving it an arachnid vibe.

Basically, it was freaky as hell!

“He is one of the son’s of Buer, who is a powerful President of Hell, with fifty legions of Demons under his command,” Marcus told me as the crowd around us cheered in awe.

“Very impressive,” Jared said after clapping slowly, forced to join in with the crowd. At this she walked forward, leaving

the book hovering there behind her as she was now solely focused on Jared and making her intent known.

“I am pleased to have impressed you, although if I am permitted to say that I have many more talents, if his lordship wishes to discuss them in say... a more private setting.” Okay, so if I wanted to gag before, now I wanted to throw up on her feet!

“Oh god, please give me a break,” I muttered, making Marcus hush me as he had started to creep forward.

“What are you...?”

“I believe we were waiting for a chance to steal again... well, here it is, Cookie,” he replied, making me hiss back,

“But the monster is right there!”

“Yes, well thankfully it isn’t the only monster in the room... now come on.”

“Wait, me...? Why me?” I asked, wondering when this became the plan.

“Because you, my dear, are going to play my lovely bait.” I swear but nothing could have stopped me from groaning at this.

“Marcus, that isn’t the plan we discussed.”

“No, but it is the only plan that will work.” Then he tapped the side of his head and said,

“Now trust me.” I grumbled a moan, knowing what that meant from Mr Fates himself and decided to let him pull me closer. At the very least, Jared was busy with ‘entertaining’ the bitch’s ego.

“I believe business before pleasure, Niniane,” Jared replied in such a way I could tell he was seconds away from grinding his teeth.

“Then let us hurry and get the negotiations underway so we can celebrate our new partnership,” she said seductively and again, I wanted to take off my shoe and throw it at her. Perhaps set it on fire first or douse it with poison.

“I wish to make a simple trade,” Jared started.

“Ah but trading in souls is what I do best... go on,” she all but fucking purred!

“I am in need of more fighters and, in exchange, you may reap the souls of those who fall beneath them.” At this her greedy eyes grew wild.

“That sounds like an excellent trade,” she hummed as we drew closer, the monster still there hovering like some Demonic abomination in the mist waiting for her order to strike.

“I’m glad you think so but there are exceptions,” he said, making her grin before bowing her head slightly.

“But of course, as I would expect there to be,” she said, drawing closer and closer to Jared and therefore further away from the still hovering book. Jared was doing his job, despite knowing him well enough to know how hard it was for him to keep up the charade. Especially when his eyes tried to subtly scan for me in the crowd and narrowing when they couldn’t find me.

“He is going to lose his shit soon if we don’t hurry,” I said just when we reached the edge of the steps, and this was when Marcus turned to me and said,

“Alright, Cookie, this is the plan, I am going to go up and run for the book, but I will get caught.” I frowned at this and started shaking my head.

“But then what is the...”

“You will grab the book when her gaze is centered on me.” I jerked back at this and shock took over.

“Me?!” But how can I...”

“Trust me, and trust in the Fates that brought you here... but most of all, trust in yourself, Ella.” I started shaking my head when he grabbed me the shoulders and told me,

“You were Chosen by the Gods, Ella. Believe in yourself and the power locked within you. Believe in yourself the way I do... the way your Chosen One does, for he is locked away in

her world and my sweet girl... *he is calling for you.*" At this I sucked in a harsh breath and nearly staggered back.

"He is?"

"Yes, now the question remains... *will you follow his call?*" I swallowed hard and nodded, my reserve and courage coming to me all at once.

"I always knew you had it in you, Cookie," he said with a smirk and gently knocked on the side of my jaw.

"Had what?" I asked as he started to walk up the steps and towards what most likely was certain death. For I had seen these things fight and they... well, *they were unbeatable.*

"The Heart of a HellBeast." Then he winked at me as his way of goodbye and made his presence known just as Jared had hit his limit.

"Don't touch me!" Jared roared, tossing her back from where she had obviously made her way across the space between the stage and his throne. She staggered back, landing on the stage with a thud, just as Jared called out to me in panic,

"ELLA!"

"Ladies and Gentlemen, bastards and bitches... I give you my final act!" Marcus said, walking closer to the book and pulling forth his staff from his jacket that grew to the floor. Niniane snarled back at him before her eyes flashed murderous intent to her creature's soul. He roared like a fucking lion and knew what was needed of him as he attacked. Marcus closed his eyes for a moment as he raised his hands out to his sides as if waiting for the sweet relief of death.

Then before the creature could hit him, he shifted his body, sliding to the side and bringing the attention of both Niniane and her controlled soul towards him. Marcus was drawing them away from the book and I knew that now was my chance. It was now or never. And never meant death.

Jared needed me.

That was all that mattered.

So, I raced up the steps as quickly as I could, using Jared's blood in my veins to power me faster across the stage until I finally made it to the glowing green book.

"ELLA, NO!" Jared saw this and roared before leaping across the stage. But he wasn't the only one to try and run at me, as Niniane did too. I looked to Marcus who was just about to feel the final blow and watched as he nodded.

"You fool! You will die!" Niniane shouted after coming to a stop a few meters away before taunting laughter came from her lips, but then I told her,

"Not today I won't, but you... I will be seeing you soon, Niniane, and when I do, *I will have no fucking mercy!*" I warned before grabbing hold of the book and the second I did, I screamed as I let the power take total control. Gods but it was like being cocooned in a vortex of souls all swimming around me and screaming out at me to take them. It nearly brought me to my knees, but I held on. I forced my body to hold on as a bright green light near blinded me. It wanted to harm me, to consume me, but I fought against all the evil intent, determined not to let it tear me apart like I knew it wanted to.

And with that single thought, I managed to get back some will over my body, looking to my friend to see him now lying on the floor.

Marcus was dead.

I screamed in agony and rage... Gods, so much fucking rage that I felt like it was a fire coursing through me, getting ready to self-combust. An explosion of green souls came roaring out from all around me at the strength I commanded.

"No... No, it's... it's impossible!" Niniane said the second I dragged in air, standing there and panting as the souls accepted me and my rule over them. They started to settle, falling down to the ground like clouds of green ash.

"*Ella?!*" Jared said my name in utter shock, the thousand questions all there in that one expression. But then only one slipped past his lips as he slowly approached.

“What...? What have you done?” he asked, his voice almost breaking. I closed my eyes a moment and told him,

“What I had to do.” This was followed by a single tear falling down my cheek as I knew what was left for me. Even as I raised my hand and the book shot straight to it at my silent command.

“Ella, no... just let go... let it go and come back to me.” Another tear fell and, this time, it was mirrored by the man in front of me as water-filled eyes looked back at me. The sight felt like hundreds of souls all mourning with me. But I looked to the side and with a slash of my hand, I opened a portal, not even questioning how. Because I just knew that I could. Like there was a living, breathing entity inside me, guiding me and showing me the way.

“*You promised,*” he whispered so painfully that I let my head hang at that as more tears fell, disappearing into the green mist surrounding me.

“You promised me,” he said again, this time with more strength.

“I know, but please understand, it wasn’t the only promise I made,” I told him, my voice cracking and making each word harder to say than the one before it. I glanced towards Niniane to see her now trying to fight Orthrus’s hold on her, but it was clear that she was nothing without her book. The source of all her power reduced now to nothing as it belonged to me now.

“Please... *I beg of you,*” Jared said, the tears falling freely from us both now and I forced myself to act. But first he had to know the truth.

“Thank you for making me fall in love with you all over again. I will never forget our time... time no one can ever take from us.”

“*ELLA, NO!*” he shouted as I started to step back through the portal, my heart heavy for all I had lost along the way and breaking for all that I had gained. He went to reach out to stop me but all he received in return was my last goodbye, as his fingers skimmed the air where I had once been.

“I love you, Jared Weller. I will love you for yesterday, for today, and for the tomorrow, and pray that you are waiting for me on the other side... *goodbye.*” Then I stepped through just as he made one last leap to get to me, the sight of his heartbreak was the very last thing I saw before I fell into...

HOPELESS OBLIVION.

A FATED HEART



The moment I fell, I opened my eyes to find my own inconsolable reflection looking back at me. It started to move like water as I moved and, for a brief second, I wondered if this was the moment I was about to drown. The water was black, or at least the surface beneath it was. It was why I could see my reflection so well. I lifted my hand, as it was only inches shallow and found my hand covered in black sand.

“Where am I... what is this place?” I asked myself aloud, not sure if I wanted an answer. Yet that was exactly what I received as a voice startled me enough to cry out.

“Hello, human Ella.” I flipped over and scrambled back in fright, now splashing the water that strangely didn’t make me wet. But this was when I finally saw the never-ending space around me. An endless room of infinity. One without walls, without life, without a single soul but mine. Just an endless space of nothingness. I expected to see someone coming closer to me but there was no one to be found.

“*Who... who said that?*” I asked fearfully, now looking around quickly and unsurprisingly finding nothing behind me. But then the moment I tucked my legs under me, was when I started to feel a presence emerge. I narrowed my eyes as the figure approaching became clearer, quickly causing me to shake my head in utter disbelief. As now I couldn’t believe my eyes. Because I must have been wrong. I mean, sure they looked so similar, but seeing as I had never seen him like this, then how could I be sure?

No, I must have been dreaming or worse, I was dead. But then if I was, that mean that he was too. A thought that quickly brought me to tears. Because the memory of him hit me as I realized that I was right... *he had died.*

He had sacrificed himself for me.

“Why do you cry, little one?” he asked, bending down on one knee in front of me, and I didn’t even flinch when I felt his cool hand lift my chin up to his handsome face. One I had never seen like this before.

“Because I failed. I failed so many people... *I failed you... Marcus.*” At this he smiled and without all the crazed make-up and the wild hair, he looked so human. So, breath takingly handsome it nearly hurt to look at him. Like some regal Angel without his wings to take from the masculine beauty of his face.

Gods but it was so painful looking at him.

“Oh, my dear, but you didn’t fail.” I frowned at that, hiccupping through my tears and wiping them away long enough to see the hand he held out for me to take. I did without question and let him help me to my feet.

“I didn’t?” I asked in awe. He shook his head and allowed himself a soft and gentle smile. And once again, I was blown away by it, seeing it now without the exaggerated lines of red that usually outlined his lips like Batman’s Joker.

“No, no, in truth, you did everything you were ever meant to. You were perfect, my child,” he said, running the back of his hand down my cheek with a sort of kindness and tender affection a father would give to his crying daughter.

“I don’t understand... how are you here, Marcus...? Where are we?”

“I often forget how curious humans can be.” I frowned at that before stating what now seemed like the obvious,

“You’re not Marcus, are you?”

“No,” he said softly with a slight and gentle smile.

“I can take on many forms and chose one of my Oracles so as to bring you comfort... I didn't wish to frighten you,” he told me, making me swallow hard.

“One of your oracles... Marcus is an Oracle?” I asked, making him nod. Then he smirked as if an amused thought gripped him before adding,

“If not one of my more colorful ones, should we say.” I chuckled at that and agreed.

“Oh, colorful is one word to describe him.”

He too laughed in return.

“So, I am not dead then?” I asked, really wanting to be sure about this part.

“No, but I brought you here once you fulfilled your destiny and was faced with the next... how should I say, fork in the road.” This was when it hit me.

“Holy shit, you're Janus... the God Janus... and God, I just said shit in front of you and then God... oh my God, I am so messing this up, aren't I?!” At this he laughed and took my hands from covering my mouth down into his own.

“You are a delight, child, but no, you mess up nothing and you most certainly are not dead. No, like I said, I brought you here so as I may speak with you.” My eyes widened at that and the disbelief was easy to hear in my tone,

“You wanted to speak with me?”

He nodded at this, that comforting smile still in place.

“And here is?” I asked after looking around and again, seeing nothing.

“We are at the center of the fountain.”

I gasped.

“But... that's impossible, this place must go on for miles and miles and...” At this he placed a hand at my shoulder just as the real Marcus had done when asking me to trust him.

“There is very little in my world that is impossible and now, in your world too.” I released a heavy, weighted sigh and replied,

“I guess you’re right.”

“You were very brave, and I fear you will have no choice but to continue to be so, for your journey is far from over yet.” I nodded at this and asked,

“Will I ever manage to save him?” Of course he knew who I was talking about.

“Now that, even I am forbidden to answer, but I will tell you this much, for everything you gained in the past will still be yours, now and forever.” He nodded down at me, making me look to find myself dressed exactly how I had been before jumping in the fountain. Even my necklace was still hanging there, like a reminder of all it had taken to get it back. But other than that, I had no idea what he meant by this.

“And for those that I left behind?” I said, resisting the urge to look behind me as if that other life could still be found there.

“That branch of time collapsed the moment you left it, for you were the last to leave.” Again, my breath left me quickly before I asked,

“The others... they made it home?” At this he took a step back and revealed the shimmering wall behind him. And there, just beyond, was the heartwarming sight of my family in the Temple, as if waiting for me.

“I finally made it home,” I whispered as tears filled my eyes once more.

“You did indeed and now, as you step back into your destiny, you will have the comfort of knowing that time is exactly as you left it. You are the only change to this world... *remember that.*”

“But everything I left behind... Jared, he...” It was too painful to say, as the heartbreak I had caused was too raw in my mind.

“Remember to always trust there is a reason for every step we take and every place we choose to take it in. Trust in the keepers of time, for even they lose their way sometimes, just like your friend once did but, in the end, salvation comes to us all... *even me.*”

I looked up at him then to see the depth of those words looking back at me from startling blue eyes. Which was when I did something I knew might be forbidden but something I couldn't have helped either way. I threw myself into his arms and hugged him,

“Thank you... thank you for giving me this.” He froze in surprise for a moment but before I could retreat and start to apologize, I felt him relax before putting his arms around me and embracing me in return.

“You are most welcome, Carrie Ella Miller.” I gasped when hearing this name, one I shouldn't have recognized as being my own. Yet despite the last name being one I didn't know, I felt the truth of his words, making me now question... why did I feel this way when Connor was my last name?

But before I could ask, he nodded for me to go ahead and take a step towards the shimmering wall of water that only just barely showed my family beyond it. So, I did as he asked, and made my first steps back towards the world I knew. I paused long enough to look back behind me and waved, making him grin before lifting a hand as he started to fade away into nothing. It was a sad sight, seeing the last of Marcus like this and knowing that I most likely never would again.

But like he said, I had a destiny to face and a future to get back to. So, with that feeling deep within my soul, I ran through the fountain and let the emotions of everything that happened to me erupt into even more tears. I ran straight into the arms of my aunt and uncle, who soon spoke my name in absolute relief. I looked to Sophia and Pip, scanning the room for another who held my heart.

And that was when I found her. Amelia was in the arms of her Vampire, crying into his neck with just as much heartbreak and relief as I knew I felt. Although the bitterness in knowing

that this wasn't my happy ending, was admittedly hard to swallow. Of course, I was grateful that everyone was back safe and in the arms of their loved ones. But as for me, he was still trapped out there and I felt as if I hadn't come any further in rescuing him. Which is why I couldn't stop the tears from falling, as I clung on to my family, secretly wishing they were the arms of another.

"Oh, sweetheart, it's alright... it's alright, you made it home... you're safe now." A mixture of my aunt's and my uncle's voices mingled as one as they tried to console me. But I knew, in the end, that nothing really could... *not without him*.

Which meant that once all of the emotions of the day were spent and our different journeys had been somewhat explained, one by one people left, making their way back to Afterlife. I had promised my cousin time to explain in more depth after she had spent time with her husband as it was clear they both needed it.

As for me. I remained standing at the fountain asking myself what it was all really for if, in the end, I hadn't been able to save him. Janus had told me that everything happened for a reason, and I had to believe in that... *I needed to*.

But I had to say, it was pretty hard to do while I standing here and waiting for, I honestly didn't know what. As if I were secretly expecting that, any moment, Jared would magically appear and thank me for saving the day. All of these doors and not one of them did I have the key to unlock his prison. Christ, but I wouldn't even know where to start. And it wasn't like I could just start knocking like some damn crazed Avon lady.

I sighed as the hopeless thought took hold and I could ignore the fact that I was not alone any longer.

"I know you're there," I said, looking back to find my uncle leaning against one of those doors watching over me.

"I must be losing my touch and can no longer add stealth to my Demonic list of qualities." I laughed a little at this, a sound that even to my own ears lacked much humor. I felt him approach after I had cast my gaze back to the fountain, thinking back to all Janus had told me.

“I fear I must owe you a grave apology.” I looked to my uncle then, now getting used to the way he looked so much younger now there was no need for him to mask his true self from me. I was surprised by his admission, as much as I wasn’t. When explaining most of what had happened to them both, I had purposely left out the part about the role he played, trying to spare him the guilt I knew he would feel. Which made me realize that my aunt must have been the one to fill in the gaps. This after learning of my side of things after she was sucked into my past and I in turn, swapped with hers.

“I understand,” I told him softly.

“But how could you?” he said, now taking me by the tops of my arms and turning me away from the fountain towards himself. It pained me to see a man so full of life, so full of confidence and self-assurance in all he did, now so dejected and saddened. This man who had been there every step of my life so far. He had always been there for me, and I loved him dearly. Not as a King of this hidden world he ruled. But as an uncle who loved his niece. Not the uncle of the past.

“Because I have come to understand that you will do anything for your Chosen One just as I would do for mine,” I said, nodding back to the fountain I had foolishly stepped into in hopes of saving my own Fated.

“But you are my family, I held you in my arms as a child, the first child I ever held, in fact.” This surprised me but now wasn’t the time for my curiosity. No, now was the time for comfort and understanding. So, I took his hand in mine and asked,

“Do you believe in the Fates?” He released a sigh and while looking over at the fountain as if he would find the God Janus there waiting too for the same answer, he told me,

“There was a time that I believed the Fates to be nothing but against me. However, I soon learnt that to behold all I do now, that I can do little else but believe in them.”

“Then I was Fated to meet you in the past and you, in turn, were Fated to do what you did... you didn’t know who I was

to you, Uncle,” I told him, looking up into his dark eyes and seeing the spark of hope there.

“But you were a girl in need of my help and I...”

“You did as you were Fated to do and nothing more,” I finished off for him.

“Then I am blessed in more ways than many, for I have you safely back and thankfully, untainted by my betrayal. For I would hate to lose you, my dear niece.” At this he pulled me in for a hug and I held him back, taking the moment of comfort from his strong arms around me. As I always felt when I was like this. As if no harm could ever come to me and now, I knew why I always felt that way. Just like a daughter would with a father... *just like I felt with my own father.*

“Come, we will get you settled.”

“I would like to stay here a little longer, if I may?” I said, not willing to leave just yet.

“As you wish, I will leave the door open for you... you know the way?” he asked in a kind tone, knowing that I must have needed this time alone.

“I do.”

“Very well... I love you dearly, Ella.” I smiled at that before replying in kind,

“I love you too, Uncle Dom.”

He kissed the top of my head after giving me one last squeeze before he walked away. As for me, I turned back to the fountain once more and, with a heavy heart, watched the forces of nature defy itself. With that much water I would have expected it to be loud and an almost deafening echo with the force of it but it was so still in here. So silent. Deathly so.

I just wished I knew where to go from here. Janus had told me that my journey wasn't yet over but then why did it feel like it was? Why did it feel like even in an endless space filled with doors, I had nowhere else left to go?

I released a deep and painful sigh, wishing there were no more tears left to my grief. The memory of Marcus dying I

could only hope was part of the thread that died along with him. Along with the heartbreaking sight of destroying a promise made to the man I loved. That time had really righted itself and I was all that was left to carry the burden. One I felt getting heavier and heavier with each twist and turn the pages of my life took.

“The book!” I cried out the second that memory hit me. I had absorbed the power of the book. But what could that mean? I hadn’t got that far with telling my aunt and uncle how exactly I had made it home. Perhaps he would know something more. Perhaps that was my whole purpose for going back in time?

“Holy shit!” I shouted to myself as it all started to fit into place.

What did Janus say, that everything I came back with I would now keep. Did he mean the power the book of souls held with its pages? Did that now mean that I too would have some control and if I did, would it mean I would have the power to free Jared? I just didn’t know. But I knew one thing, and that was I needed to find out.

So, I lifted my head and whispered to the fountain,

“Thank you, Janus... for everything, as well as the memories.”

I nodded once and started to run back down the Temple to where I knew Afterlife was waiting for me. Back to where I knew my uncle could help me find the answers. However, it was on my way back there that I ended up stopping dead in my tracks.

“No... no, it... *it can't be,*” I whispered before waiting to see if I heard it again and when I did, my hands flew to my mouth to stifle the gasp of joy.

It was Jared.

It was Jared’s voice calling out to me.

“*Ella... Ella...*” I whipped my head around behind me and started to running back the way I had come. Now knowing that I finally had something to follow. Another path to lead the

way. I waited for the next call of my name as it was getting louder now.

“Ella... Ella!” I ran and ran until finally, I came skidding to a stop when what faced me was a sight I recognized. A door I had seen, but not like this... no, not a door... but a book. The cover of the book, it was here. It was beyond this door and with it, so too was Jared.

An intimidating sight of carved black wood with the same ghostly symbols adorning it. The face of which that seemed to constantly change, one moment showing a Demonic symbol at its center like some Hellish crest and the other a soul that looked desperate to escape it. And there, right below it, was a twisted iron handle, one now glowing green and humming with power.

So, despite knowing this might just be another foolish mistake, I reached out with a shaky hand, stopping and asking myself if I were really ready to do this. But then the next time I heard his voice, I knew that I had no choice.

Especially when he spoke like these were his very last words before he died.

“Ella... I’m so sorry... Goodbye, my love.”

“Jared!” I shouted in panic and quickly...

TURNED THE HANDLE.

To be continued in
The HellBeast’s
Soul.

<https://geni.us/TheHellBeastsSoul>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Well first and foremost my love goes out to all the people who deserve the most thanks which is you the FANS!

Without you wonderful people in my life, I would most likely still be serving burgers and writing in my spare time like some dirty little secret, with no chance to share my stories with the world.

You enable me to continue living out my dreams every day and for that I will be eternally grateful to each and every one of you!

Your support is never ending. Your trust in me and the story is never failing. But more than that, your love for me and all who you consider your 'Afterlife family' is to be commended, treasured and admired. Thank you just doesn't seem enough, so one day I hope to meet you all and buy you all a drink! ;)

To my family...

To my crazy mother, who had believed in me since the beginning and doesn't think that something great should be hidden from the world. I would like to thank you for all the hard work you put into my books and the endless hours spent caring about my words and making sure it is the best it can be for everyone to enjoy. You, along with the Hudson Indie Ink team make Afterlife shine.

To my crazy father who is and always has been my hero in life. Your strength astonishes me, even to this day! The love and care you hold for your family is a gift you give to the Hudson name.

To my lovely sister,

If Peter Pan had a female version, it would be you and Wendy combined. You have always been my big, little sister and another person in my life that has always believed me capable of doing great things. You were the one who gave Afterlife its first identity and I am honoured to say that you continue to do so even today. We always dreamed of being able to work together and I am thrilled that we made it happen when you agreed to work as a designer at Hudson Indie Ink.

To my children, my wonderful daughter Ava...who yes, is named after a cool, kick-ass demonic bird and my sons, Jack who is a little hero and our little viking Halen.

And last but not least, to the man that I consider my soul mate. The man who taught me about real love and makes me not only want to be a better person but makes me feel I am too. The amount of support you have given me since we met has been incredible and the greatest feeling was finding out you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me when you asked me to marry you.

All my love to my dear husband and my own personal Draven... Mr Blake Hudson.

To My Team...

I am so fortunate enough to rightly state the claim that I have the best team in the world!

It is a rare thing indeed to say that not a single person that works for Hudson Indie Ink doesn't feel like family, but there you have it. We are a Family.

Sarah your editing is a stroke of genius and you, like others in my team, work incredibly hard to make the Afterlife world what it was always meant to be. But your personality is an utter joy to experience and getting to be a part of your crazy feels like a gift.

Lisa, my social media butterfly and count down Queen! I was so happy when you accepted to work with us, as I knew you would fit in perfectly with our family! Please know you are a dear friend to me and are a such an asset to the team. Plus, your backward dancing is the stuff of legends!

Libby, a valued member of the team but someone I consider one of my oldest and dearest friends, you came in like a whirlwind of ideas and totally blew me away with your level of energy! You fit in instantly and I honestly don't know what Hudson Indie Ink would do without you. What you have achieved in such a short time is utterly incredible and want you to know you are such an asset to the team!

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You have stuck by me for years, starting as a fan and quickly becoming one of my best friends. You have supported me for years and without fail have had my back through thick and thin, the ups and the downs. I could quite honestly write a book on how much you do and how lost I would be without you in my life,

I love you honey x

Thanks to all of my team for the hard work and devotion to the saga and myself. And always going that extra mile, pushing the Afterlife world into the spotlight you think it deserves. Basically helping me achieve my secret goal of world domination one day...evil laugh time... Mwahaha! Joking of course ;)

Another personal thank you goes to my dear friend Caroline Fairbairn and her wonderful family that have embraced my brand of crazy into their lives and given it a hug when most needed.

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As before, a big shout has to go to all my wonderful fans who make it their mission to spread the Afterlife word and always go the extra mile. Those that have remained my fans all these years and supported me, my Afterlife family, you also meant the world to me.

All my eternal love and gratitude,
Stephanie x

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Hudson has dreamed of being a writer ever since her obsession with reading books at an early age. What first became a quest to overcome the boundaries set against her in the form of dyslexia has turned into a life's dream. She first started writing in the form of poetry and soon found a taste for horror and romance. Afterlife is her first book in the series of twelve, with the story of Keira and Draven becoming ever more complicated in a world that sets them miles apart.

When not writing, Stephanie enjoys spending time with her loving family and friends, chatting for hours with her biggest fan, her sister Cathy who is utterly obsessed with one gorgeous Dominic Draven. And of course, spending as much time with her supportive partner and personal muse, Blake who is there for her no matter what.

Author's words.

My love and devotion is to all my wonderful fans that keep me going into the wee hours of the night but foremost to my wonderful daughter Ava...who yes, is named after a cool, kick-ass, Demonic bird and my sons, Jack, who is a little hero and Baby Halen, who yes, keeps me up at night but it's okay because he is named after a Guitar legend!

Keep updated with all new release news & more on my website

www.authorstephaniehudson.com

Never miss out, sign up to the
mailing list at the website.

Also, please feel free to join myself and other Dravenites on my Facebook group

[Afterlife Saga Official Fan](#)

Interact with me and other fans. Can't wait to see you there!

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Afterlife Saga

Afterlife

The Two Kings

The Triple Goddess

The Quarter Moon

The Pentagram Child - Part 1

The Pentagram Child - Part 2

The Cult of the Hexad

Sacrifice of the Septimus - Part 1

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Blood of the Infinity War

Happy Ever Afterlife - Part 1

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Transfusion Saga

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Map of Sorrows

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