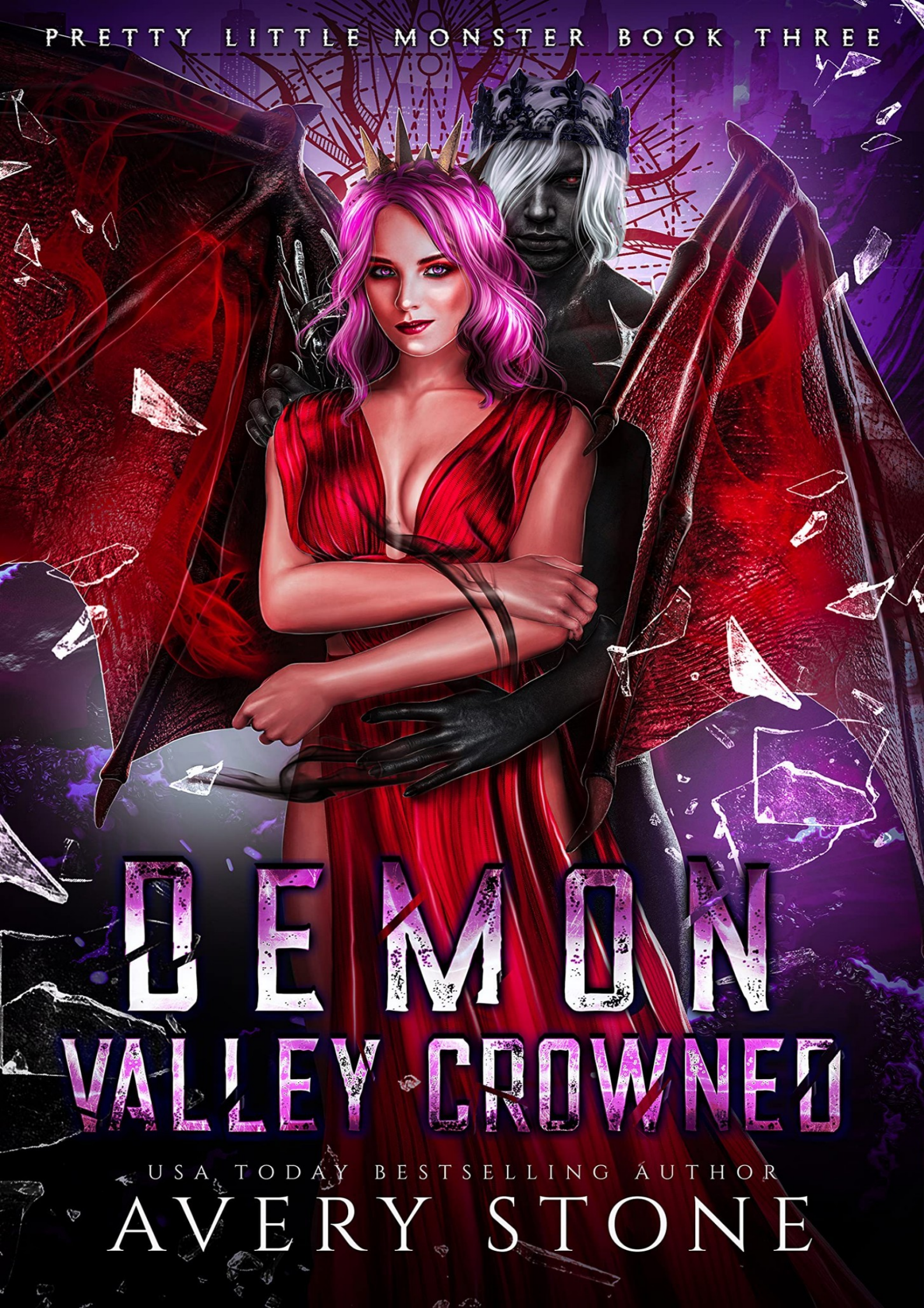


PRETTY LITTLE MONSTER BOOK THREE



DEMON VALLEY CROWNED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVERY STONE

Demon Valley Crowned

PRETTY LITTLE MONSTER TRILOGY

AVERY STONE

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STAY CONNECTED

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Also By Avery Stone

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Demon Valley Crowned Blurb

“One final fight to reclaim everything lost is my only hope in saving the demon everyone assumed would remain my enemy.”

The end is near for me, Lexianne Monarch.

I can feel it in the depths of my veins, while my mind prepares for the physical, emotional, and mental constraints that would do everything to prevent my King from losing this battle that is inches from being won.

Enemies will rise to the surface.

Allies will sacrifice anything to get me to that sacred spot that holds the very key to the valley.

And I'm destined to succumb to the hands of my Alpha savior, all in hopes of giving the crown of domination to the rightful owner of Demon Valley Pack.

As the current Ruler of Demon Valley, it's up to me to finish what we started, and no matter the blood, sweat, and tears, I vow to unleash the true villain deep within.

To reveal how deadly a pretty little monster can be when betrayed.

It's time to show this sinister world that two can play this game called survival.

Let the final round begin.

Prologue: The Entrance Toward Tainted Oblivion

“**L**ady Heartwell.”

I pulled the reins of the shadowed horse I rode upon, my eyes slowly opening to take in the vast field of opposing creatures who were anxiously waiting for our arrival.

Their deformed appearances matched with their odd auras immediately told me these weren't demons from our valley.

They didn't even resonate with the dead.

“Looks like Baker decided to send a mini army of his own experiments to clear the way,” I calmly voiced while Zasper disembarked off his shadowed beast, which immediately fizzled out into nothing but black ember flakes.

He walked to my right side, taking the reins to lead the horse forward. The rest of the fleet — *and our squirming prisoner* — had no choice but to remain where they stood.

There had to be at least one thousand creatures standing a few feet from us. It was like a sea of black as they swayed from side to side almost hypnotically.

Their combined energy was thick, suffocating if we dared to approach too closely into their orbit of oblivion, but I didn't have the intention of moving much further.

This was honestly just wasting my precious time to return to my king.

“You thought you were going to find this crown or whatever like it’s a piece of cake.”

It took me a few more seconds to turn my head toward the chained woman in. My eyes landed on Laura, who was riddled with scratches, cuts, bruises, and marks from whatever else had harmed her while she was dragged by the rest of the fleet.

They paid her no mind as they sat ready to go into battle — *which I genuinely appreciated* — but I didn’t have the intention of letting them face such a tainted group of beings.

Since it had been a while since my tortured days, I couldn’t really grasp how dangerous Baker’s experiments gone wrong were in comparison to the average ruthless shifter.

The fact that there were so many confirmed he’d been kidnapping and using shifters for his diabolical plans in the shadows, which only heightened his threat to the shifter population outside of the valley.

If he can casually send one thousand failed experiments here, either he’s desperate to claim Demon Valley as his, or he wants to give us a taste of what he has hidden behind closed doors in that laboratory of his.

“You can’t outsmart Baker. He’s going to get rid of all of you and these stupid dolls you’ve attempted to make into some illusion of knights!”

“You talk so much,” I complained and decided to meet her narrowed eyes with a look of utter boredom.

The mere sight made her flinch as if she was expecting me to do something wild like slicing her throat again — *which*

would be fun but a waste of time and energy — but instead, I glanced over to Zachery, Zion, and Zane.

“How lethal do you think those creatures are?”

“They could probably execute the average shifter in ten seconds or less,” Zackery announced.

“They emit an energy that projects intense starvation, Lady Heartwell,” Zion revealed. “They’ve been starved as a way of torture.”

“The intention was surely to feast off the demons of the valley to test out the theory of respawning,” Zane contributed.

“Well, we should test that theory, don’t you think?” The corners of my lips began to rise while I returned my taunting gaze to Laura just to enjoy the rise of fear that flickered in her eyes, which further widened.

“I-I-I’m not afraid. You’re not going to do shit! Baker could arrive at any moment and save me.”

“If you still believe such a man cares about your existence, I pity you,” Zasper muttered in disdain while he slowly shook his head. “Your orders, Lady Heartwell.”

“Throw Goldibitch in there. I want a glimpse of what they can do,” I encouraged and actually laughed at the way Laura’s face paled.

“Y-You can’t do this!”

“Why not?” I asked as Zeke and Zavier immediately tugged at her chained collar, which encouraged her body to slam into the desolate dirt before she was dragged. “Last time I checked, I’m the captor and you’re my lovely captive. I earned the right to have you as my everlasting pet. You should be grateful, honestly.”

“Why...bleh...should I be grateful?! You don’t know what whom you’re dealing with!” she spluttered while attempting to avoid getting dirt in her mouth.

“I’m well aware what Baker is capable of,” I calmly voiced while my gaze returned to looking at the outskirts beyond this crowd of experimental monsters.

That would lead us back to the forest and where we had to discover the gateway that would take me to the dangerous realm of Demon Valley.

A place full of terrors and death that taunts its guests at every corner.

“A shame, really,” I finally continued while I dared to smirk. “He doesn’t grasp what I’m capable of in return.”

“You can’t do shi—AH!” She was lifted up before she could finish, and not another word could come out of her mouth because she was screaming as she soared through the air thanks to the generous toss that landed her in the midst of the demonic crowd of tainted beings.

She didn’t stay a second on the ground before her she was attacked and ripped to shreds. Those creatures acted like a sea of piranhas fighting to get a taste of a single hook of bait.

Her screams did nothing to make me feel pity for her; my attention was focused on the tainted beings’ behavior and how quickly it took them to kill a helpless demon.

“Forty-five seconds, Lady Heartwell,” Zasper announced as if he already understood what I wished to calculate. “Shall we move her to a different spot?”

“Yes, please,” I encouraged, and Zeke and Xavier tugged and whipped the chain with enough force to send Laura’s body further west from her current spot.

She was mid-respawn, her head beginning to reform, which ignited the shrilled screams that followed before she dropped to the ground and once again was pounced on.

This time around, the tainted demons were infatuated with her presence in their midst, which was why they fought to get closer even though she was being ripped to shreds all over again.

“Time?”

“One minute and eleven seconds, Lady Heartwell.”

“Intriguing,” I commented. “Another spot.”

She was off to the east side, her screams piercing the air once more before she was mauled. She was preserved even longer as more of the creature’s attention was pulled to her.

“Two minutes and forty-five seconds.”

“Good.” This was going to work perfectly in our favor. “Zeke, Zavier, continue doing that as we make our way to the other side. Once we reach our destination, place our confident prisoner right here.”

I purposely moved my left foot to create a little X that was barely visible. Neither of them complained about not seeing the marked place as I returned my attention to them.

“Once you do that, come regroup with us,” I encouraged. “Also, make sure the chain is long enough. Don’t want to leave our lovely bait behind.”

“Yes, Lady Heartwell.” They bowed in submission before I looked to Zasper. “Do you think it’ll be much worse by the time we head through the forest?”

He didn’t answer immediately, as if he was imagining the blueprint of this world in his mind and trying to figure out the

best course of action.

“I believe this could be a test,” he finally suggested. “As to whether he has backup ready to ambush us, that will be something we need to face upon arrival.”

“Excellent suggestion,” I praised and glanced around at the rest of the fleet. “Let’s move. Keep your auras lower than our bait.”

“Yes, Lady Heartwell,” they replied before Laura’s screams were piercing the air again.

It was easier now to zone it out, which may have been rather inhuman of me, but then again, we were all demons.

Who gives a fuck about a bitch screaming about being ripped apart?

I had to fight from smiling because of how ironic this all was. I had been a victim of brutality for years and somehow managed to survive with enough screws to function with a dose of cunning intelligence, while Laura couldn’t even handle five minutes of dying and respawning.

Still don’t feel pity for her.

Without delay, Zasper helped me back onto my horse before we began to move with the fleet surrounding me like I truly was a queen they were ready to worship for all eternity.

This really was what it was coming down to.

Would we secure the royal position of this grand world that Malifer created or to let it slip out of our grasp because of a psychotic, distraught, tainted hybrid who wanted to leave the world in a blanket of oblivion?

With the mass of monsters now crowded around Laura, we could walk with ease to the edge of the forest.

The sight of it already ignited memories of the trials, and all I could envision was the immense surprise and pride in Malifer's eyes as he had no choice but to acknowledge my unexpected survival.

How will he look when I reach him?

My heart ached for him.

My body begged to enjoy his chilled touch and warm embraces.

Everyone loved to acknowledge how many cherish something when it was gone, but I'd loved and cherished this man — my mate — for years. This was finally my time to enjoy him.

To help him peel away the layers of doubt and uncertainty and replace them with a newfound confidence that proved he was more than enough to be by my side.

That I loved him no matter what position he carried in these forbidden realms of desolate power.

"Lady Heartwell?" I blinked and turned my attention to Zasper, who was eyeing me carefully. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Imagining what I'll say to Malifer when I finally find him."

Returning my attention to the massive circle of demons who had been experimented upon, I wondered what the best way would be to get rid of them at once.

They had to be immune to the common elements like fire or ice, but I had feeling toxins weren't accounted for.

"Why don't we box you all up like a lovely present?" I mumbled to myself while the image unraveled within my

mind. The moment Zeke and Xavier were reunited with the rest of us, I set my next move into action.

I clapped my hands and felt the trembling shift of energy that rose upward from the ground to create four walls around the crowded mass of creatures.

Their attention was still on Goldibitch, which worked in my favor as I wasn't even using a pinch of magic yet. I needed to form the invisible box until the structure was solid.

That way, they really won't be able to leave until their lovely Master attempts to free them.

I doubted Baker would come here when his focus was on the crown, which was another reason why I was forming this present with accuracy.

It would become a monumental piece in demon valley — a constant reminder of what was awaiting us if Baker and Laura got what they wished for us.

My internal satisfaction pushed the strings of magic that began to swiftly create what I envisioned in my mind. It triggered the monsters to begin to be pushed together until they seemed to be tightly packaged in an invisible box.

Vines of black began to move along the transparent surface, the four thick vines working their way in the middle of each wall and proceeding to glide along the top surface to meet at the very center of the massive clear box.

The union triggered the blossoming of night lilies, their illuminating glow taking our attention with ease as they blossomed and twinkled their glowing petals with pride.

The screeches of the demonic creatures were muted while those against the transparent walls fought to get out of their imprisoned grasp.

“You can tug Goldibitch out of there,” I encouraged. “Before the toxic fumes make it harder for her to die so swiftly.”

“Toxic fumes?” Zasper sounded fascinated while he continued to watch the demonic creatures struggle to get out of my present prison.

Zeke and Zavier tugged on the chain with enough force to send the chain flinging into the air — revealing only Laura’s neck as her body began to respawn once more.

By the time it dropped to the ground once more, there was Goldibitch, coughing up a storm as she was on her hands and knees while her body trembled like a leaf in the midst of a blizzard.

She looked up with wild eyes of rage, but I remained completely calm as I met her gaze of fury with flickering glee.

“On the outside, the lilies perfume the wonderful scent that will empower the lands around here and feed them with rejuvenating energy. It’ll take some time since it’s just been established, but once we’ve taken care of everything, this place will be a beautiful paradise of flowers,” I explained. “This energy will flow through the black vines, which will allow them the same respawn capabilities that I’ve granted our inconsiderate pet down here. Meaning, they can’t be chopped, burned, or destroyed by anything magical really seeing as the flow of energy is endless. This ensures the transparent walls of magic I’ve created with the energy of the valley will remain intact.”

I allowed myself to grin as I flicked off a few strands of my hair.

“As for the toxic fumes, that’s what is currently pooling on the inside with the rest of those demonic experiments. It’s a bit slower in execution, but it’ll force those creatures into a very lengthy hibernation. Their energies will still be recognizable by the valley so now whenever any experiments in this half-complete state enter the valley, they’ll be immediately teleported into this prism and no longer be a threat to the valley,” I revealed.

“Impressive,” Zasper praised.

I knew Goldibitch was going to say something, but I was beginning to not carry the patience for whatever bullshit she wished to spew at me, so I snapped my fingers as she opened her mouth.

Her body was forced upward as the same black vines that wrapped around the transparent prism were now around her outstretched arms and spread legs. She was mere inches from where I continued to sit comfortably on my shadowed stallion.

She attempted to speak, but not a squeak came out, which immediately made her freak out. I further grinned as I leaned in to whisper in her ear. *“Why don’t I make this very clear;”* I snarled as my eyes bled to black. *“I am your master. You...are my pet. I earned that right the moment I sliced a knife through your throat and kept you alive. Complain, and you’ll be punished. Waste my life span, and you will be punished. Make a single noise that pisses me off, and most certainly you will be punished.”*

I leaned back to see the fuming anger in her eyes while my cunning smile taunted her immensely.

“You had five years to play this game of deceit, and what a waste of time you spent being a puppet when you thought you

were some grand puppeteer. Such a shame. I should feel pity for you, but one does not show empathy to cocky idiots.”

Shaking my head, I enjoyed the way the vines immediately rushed to wrap around her neck. The action made her whimper and struggle against the vine’s hold on her.

“I’m about to show you how a real puppeteer pulls the strings of their devoted puppets, and by the end of all of this, that entitled attitude of yours will be nothing but a fragment of your memories while your submission will be a trophy I show Baker himself.”

She fought to shake her head but stilled at the touch of the metal black knife that made her cheek begin to rot before our eyes.

Fear flooded her expression while I began to giggle lowly. It was a sound that would ignite goosebumps on anyone’s flesh.

“You said Malifer’s Demon Valley Pack was boring, right?” I purred and leaned in to lick the black blood that oozed from the cut that was continuing to spread more venom that made her skin rapidly rot. *“Until I get my demon king back by my side, I’ll show you how joyous my Demon Valley will be with my reign.”*

The intense aroma of her rotting flesh matched with intense fear made me laugh while I enjoyed the sight of her entire body rotting to black before melting into rotting organs.

Sitting further up and taking one last glance at my created monument, I looked to Zasper.

I didn’t need to say a word as my knight looked at his fellow comrades.

“Let’s make our way into the Forest of Infinite Souls!”

“Yes, Commander!”

Glancing up at the sky, I smiled proudly as I enjoyed the wonderful sight of the moon.

If it's a game you wish to play, I'll ensure it's one I'll be victorious in playing.

*Into The Depths Of
The Valley Of Broken
Dreams*

“**F**rom here on, it would be best you stay behind,” I announced as Zasper helped me off my horse. “I feel as though this path would be too small for all of us to walk through in single file.”

We peered into the cave entrance. The few steps that led into the void oasis were covered in pitch black. I could feel the dip in the atmosphere, though my focus briefly looked upward as I inspected the place that seemed to be the catalyst to all of our ends — *and beginnings*.

“You’ll need someone to go with you, Lady Heartwell,” Zasper acknowledged while the others began to gather in a semi-circle formation just before the forest entrance.

They lowered their spears into the tainted earth, igniting beams of black that reached high into the air before spreading out and joining together to make a wall of shadows.

I doubted anyone would come from the valley to try to aid us — *or stop us* — but this would also ensure that if Baker decided to waltz down here from the cliff, we’d have him sealed off.

“Hmmm.” I thought about it, but looking at the fleet only made me feel the need to keep them together. “I need you all together. I’m unsure how things are going to turn out once I go

inside, but my priority is to find Malifer and Momo. Once I get Momo, I'll teleport her back here. It shouldn't be too hard, but I'd like her to be with you all. I'm sure she could easily add to the defensive force."

Zasper bowed his head in complete agreement. "I agree that Princess Momo would indeed be of assistance in defense against our various enemies," he agreed.

"Princess, huh," I commented, and enjoyed how his cheeks slightly flushed red. "Cute."

Peering over my shoulder, I confirmed Goldibitch was still with us — unconscious and barely breathing after our rather bumpy journey over here.

I still didn't carry an ounce of pity for her, especially when she couldn't admit her wrongdoings and that she could have led to our everlasting circumstances as slaves under Baker's rule.

I wasn't sure when that sensation to watch her suffer would fade away, and maybe I didn't want it to. If one planned for us to suffer for all eternity, maybe their karma was to be tortured and despised for all eternity?

"You can't take her alone with you," Zasper commented as he noticed my lingering gaze. "She could slow you down on purpose."

He had a point.

She wasn't very cooperative — which was expected with any new pet — and knowing she could potentially benefit us by being the perfect prey for any hindrances ahead, she really could be a thorn in my side rather than the perfect bait for Baker to prey upon.

Despite how she was fighting for breath, I could feel her defiance. It was a shame she was a bitch and would probably die being an enemy, or else she'd be a good recruit.

She made her bed. Now she has to lay in it.

“What if we can be of service?”

I wasn't expecting the male voice that held immense amusement. My head immediately moved to my far left to see Colton and, even more surprisingly, Lauren.

“Colton? Lauren?” I inquired as they made their way toward us. Zasper bowed in acknowledgment before questioning Colton's appearance.

“I assumed you'd be staying behind with the others.”

“Originally, that was the plan,” Colton revealed with a playful smirk before he gestured to Lauren, who wore such a calm demeanor now that she wore such a magnificent white dress.

Her aura reminded me that she was a Tainted Time Keeper and not the woman who encouraged my downfall into the valley, but I knew if she was here now, that meant things could have changed outside the valley.

For better or worse.

“Our Tainted Vixen here has intel from above that needs our Lexiboo's prompt attention,” Colton revealed.

“Tainted Vixen?” The way Lauren's eyes narrowed at the puppeteer only made him grin seductively in return as he winked.

“Admit it. You like it.”

“I’d rather enjoy calling that chained pest over there Goldibitch than being called such.”

“What if I put ‘my’ before it?” Colton offered. He didn’t hesitate to lean over to whisper, “My Tainted Vixen.”

The way her eyes narrowed in scrutiny only made him grin like a damn fool who was madly in love.

Actually, I wasn’t blind. This man was clearly smitten with the Tainted Keeper.

“That imposter of a bitch...is out of your fucking league.” All eyes landed on Laura, who could barely keep her eyes open as she still fought to catch her breath. “You’re nothing but a waste of space. Like someone of my class...who’s popular and strong...enough to be impersonated by some bitch...would be interested in a weak, poor, outcas—”

She was cut off by the splash of Lauren’s foot to her face. That was followed by her body being riddled with piercing needles of white that reminded me of icicles, which finished her until her body was left with plenty of holes.

“Being able to kill you without a second thought is far more satisfying than I ever could have imagined,” she voiced first before she crossed her arms over her chest. “And who do you think you are trying to throw shade at a man who could probably love, respect, and treat a woman like a queen in comparison to the douche of a toxic fucker you decided to embark on the one-side journey of love with?”

She knew Laura wasn’t going to be able to reply, but seeing as Goldibitch’s heart was still beating, she wasn’t about to respawn just yet.

“Maybe after you respawn, you’ll think twice before trying to give anyone else love advice, let alone be a judgemental

bitch who thinks she's worthy enough to say who can be with a Tainted Vixen like me."

With a huff, she turned around, which sent a final shard of white that completely obliterated Laura's body, and grabbed onto the lengthy pink chain that whipped around aimlessly.

With a firm grip on the metallic rope, she was right back at Colton's side, which was enough time for Laura to respawn again. She was breathless, her body shaking as if she could still feel the chilling shard going through the remnants of her body.

Unlike before, she didn't dare say a word — even with all our attention on her.

Guess she needs a break to recover from that unique death.

"Fine. Tainted Vixen will do," she finally declared as she side-glanced at the puppeteer in question, who grinned from ear to ear.

"Really?" he dared to ask while attempting to hide just how giddy he was to have Lauren's approval.

"Yes," she muttered but narrowed her eyes as she continued to side-glance his way. "Don't encourage me to change my mind."

"Never," he vowed with a wink.

"You'll take any opportunity to flirt," Zasper commented, which made Colton grin proudly.

"You never know when an opportunity will change your entire life," he acknowledged and looked to Lauren, who decided to reveal why exactly she was here.

"Master Gaia has a strong sense of your sister's location," she revealed. "It looks as though Baker has devilish plans to

blow things up.”

“Blow things up?” I didn’t like the sound of that. “My sister is in danger of becoming ash?”

“She’s in the building where a potential bomb threat has been noted. I believe Baker is doing that as a distraction as his Astra is almost here at Demon Valley. He’s rather positive you’ll hear about her safety being at risk and promptly leave the valley to come to her aid.”

It was a safe assumption, though it was also gutsy to pull off such a move.

“If I give him what he wants, he’ll invade here a lot faster than I intend,” I voiced, which intrigued Colton.

“Like you intend?” I could see the excitement in those bright eyes of his that begged for me to continue.

“Baker should have been here probably fifteen minutes ago but I’ve been putting him through the wringer, delaying his efforts to enter the valley,” I confessed, which surprised all of them.

“Impressive,” Lauren praised. “Won’t he get frustrated and do something unexpected?”

“That’s exactly what she wants, isn’t it?” Colton offered, which only made me smirk in return.

“If you play a game the right way, you leave your enemy desperate to reach the finish line of victory,” I calmly voiced while my finger briefly brushed across my bandaged neck. I stopped myself from flinching from the pain.

I did the move intentionally because I needed the reminder of how far I’d come. My drive for survival matched all the

moves I took to finally reach this final round that would reward me with everything I desired.

The pain would keep me focused on the grand prize.

“Clearly, there’s no way I can leave demon valley now,” I stated the obvious point. “Too much is in jeopardy if I abandoned the valley in such a vulnerable state. Malifer wouldn’t leave if he was in my position. I can’t possibly do the opposite.”

“Do you think your sister can escape?” Colton pondered in worry. He looked as if he was ready to go in my place and protect my own blood.

“My sister is a Monarch,” I emphasized. “I don’t know her past, nor do I know the traumas she’s gone through to reach this moment in our lives, but death enjoys taunting her as much as he enjoys taunting me.” The comment made me sigh before I looked at Lauren. “However, I am the older sister. I can’t possibly abandon her when she could need assistance. Baker’s desperation will only affect his Astra’s desire to bring pain to me and the valley. Ending my sister’s existence is the perfect way of contributing to such agony and isn’t something I wish to give him the satisfaction of doing to me. I have more than enough bad memories and experiences with the con artist. I don’t need anymore.”

Closing my eyes for a moment, I took a moment to narrow down my options.

And easily found a solution.

“Nathan is on the other side, yes?” I finally asked Lauren while my eyes slowly opened to peer at the Tainted Time Keeper in question.

“Yes,” she confirmed with an added bob of her head.

“Then my Maleficent Astra can handle it,” I announced. “A dramatic entrance with her love in tow could be enough to interfere with Baker’s plans. Baker can’t tell the difference between us, and he’ll believe I truly fell into his plan for arriving when trouble brews around my sister.”

“Doesn’t that risk him targeting her again?” Colton inquired.

“That’s what I want,” I noted with a smirk. “I think it’s time we get rid of Baker on both spectrums. His existence is only a pain in our asses. Plus, he’s the type to hold grudges as deeply as any demon. We don’t need that looming over us as we rebuild Demon Valley Pack for the better. I’d also like to avoid a war with the other packs. We don’t have time for all that drama.”

Glancing between Colton and Lauren, I felt confident in my decision.

“Does that sound good?”

“Sounds brilliant to me,” Colton declared. “It allows us to help you reach the destination where our Alpha is.”

“Such moves will work out in your favor so there are no objections from my side,” Lauren declared.

“All of you are fucking cunt ass fuck—” There went Laura, but she was cut short, again, as her body was sliced into so many pieces, it was as if she went through a cheese grater.

We all looked to Colton, who began to whistle while he walked over to stand right next to me.

“So back to the main priority being you can’t go into that mysterious cave by yourself,” he voiced with a prideful grin. “So let me and Lauren come with you. Lauren could ensure Goldibitch isn’t a complete hindrance, and you and I can focus

on finding the path that will take you to whatever place hides the crown of the valley.”

“What if we reach a point where I need to venture alone?” I inquired just so we could get the discussion out of the way now versus later.

We really didn't know what was ahead for any of us.

“Then we'll follow until we reach that point where we can't,” Colton encouraged. “And we'll wait for your return with King Malifer.”

Having their support and confidence was empowering in various ways. It really made me feel like we had a fighting shot at destroying Baker's objective while securing the place that became our safe haven thanks to Malifer's selflessness.

“Then, let's make our way,” I encouraged and watched Lauren tug on the chain that dragged Laura through the dirt. “How did you guys get through the fleet's barrier anyway?”

“I teleported Colton and myself to the sacred waters of the lagoon of Shade pack and took the passage from there down to the cliff,” Lauren revealed. “Colton lowered us with his strings before we were ready to enter the forest but you guys showed up seconds later.”

“Good timing,” I praised. “Though that should be expected from a Time Keeper.”

“Though I'm a Tainted Time Keeper,” she noted with a wink, “I don't have to be on time.”

“Accurate,” I commented and looked to Zasper and the fleet. “We'll make our way now. Please be careful, and protect Momo when I send her back here.”

“We’ll shield her with every fiber of power within us,” Zasper declared as the others knelt in their spots in agreement. “Please be careful, Lady Heartwell. The enemy is the most deceitful when they know they’re in the midst of losing what’s most precious to them.”

He spoke nothing but the truth.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

With a final exchange of goodbyes, Colton led the way as the protective puppeteer he was, while Laura was clearly last seeing as she was being dragged by Lauren. At least if anything tried to attack us from behind, the cocky, talkative Goldibitch would be the perfect appetizer to appease them before they reached the rest of our group.

We’d been walking for fifteen minutes now, and it was far too dark to see even with our gifted abilities to walk through pitch darkness with ease.

Clapping my hands three times, I ignited flames that burst and gathered to create floating orbs that hovered above our heads. The illumination was enough to see more of our surroundings and up ahead at least five steps.

“Much better,” Lauren confessed with relief. “I’m not usually one to struggle with seeing in the dark.”

“Me neither,” I admitted, which annoyed me quite a bit. “This intensity of darkness can’t be normal.”

“It’s not,” Colton agreed, and I could only imagine him narrowing his eyes in precaution. “It feels foreign in nature. If it was from the valley, it wouldn’t make us feel so...”

“Uncomfortable,” Lauren dryly muttered. “There’s an opening up ahead.”

Her warning put us on high alert as we approached the opening that didn't project a ray of light like most exits.

The moment we reached the opening, my arm instinctively moved to grab onto Colton's shirt. The timing was absolutely perfect for he would have walked right off a cliff.

"Fuck," he cursed in surprise as I pulled him back so he was pressed against me. "Thanks, Lexiboo. That was close."

"No worries," I voiced, but I was scanning the vast oasis before us. It felt like we'd hit a dead end because there was no path for us to go from this spot.

Just a very deep drop below and a steeping high ceiling from above.

"There has to be a place for us to go," Lauren muttered. "I sense energy in here. It's not heavy and foreign like this place. It mimics the sacred waters of the lagoon above in Shade territory."

"Hmmm." It didn't feel like this was a world of illusions, but I did wonder if we were missing a hidden passage somewhere in the midst of this dark inner cave.

"Are you stumped?"

The sudden presence of power in my mind kindled a grin to form on my delicate lips.

Lily. We need your help.

"Ask and you shall receive," she encouraged. *"It's been a long while since I've seen these inner walls."*

Wait. You've explored here?

"When you're dead for years, it only makes sense to explore what holds the roots of your agony," she quietly

confessed. *“This hidden gem is a place that leads to the very root of power within the depths of Demon Valley. To be honest, I’d forgotten about its existence since it’s been so long, but Malifer surely must have recalled these parts, which is why he’s somewhere in this maze of tainted energy.”*

So we’re on the right track at least.

“You are.” She sounded very cautious. *“However, this is the most dangerous part of the valley, Lexianne. I’d advise you to be very careful. The demons here can steal souls and leave you in a world of hallucinations if you allow it.”*

That makes me a little worried for Lauren and Colton.

She didn’t answer immediately, as if assessing their strengths and weaknesses with a simple sense of the atmosphere around me.

“They will reach the sacred spot where they will be safe from the deadly creatures of this realm of darkness, but they won’t be able to follow you after that,” she explained. *“However, you’ll need to leave your new pet here.”*

“I have to leave Goldibitch here?” I asked out loud before I turned my attention to where she actually was.

When I didn’t see her, I could only look at Lauren, who simply shrugged. That led me to look at Colton, who chuckled and pointed downward.

“Tainted Vixen cut the bitch’s tongue and threw her over the edge when you were deep in thought.” He told on the Time Keeper like it was a secret he’d been desperate to share for years.

“You’re not supposed to rat me out like that,” Lauren muttered, which only had Colton laughing long and hard.

“I’d do it again and again if I get to see that glaring expression of yours,” he praised. “Besides, Lexiboo is going to know my ass didn’t send her down.”

“Why did you do it anyway?” I decided to ask for the hell of it.

“She’s our distractor, right?” Lauren reminded me. “Let her distract by being the perfect bait.”

“Bait for wh...” Colton began and trailed off as the ground beneath our feet began to tremble ever so slightly. Lauren and Colton tugged me further away from the cliff as they stood before me almost protectively. The three of us glanced around before Laura’s piercing, shrill scream echoed against the hollow walls.

We couldn’t even ask what made her scream like that because the biggest creature of darkness I’d ever seen came into view as it climbed along the opposite wall.

All of us gawked at its giant width. The scales on its back alone were mere centimeters from touching Colton and Lauren while the rest of its body oozed thick black liquid that burned through the rock’s surface itself with just a single droplet of its tainted essence.

What left us speechless and frozen in place wasn’t its massive body or the stench of death that came with its appearance, but the mass of bodies that practically made a form of armor along its scaly, oozing flesh.

Shifters of various shapes and sizes were intricately placed along the creature’s body as if they were medals of honor that deserved to be displayed.

It paused in its movement, tendrils of black whipping around as if to grasp more prisoners for it to feast on.

I caught onto Laura's body, noticing how her complexion was now purple while her bulging eyes were oozing black blood. You could literally see the life leaving her with every second that passed, but the creature began to move once more, crawling upward until an opening on the opposite wall emerged and gave it access to slide its massive body into its chambers.

"That should keep that creature occupied for a while," Lauren declared with a disgusted look on her face.

"Should we even ask what that was?" Colton pondered more to himself as he continued to stare upward. "And we ain't getting Goldibitch back, are we?"

"She can stay with that Dazolace until we're done," Lauren suggested. "Those are one of the deadliest dark creatures of any dark realm. In human literature, they're creatures that live in the deepest depths of the ocean and are triple the size of the eldest whale in existence. That clearly had to be a baby Dazolace since it's able to fit the radius of this place."

"A baby..." Colton muttered. "Ya...once we get this crown, let's never come here again."

"If it's an ocean creature, that means down below is water," I suggested. "Why did it go up to crawl into that opening?"

"It must be its nest," Lauren suggested. "Which is why I used Goldilocks as a bit of a distractor for us. Once a baby Dazolace is distracted, it can take hours if not days before it comes out of its nest. They're harmless when occupied and their surroundings return to normal when they're in a happy or intrigued state."

The mention of that made me realize that the space was looking more like an open cave — the shadows retracting and revealing the rough, rocky surface of stone.

“Since Goldilocks can respawn, it’ll give the creature some form of entertainment while we further venture inside. Without its haunting dark energy, whatever other beings of darkness that thrive on the Dazolace’s presence will retreat into their safe havens until we depart.”

“Maybe that’s why it was a good idea to bring Laura here,” I voiced, and Colton nodded.

“And if Baker is stupid enough to try to use her presence to teleport into Demon Valley, he’ll come face-to-face with that Dazolace.”

“Your immense excitement proves you’re begging Mother Moon herself to let that happen,” Lauren voiced as she monitored the man in question, who chuckled.

“Baker is on everyone’s shit list so if we can get rid of him, I’d be pleased,” he emphasized.

“That’s true,” I whispered and looked at both of them. “Lily said you can follow me until we reach some sort of sacred place that should be similar to the sacred lagoon. After that, I’m on my own.”

“Fine by us,” Colton spoke for himself and Lauren as he gave a firm bob of his head. “As long as we’re able to lead you towards the final spot to reaching Malifer.”

Colton...

“Events like this that hold the key to change are frightening to do alone,” Lauren emphasized as her eyes met mine. “Doing it with another makes the journey worthwhile with individuals you know have your back. After all the

sacrifices you've made, it's best you feel what it's like to be supported by others who see the vision you seek to unravel."

Lauren...

"It feels weird to be supported," I confessed. "I'm used to doing things alone."

"Aren't we all," Lauren admitted with a small smile as she closed her eyes. "If I knew enduring challenges with others could be more enlightening, I would have strayed away from being a lone wolf a long while ago."

"Same," Colton admitted with a sad grin. "But then again, maybe we wouldn't have appreciated it the way we do now."

He had a point.

"Thank you both for taking the risk to come and assist me down this path," I expressed my gratitude. "Malifer...has impacted our lives in various ways, and I wish that he sees that versus basing his existence and purpose around the ideology that being king is his sole duty in this world."

"If anyone can convenience him of his worth, it's you, Lexianne," Colton assured me.

"I've served many men in my centuries of existence," Lauren quietly admitted. "Yet, out of all of them, Malifer is the first to carry such a selfless heart."

Her eyes lowered to my bell, the reminder only making me press my hand upon my stomach while I remembered what he'd sacrificed that was the reason why we were embarking on this adventure, to begin with.

"He doesn't regret it?" I dared to ask as my eyes peered afar and I pondered the mere possibility.

Does he regret giving up his title for me to be able to conceive?

“Never.”

I returned my gaze to Lauren as she stared at me with a serious expression.

“He’d sacrifice the world just to witness you be the mother of your children,” she emphasized, which made me struggle not to shed tears. “He made that bargain without a hint of doubt in his being. Whether you knew or didn’t, that man made that decision the moment he knew what you sacrificed for the sake of your survival and the love you both share.”

Oh, Malifer...

“I love him dearly,” I confessed as a single tear ran down my cheek. Blinking the rest away, I smiled and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “He needs to be reminded that he’s loved and cherished by many. He’s also deserving of revenge. He deserves to see the demise of the man who brought all this misery and struggles into his existence. Both as an Alpha and the King of Demon Valley.”

Colton’s hand reached out to hold mine just as Lauren’s hand reached out to press onto my shoulder.

No words needed to be said. I knew and felt their intentions to aid me in any way they could, but they wanted to ensure I knew I was also supported.

That they wished for me to reach the finish line as well.

“Passing over to the other side should trigger the opening of a passage,” Lauren declared. “Let’s make haste.”

“Agreed,” Colton encouraged and squeezed my hand one more time.

The final trials of Demon Valley await.

The Hidden Gem Of Chaos And Cruel Savior

“**F**uck...I don't think I can hold this for much longer.”

“They just keep coming,” Lauren grunted before she clapped her hands and sent a wave of energy that destroyed rows of monsters that screamed at their demise.

My eyes continued to dart from side to side, taking in the never-ending sea of monsters that blocked our path from the grand prize — the platform that would lead us into the sacred space I hopped would take me straight to Malifer.

*Did he have to go through this madness for minutes?
Hours? All by himself?*

There were three of us and we were struggling, so I couldn't wrap my mind around Malifer taking on rows and rows of demonic creatures that were as powerful as final bosses in a typical video game.

Being sitting ducks here was beginning to tick me off, so much so that my magic was begging to come out and put these creatures in their place. I couldn't count exactly how many demons were fighting to kill us, but there had to be more than one hundred.

“*Do you wish for me to interfere?*” Lily inquired.

To be honest, I would rather wait for your assistance until we're close to Malifer's location.

With us facing difficulties now, I worried entering the forbidden space that hid the crown of the valley would be a strenuous task — *especially by myself.*

“You have a point.”

I took a moment to acknowledge Xiao, who was watching, intrigued, in hopes I’d request her aid. If the space around us wasn’t so condensed, it would have been a good idea to shift and take them out with our swiftness, but the ground beneath us was just as unstable as the rocky walls surrounding us.

Getting rid of these creatures needed to be swift and practically effortless.

We’re running out of time here.

With a bite of my bottom lip, I looked at Lauren.

“Can you teleport yourself and Colton over there?” I asked and pointed to the spot we were trying to reach, though we’d only managed to make it to the middle of this monster madness.

“What are you planning?” she asked instead as her eyes narrowed, which made me smirk in return.

“Getting us out of this mess,” I voiced and added, “And you two need to be blindfolded.”

Colton was literally shaking as the magnitude of strings that held back the creatures from jumping us were beginning to reach their max stretch capacity.

“You...can’t do this by yourself, Lexi...boo,” he struggled. “Why...do...we...need...fuck!”

More strings were beginning to snap, which encouraged me to take one more look at Lauren, who bit her bottom lip before cursing.

“Fine. Teleport to the wall there. But blindfold?”

“I don’t want you guys to see what I’m going to do,” I confessed in seriousness. “It’s not something I’m proud of, nor is it a side I like to delve into, but seeing as I can’t call upon Lily or Xiao, it’s something I have no choice but to use to ensure we get passed this.”

She looked at me for three solid seconds before she reached out to grab Colton’s hand.

“Don’t die.” That was all she had to say to me before she snapped her free hand, which kindled the white fabric of silk that wrapped around hers and Colton’s eyes. A second later, they were no longer standing before me, but exactly where they needed to be on the opposite wall that was marked with an incantation.

Without delay, I summoned a wall of shadows to rise just before them, boxing them in so none of the starving creatures could attempt to jump at them. Without sight, they wouldn’t be able to determine if they were about to be attacked, so the safety precaution would ensure they’d remain safe until I was done here.

It took only three seconds for all the creatures’ attention to fall upon me, but none of them dared try to jump at me — even as the last strings of Colton’s spell snapped away and left them free to all jump at me.

“So you creatures of mindless fury can sense doom, hmm?” I quietly purred as I cracked my neck and tried to stabilize my breathing. I hadn’t tapped into this side of myself for a few months, so I needed to calm down my nerves and other emotions, or else I could lose control far too quickly.

The barrier I'd created around Colton and Lauren would be soundproof specifically to the English and magic languages. They would at least hear these beings' screams of agony, which would ease their worries just a little that I wasn't going to die — let alone lose.

They would sense my aura, which was something I didn't really like them knowing about, but I wasn't tapping into all my magic. I'd give off the impression I used my highest skill so they assumed that was the strongest I could be. At least until I was comfortable enough to share the true reflection of how much power someone as cunning as I carried.

Being Alpha Shade's favorite meant I had to play the part of an overpowered bitch.

The sight of all these creatures reminded me of the cunning bastard of an Alpha. This was his specialty — locking us in a glass box and enjoying the wash of fear that would seep through our faces as sinful creatures emerged from the ground in hopes of devouring our bodies and souls.

The adrenaline of survival was what kept me alive, and even after hours of fighting, my ability to fend off all my enemies was only rewarded by more pain as I was beaten until I could barely remain conscious.

The reminder made the temperature drop dramatically, and my eyes began to twitch as if the existence of these forbidden creatures had pushed me past my limit. They began to mutter oddly in their groaning and screeching language, and I caught onto the odd scent of fear. The aroma reminded me of something rotten mixed with the fresh chilled breeze of winter.

They couldn't deny the switch they all sensed as I began to roll my shoulders and neck before rotating my neck at a rather

slow pace. I certainly couldn't be sore before reaching my patient king. He needed me to be ready in case we had to fight Baker head-on, which was why it was best to tap into this side of myself to get rid of this fleet of useless fiends.

"I don't know who your master is, but my gut tells me you're not among the creations of my valley," I voiced as I felt the burning in my eyes, which I knew would be glowing red. My lips began to tingle and I could confidently say they were now cloaked in black.

My hair of pink was shifting dramatically to white, and my skin was burning hot as various incantations and scars bled to the surface in impatience. My aura spiked dramatically, to the point these monsters who were desperate to dispose of me were now running in the opposite direction, but they simply crashed into the invisible walls I'd created, which had me giggling in delight as a black leather rod was now in my grasp.

"How amusing the shifter hierarchy is," I purred seductively as I finally tipped into that state of insanity I'd created to protect myself. My vision went from the various colors to pitch black. It took only a second for all their essences to be clear as day — and the sight of red only further triggered me as my nostrils flared.

My lips trembled as my free hand twitched uncontrollably, sparks of black igniting along my very fingertips while my laughter became manic in nature. I was already craving the pain that would come afterward. My reward of agony after taking all these useless beings of darkness for daring to waste my valuable time and energy.

There was an empty semicircle around me as the monsters now climbed upon one another as if they could make towers

that would give them the chance to escape. It was such a pretty sight that it left me feeling extra gleeful, to the point that I couldn't help but applaud their attempt to escape my wrath.

“Why are you running?” I asked with such a high-pitched voice, I probably sounded like a child who was questioning where all her friends had gone. “If you wanted to play hide and seek, you could have just asked.”

I laughed and clapped my hands some more before I sighed dramatically while my burning red eyes had surely dilated with my sudden focus on the first group of monsters parallel to me.

“None of you are communicating with me. I don't like that.” My voice was now emotionless as I took the chance to bite my bottom lip so hard, it began to bleed instantly.

Without delay, I raised the leather rod to kiss the top end with my bloody lips. The metallic taste mixed with leather only made me laugh long and hard as I swung the leather rod from left to right, which ignited a black whip that glowed with intensity.

Black sparks danced around the illuminated whip, and it took me a second to remind myself that this spell had been done correctly because my blood was now as black as these demons' shells versus before, when my blood was a vibrant red that made me more manic.

“This works out lovely. How powerful is a black whip of demon blood? Who knows. Who knows. Will that please my Master? I wonder. I wonder.” My thought process was as erratic as my words, but it didn't matter because my attention was now on my prey before me — the first set of targets that would enjoy the raw charge of my crucifying whip.

“Feel the wrath of a pretty little monster,” I purred in bliss before I moved my hand in a blurred movement that sent a charged force of wind, electricity, and death to my targets in one go. With a single blink, their screams echoed through the hollow oasis while I enjoyed the sight of their red bodies bursting into tiny little particles.

The sight made me grin from ear to ear, showing my glimmering white teeth while my eyes further widened so I could take in all the fine details of the red orbs that were growing tinnier and tinnier as that section of desolate life was eliminated by my wrath.

“Red. Red. RED!” I scream and giggled — my mind not processing which one came first before I licked my lips slowly as if I could taste the very blood I’d spilled upon these tainted grounds. “I SEE NOTHING BUT RED!”

My next movements were a mix of spins, swift flicks of my arms, and jumps in place as I continued to enjoy the massacre of death that left my ears ringing and my body craving for more. I wanted to witness more droplets of red rain down, to hear the high-pitched screams that were eerie and only encouraged me to move faster so I could enjoy the way the sound amplified in my boxed space.

The creatures had dared to try to hurt me and those I considered precious, and here they were. Cowards trying to run away from their executioner.

“You can run. You can hide. You can do everything in your power to flee from me,” I encouraged breathlessly as I aimed for the last tower of red that still formed a thick block of unity that needed to be destroyed and turned into droplets. “But a pretty little monster can disappoint her master, which means

you all must disappear until there's nothing but darkness that remains.”

I sent my final whipping strike, tripling the amount of power that burst out of me like I'd been pooling it within myself for the grand finale. The end result led to an explosion of red. The rain shower of red orbs left me immensely pleased with my performance.

My inhales and exhales were erratic, my shoulders lifting up and down to aid me in getting air into my lungs. Sweat dripped down my face while my body shook with buzzing remnants of energy. I'd forgotten how dangerous this level of high was – to acknowledge what a weapon of destruction you carry in the palm of your hands while enjoying the brutal results of your merciless execution.

This high of confidence was what swarmed through my mind and begged me to keep going. To rid the world of life and enjoy the darkness that submerged me when the last bits of red fizzled out of existence.

Leaving me in pitch darkness that embraced me with pride.

“My Pretty Little Monster has done marvellously for once.”

I tilted my head to one side, the familiar sound only making my lips curl while I slowly — *hauntingly* — rotated my top half until my eyes could catch a glimpse of the man I didn't expect to face so soon.

My smile simply grew and my dry, bloody lips cracked at the extensive stretch. I couldn't stop my eerie grin from taking over my face, especially when my eyes didn't deceive me. Among the darkness stood the man in question.

My torturer...no...my Master.

“Well, well, well. Look who the tainted brought in,” I sweetly declared. “Are you here to torture me, Master? Even after all I did for you?”

Lifting my arms up to my side, I continued to look back at him in my odd rotated position, my head falling further back as I giggled and gestured around the darkness that surrounded us.

“Can’t you see? Has old age or the poison everyone is gossiping about put you in a coma that has stolen your sight instead?” I suggested. “All these creatures. I killed them all. Destroyed every orb of red. Red like blood. The blood you enjoy watching pool upon the floors of your sacred dungeon, 30 feet below where no one else can see or hear my cries of suffering.”

I giggled again, though the sound wasn’t joyous in the slightest. It was weird, to the point that I couldn’t really describe it with words. It was a sound you’d hear in a horror movie that would leave you with goosebumps while you took your last breaths before death came knocking on your door.

“You have to come back later, Master,” I voiced as if I’d remembered something important. “I have somewhere to be. Somewhere important. Very, very important.”

He looked at me long and hard, as if my words weren’t satisfying in the slightest, which made me shrug as I ended up spinning around. I almost lost my balance, as if my body was overloading and could no longer stand without swaying side to side, but I held my stance while my eerie smile made my very cheeks hurt.

“You’re saying something is more important than I, your Master?” His anger only made me crave the agony of his whip that would scar my flesh like it did on the regular. The mere reminder made my back hurt as if I could feel the remnants of pain that ignited at the striking touch of scorching leather. “You speak of something else instead of acknowledging my praise.”

“You. Praised. Me?” I needed a moment to rewind what was said as if his words were so foreign to my racing brain that I’d overlooked them entirely. “My Pretty Little Monster has done marvellously for once,” I repeated his words. “Oh.”

I needed another ten seconds to absorb his words before I gasped in utter surprise while my eyes were so wide, I wondered if my very eyeballs would pop out of them.

“You. Praised. Me?! I did marvellously. Marvellously. Me. Your pretty little monster,” I gleefully sang in a minor key that further heightened my excitement. “A first. A very first. Will I get a reward for my performance?”

His expression was disapproving, and yet he peered around to ensure we were still alone before he bobbed his head once.

“On one condition.”

“A condition. A pretty condition. What can be so tempting that my Master would be willing to reward me? His pretty little monster?” I hummed and swayed again. My body felt so heavy, but I couldn’t dare miss out on this. I needed to listen to everything he had to say. To experience this newfound change so I could drill it into my memory and evoke more opportunities like this that played in my favor.

“You need to come with me now and leave the valley to Baker.”

“Baker...” The word made me pout. “Favorite son wants to be here? A shame, a shame.” I shook my head. “He never earned my loyalty.”

“Your loyalty is with me,” he emphasized with a low growl. “*You belong to me, Lexianne, and you will do what I say.*”

His Alpha energy was fierce and did everything it could to force me to submit, but the heaviness of his words made me laugh and spin, my imbalanced steps only making me feel like I was on some sort of ride where the objective was to ensure I didn’t fall off.

“No, no, no. This isn’t right.” I shook my head, which made my hair a mess as the wild strands clung to the side of my drenched face. I was dripping with sweat like I now had a fever that wished to exile me from the realms of life. “Where’s the pain? You deliver pain and then demand. No pain, no demands!”

“I can’t whip you into submission right now,” he grumbled as his eyes further narrowed. “You will listen to me and leave this instant!”

“No,” I dared to say the single word, waiting for him to march over to me and slap me until my face burned from the brutality of his slaps and punches, but the longer I waited, the more I realized that he wasn’t going to punish me the way he’d routinely done for years.

That’s not right...

“Are you a hallucination?” I pondered to myself as I swayed from side to side and tapped my lip with my index finger. “A delusion? A mystery? A savior?” There were so

many possibilities in this intense state of insanity, but no way could this be the man who got a sexual high from my pain.

“You know the consequences of disobeying me,” he snarled, but he remained in place, which made me frown as I leaned forward. I almost landed on the ground face first because of how heavy my body felt.

“Whoops,” I began and laughed. “I almost fell. Fell to the ground. The ground I share with an imposter. An imposter! AN IMPOSTER!” I screamed the repeated words as I swayed and managed to point in his direction while my head tilted to the left side in questioning.

“You have no control over me here. Why is that? You stand afar. As if the darkness plagues you with uncertainty, while you’re forced to acknowledge your lack of power. Absence of control. Missing tools to deliver the pain that turns you on,” I voiced and shook my head like I was a malfunctioning robot. “No. No. No. My pain brings you pleasure. My agony excites you to your bones. My suffering makes you smile from ear to ear. Knowing I’m destined to be that man you despise only encourages you to leave me lying in a pool of blood. Where’s my punishment, sir? Where’s the pain and torture? You can’t be real. Nope. Not close. For you are the definition of pain, and it’s not present. It’s not here!”

I didn’t think I was making much sense anymore, but maybe it didn’t matter because this man was an illusion. This could be a side effect after not tapping into this cynical side for far too long. After the daily nights of torture, suddenly having none must be the reason for my sudden delusional state of mind after going on an earned killing spree.

“You will OBEY ME!” he screamed. *“You’re my pet! My trophy. My bitch who will take my seed and deliver me an heir!”*

You will be the death of Malifer! I'll make sure of it."

"Malifer. Malifer. There are many Malifers," I voiced as if the name itself made my thought process malfunction. "Alpha Malifer. King Malifer. My possessive mate Malifer. Dark Lord Malifer. Mafia Malifer. Master Malifer."

I giggled at the last part as if imagining the man in question as my master in comparison to the old man before me could be possible.

"There's Demon Malifer. Evil and more powerful than you. Will he become my new master? I should ask him!" I gleefully suggested though I didn't know how as I moved from side to side, my steps uncoordinated like I was completely drunk. "My Malifer. Sweet Malifer! Demon possessive cocky fucker of a Malifer! Look who's here?!"

I dramatically gestured to the man feet away from me, my eyes beginning to droop as though my body itself couldn't bare to be conscious for much longer.

"It's Daddy Dearest. The man who tortured me every night for years. Your Papa who can't whip me. He can't torture me. Where's my pain? Where's my agony?!" I thought I'd lose my mind if I didn't stick to the routine. The itching need to feel pain was growing so tempting that I reached for my bandaged neck. "You can't be my master. No, no, no. I need a new one who can attend to my needs. Needs for pain. Fix this itch. Bring me the agony and the pleasure! You're a delusion. A hallucination. A fake!"

I worked quickly to remove the bandages, spinning around as if it would aid me in my new conquest even though it made me feel dizzy and even more unbalanced.

I needed this hallucination to end so I could return to my senses and face the reality I left behind. That needed pain. For me to feel the agony from the wounds this man dared to leave behind on my precious flesh.

The last string of bandages left my flesh, exposing the raw surface that made me shiver from the chilled atmosphere that graced its fragile state. My hands twitched so hard I thought that maybe I was dealing with a withdrawal of some kind, but my fingertips burned to scrape at my flesh.

To invite the stinging spikes of pain and the oozing flow of blood that would rid me of this hallucination and deliver me the wave of relief I yearned for.

“STOP THIS, LEXIANNE!” he demanded with all his strength, but I was too far gone in my imaginary objective — the need to hurt myself was too strong for me to ignore. He didn’t care about me. Didn’t care about my pain and suffering. He was the ruler of it.

He was the creator of all my woes as I wished for a world where I was happy with my destined mate. All the years of purity. All the hours of faking my identity. I lived a life that never minded proclaiming, and in the depths of the night, I screamed my voice away as I protected the man I knew couldn’t be my knight in shining armor.

I had to save him from his worst enemy.

Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t even himself...

“Disappear,” I pleaded as my eyes pooled with tears, my fingertips inches from my neck. “Until my mate can finally get rid of your existence.”

“That coward would NEVER save you!” he screamed so loud, I actually paused in execution to stare at him as he shook

with so much rage. “A weak bastard of a son! A mistake with my pack! I asked Mother Moon to give me a ruthless Alpha to carry the Shade legacy and what did I get? A kind Alpha?”

He stomped his foot, and I realized that despite his intention to move that flickered in his eyes, he couldn't take a single step.

“A disgrace from day one! A boy who'd never rise to the foundation I worked diligently to protect! And yet here you are. Protecting him! Again and again. What a fucking delusional cunt you are!” he screamed. “You want pain? I'll squeeze that little throat of yours until it snaps! I'll force your heart to stop, fuck you senseless, and throw you in a fucking machine until you give birth to my heir. I'll make him witness it all, and when I get what I desire, I'll fuck your dead body before him before I blow your fucking brains out!”

It was so gruesome and horrifying that I needed a moment to really think it through.

“That...” I began and beamed. “Is brilliant. A shame you can't do it now.”

His face was red as he shook violently, but my objective returned as I readied myself to dig my own fingertips into my flesh.

“You don't hate him because of all that bullshit,” I dared to whisper and watched the way his irises grew in size. “You despise that no matter what you do to me, you can never retrieve my loyalty. You'll never be loved by me. Your son you deem useless and unworthy of my salvation has earned a spot in my heart while there's not even a speck of space for you in it. You think he's a worthless king, but my Malifer was carved just for me.”

I allowed myself to smile as tears ran down my cheeks and manage to roll down my jaw and into my open wound. The droplet of salt gave me my first pinch of pain, and it made the walls surrounding us begin to crack with a single line on each side.

“You can’t take the one thing that’s most precious to him. What’s marked by Mother Moon for himself as his and his alone. It grinds your gears. It drives you mad. And even his death didn’t deliver the results you imagined in your mind again and again,” I hummed. “Disappointment after disappointment, revolving around the one being you claim is your true rival, and no matter how hard your prodigy of a half-son aims to please you, it’ll never be enough to truly satisfy you, for the one thing you want will always be out of your grasp.”

I gave him my biggest smile.

“Me.”

He couldn’t say a word as more cracks began to filter through the dark space, and that only intensified as his eyes widened to saucers as he stared at me. It wasn’t the approaching burst of reality that made me freeze in place suddenly, but the gentle press of a chilled body behind me that gave me enough strength to simply lift my head up and back to reveal who dared to stand in my personal radius.

One look into the orbs of glowing purple matched with the frigid ebony that illuminated so perfectly thanks to all those intricate markings along his flesh confirmed that I was looking into the demonic entity of the man we’d just been discussing.

And he pulsed with anger while looking down at me with overwhelming admiration.

“You’re exactly right.” There was that deep, husky voice that could leave my body quaking with need and open the floodgates of my pussy’s arousal.

He proceeded to wrap his hand along the front side of my throat, but his hand was but a few centimeters from the surface as if he knew delivering pain would snap me out of whatever nightmare this was.

“The one thing that can never be taken from us. The one grand prize that’s greater than any crown sitting upon my unworthy head.”

He began to inch downward until his lips were barely touching mine — allowing me this moment for my body to lean back and give him a few seconds to take on the weighted toll this madness had to instill into my very bones.

“You, Sweet Lex,” he revealed loud and clear without a hint of dismay. *“It’s always been you, my Pretty Little Monster.”*

He sealed the kiss right there and then, and the touch electrified me.

Sending shockwaves of nothing but pleasure.

“Leave this world of devastation, my Sweet,” he encouraged as he further deepened the kiss while his free hand grazed down my front side until it was right between my legs and taunting my wet pussy. *“Let him begin to witness his fall. To see that he may be the bringer of your pain, but that I am the Master that delivers you nothing but pleasure.”*

He slid his fingers inside me without hesitation, while managing to not hold my neck even with how close it was.

He knew what needed to be done to shatter this mental prison and returned me to reality where I had power over

myself once more.

“Mal...if...er,” I spoke his name in increments as he kissed me ruthlessly, all while his two fingers fucked me nice and deep, which made my body begin to tremble as the coil of pleasure began to tighten and build.

“Be louder for me, my Pretty Little Monster,” he encouraged. *“Let them hear how much you enjoy this. Being touched and fucked by these cold fingers of desolate frost.”*

“Yes,” I moaned and gasped for air before he smothered me in another deep kiss that made my very toes tingle with lust while my body grew hungry for more.

Everything was so heightened in this world, to the point that it felt like this rush of pleasure would swallow me whole.

My moans grew louder, and the sound of his fingers moving faster in my wet pussy only encouraged him to plunge deeper.

He was enjoying this just as much as I was, his groin pressing into my ass as if he needed the mere stimulation to keep going while appeasing that erect cock of his. The smell of my arousal wrapped around us like sweet perfume — encouraging us to get lost in this overwhelming sensation of hunger and lust.

“I’ll be victorious! You won’t beat me!” The desperate screams sounded so far away now, as all I could do was focus on Malifer. The demon was giving me the key out of this shadowed prison, and it didn’t involve an ounce of pain.

Only pleasure.

“Feel it, baby. Endure every tendril of pleasure that’s about to shoot through you and leave you quaking for more.

Cry out my name when you hit that very peak and let me be your new Master in this world, where I'll give you nothing but pleasure," he declared, laying out a new foundation that was far too tempting to ignore.

A world of pleasure. A place that embraced my psychosis and rewarded me with spikes of lust and euphoria.

"Tell me you want it, Sweet Lex," he encouraged.

"I want it." I didn't just want it. I begged for this new contract of power. "I beg you. I need this, my king. Please. Pretty please? I'll be a good little monster. I'll listen to only you."

"That's my girl," he praised and suddenly had me hoisted up with my legs spread and his fingers fucking me with such swiftness, I knew I'd cum any second.

"I won't let him have you, Lexianne. No more running away. You always find me...and now it's about time we found you," he vowed as I inched closer to my release.

"Ma...lifer," I moaned and braced for my orgasm that would shatter this world and return me to the present to face whatever awaited me on the other side.

"Endure whatever waits for you, my love," he pleaded. *"Until I can show you just how important you are to me. Until I can make you feel that you are my entire world."*

I tried to look back just as my whole body grew rigid, but his lips sealed mine as he shifted the angle of his thrusting fingers, which was enough to push me to the tip of the edge.

"Cum for my, my Demon Queen. Cum for your king!"

"AH!" I cried in ecstasy as my head fell back and I was completely consumed by pleasure.

“NO!” The outburst triggered the world’s destruction as it shattered like a broken spell.

Pleasure swallowed me whole while the promise from my Demon King lulled me into unconsciousness.

Walking Into A Pool Of Nightmares

“L exianne?”

The gentle touch to my cheeks encouraged me to attempt to open my eyes. The heaviness was only a reflection of just how exhausted the rest of my body was.

It felt like I was hanging — my arms outstretched while the weight of my legs was suspended by something that was wrapped around my thighs.

After a few attempts, I was finally able to open my eyes, especially when I began to recall what had been happening before I fell unconscious.

Wait. I was fighting the creatures...then Alpha Shade was present and taunting me. Then Malifer showed up. Demon Malifer.

Just the reminder made my cheeks immediately flush while my body, despite its tiredness, pulsed with the lingering waves of pleasure Demon Malifer had delivered so effortlessly.

“You always find me...and now it’s about time we found you.”

His words echoed in my mind, and the power of commitment in them encouraged me to keep pushing forward. What I’d just endured was mentally debilitating, but I was still

breathing and wasn't forced to be in Alpha Shade's possession.

I have to be careful. That may have been one of Baker's traps to get me to join their side. With or without my permission.

“Lexiboo?”

I blinked a few times before realizing Colton was literally in front of me, looking so damn worried.

After blinking a few more times, my vision cleared and I noticed the ground itself where I'd enjoyed my wild battle was completely gone.

Well...fuck.

White and blue strings kept Colton and I suspended in the air. The thick ropes with hints of magical essence were around my wrists, biceps, waist, thighs, and ankles.

Colton was balancing himself on a single rope of string, his body crouched down so he could look up at me in wait for my awakening.

After I'd gone all psycho in my killing spree, I had to have passed out in the midst of the craziness. That must have triggered the depletion of the protective wall I'd put around him and Lauren, which was why he was here.

Surprisingly keeping me alive.

“Colton,” I whispered. “Why did you come back?”

“Well, it's rather funny really.” He smiled comfortingly before a puppet appeared in his hand and kissed my cheek.

“You see, a certain Queen of the Valley decided to pull off a miracle and defeat hundreds of mega-overpowered monsters

all by her lonesome while her best friends were blindfolded and protected by a lovely wall that ensured they didn't die by accident. I have no clue what occurred for I only got to witness the aftermath, but the loud cracking of the ground encouraged my dear Colton over here to be a man, take off that blindfold, and realize you were seconds from plummeting to the ground of despair," the puppet explained and tilted to one side. "He panicked like a child about to lose his mother and—"

"I did not," Colton interrupted and glared at the puppet, which opened its mouth to laugh maniacally.

"And raced to save you with his lovely string magic. See? Everyone thought we were useless back in the pack when we were alive and now look? Our strings saved the most important being in Alpha's world. We deserve a medal of honor!"

"We don't have that here," Colton muttered but smiled back at me. "I couldn't possibly let you die, Lexiboo, which is why I had to tie you up a bit."

"I appreciate it," I praised, though I wondered where Lauren was. "What happened to Lauren?"

"Over here," she called out. "I'm going to help pull you guys over here! Hang tight."

"That's the plan," Colton called back before his puppet was gone and he was back to staring at me.

"What?" I asked, feeling as though he wanted to say something but was internally debating about it.

"Why do you insist on doing things by yourself?" I didn't think he'd confront me about that here and now, but then again, I guessed since I was hanging, it was a rather good

moment to ask because I had no way of running from his question.

“It’s not intentional,” I admitted and watched him bob his head.

“I know it’s not,” he voiced. “But that’s the problem. It’s something you automatically do. Like it’s engrained in your very soul to immediately sacrifice yourself in place of anyone else.”

I wanted to argue with him, so I attempted to give him a scenario where I didn’t do much but he followed up with, “You protected Felix and Fynn during your trials. You also protected the voodoo fleet. You’ve protected Malifer for what seems like your entire existence, and you now protected Lauren and me as if the risk of you perishing wasn’t possible.”

“I can respawn?” I offered even though I hadn’t tested that theory yet.

“You and I both know that’s not a good enough excuse,” he voiced. His next words barely reached my ears. “You’re no longer alone, Lexianne. Your existence matters to a lot of people.”

If his words didn’t tug my heartstrings, it was the immense fear and vulnerability that washed over his eyes of pure white that made me realize he was absolutely right.

I’d become so accustomed to sacrificing myself in various situations that it was a habit I couldn’t break. I’d rather put myself in the line of danger to save anyone I valued, but I never took in the reality that I could obviously get hurt.

I wasn’t superwoman, and I could face consequences that would leave scars on those I’d protected and left behind.

“Sorry,” I didn’t hesitate to apologize. It was only fair to acknowledge how my sacrificial actions had left him protected physically but worried him dearly because I was important to him. Even if it was just a fraction of concern, it was clearly evident, which I truly appreciated.

He smiled slightly as he slowly nodded his head in approval.

“I know our next task forces you to go solo for the sake of the valley, but remember from now on that you have allies in your corner. Alright?”

“Alright,” I whispered with an appreciative smile. “Thanks, Colton.”

It wasn’t long before Lauren managed to gather the right strings to haul us over to the platform that had managed to survive the chaos I’d ignited while battling.

From the state of our surroundings, it was clear we wouldn’t be able to go back the way we had come, but if I had to acquire the crown with Malifer, it would be tricky to return to grab Colton and Lauren.

My real worry was Baker stumbling upon them instead of us.

I was hoping all the distractions and hardships I was creating in addition to the voodoo fleet and protective walls that made it rather impossible for him to use the cliff route to get access to the valley would lead to him becoming impatient and potentially frustrated.

Emotional frustration could easily make one vulnerable to getting lost in their own mistakes.

Once Colton had a helpful arm around my waist, Lauren glared daggers at me while her hands were on her hips.

“You like to test fate to see how important you are enough to avoid death, don’t you?”

I had to smirk at her commentary.

“Makes life livelier if you ask me,” I teased and watched her shake her head as she groaned.

“Demons,” she huffed. “You’ll give a Tainted Time Keeper grey hairs if you keep being reckless.”

“My bad,” I commented as Colton began to help me walk toward the single passage that would lead us to our next destination.

Lauren went ahead of us, clapping her hands once to create an orb of light that helped illuminate the pitch-black passage.

“I sense the energies of another lagoon up ahead,” she voiced after we’d walked for another ten minutes.

“What’s that smell?” Colton pondered.

I took a sniff myself, frowning in confusion as I glanced at Colton, who looked just as conflicted as I was. It seemed to dawn upon us at the same time, and our eyes grew wide before we cursed.

“Fire!” we exclaimed and looked to Lauren, who was already sprinting ahead.

I wanted to sprint, but my body still felt weak from the earlier confrontation, which had to be why Colton scooped me up with ease and raced after Lauren despite the shadows going back in place due to the absence of Lauren’s magical orb.

“Why would something be burning?” I whispered in an attempt to truly figure out what was happening here. I would have sensed if Baker was already in the Valley, and I knew that

his shifter side was about to have a lovely face-off with my sister, Nathan, and Astra Lexianne.

That took Baker off the list, which meant there could be a potential third party attempting foul play.

But how did they enter this place? Especially the lagoon, which is hidden deep in the depths of the valley.

I was positive it wasn't Malifer. He'd never do something harmful to the very foundation he spent years building as a safe haven for all of us sacrificed beings.

So who is this invisible enemy?

Colton skidded to a stop at the wall of flames that rose to block us off, but then he muttered a multitude of words before multiple strings began to form upward.

He pushed off the ground seconds later, landing on a thick rope of string that immediately lowered at our combined weight, but he used it as leverage to push off and land on a sturdier set of strings that were crisscrossed in the middle to make a solid platform for him to land upon.

The strings below had already snapped and were burning to ash like the plentiful flowers that surrounded the sacred waters that had yet to be hit by the blaze.

Lauren was already at the edge, her hands clasped together as she looked in deep concentration. After a few blinks, she pushed her arms outward from her sides with open palms while her aura spiked with the intention of unleashing a counterattack.

“Levalso a De Lay Windchanto!”

A burst of white strings of wind ignited into existence and rushed to push the blaze away.

Lauren was already crouched before the lagoon and scooping up a pool of water in her grasp before rising up swiftly and turning around.

She lifted her open palms that were pressed side by side before she took a deep breath. The spell she'd unleashed had to be in her mind for she blew into her palm, and the water morphed into a massive stream of water that worked on combatting the flames.

I felt relieved that she'd moved so quickly and was so knowledgeable of such swift spell work, but it didn't take long for me to realize that her efforts weren't working.

No. They weren't just not working. They were feeding the flames.

“Lauren, STOP!” Colton called out before he summoned more strings ahead of us so he could quickly jump from thread to thread until we reached her side.

“Your magic is feeding the flames!” I acknowledged, which made Lauren stop and look around to prove the flames had simply grown in strength and height.

“Shit. Why?” she cursed and retracted the winds before she moved her arms upward, which ignited walls of glimmering gold and white that shielded us from the collateral damage.

It seemed like the three of us remained quiet for a full minute to assess if the barrier would hold, which it did, but we could already see that it, too, was aiding the flames' growth, though at a slower pace.

“Any type of magic contributes to the growth of the flames,” Colton cursed as he tried to figure out something to combat this new dilemma. It would be hard for any of his

skills to aid with the situation, and yet it didn't stop him from at least trying to figure out a way to contribute.

He helped lower my feet until I managed to stand on my feet. He waited to ensure I had enough strength before he let go of me. The two of us looked to Lauren as if she had some sort of solution to this.

From the look on her face, she was just as conflicted as we were.

“The flames are being contained by the looming magic within the lagoon, but if it gets hotter in here, the sacred waters will begin to evaporate and that will only lower the energy levels within this sacred space.”

“Which will encourage the flames to spread throughout this place and down the exit,” Colton reasoned as his eyes further narrowed and shifted to black. “We can't leave it like this. It'll kill everything we know from those places.”

“Trying to ignite them with any elemental trait will only empower them further and make their burning force and speed rise tremendously. It'll spread at double the rate. If anyone tries to take it down, it'll only contribute to its growth and capabilities,” Lauren explained and bit her bottom lip.

“There has to be a way to counter it,” I reasoned, and a thought came to my mind. “Why don't I attempt to stop time again? Like when I was Voodoo Doll Lexi?”

It seemed like a good idea as the three of us considered it, but Lauren crossed her arms while her eyes darted between the lagoon and the blaze outside the gold-and-white walls.

“Stopping time seems like the best option, but you can't stop time and waltz into the deeper chambers of the valley to find Malifer,” she admitted.

“Why not?” I inquired. “Multitasking wouldn’t work? I know it would be draining but if it’ll protect everyone in the valley from being burned to ash, I’ll do it.”

Colton reached out and lightly karate-chopped my head.

“Ow!” I looked at him with astonishment. “W-What was that for?”

“Didn’t we just talk about you being a sacrificial lamb? And what’s the first thing you suggest?”

“Being a sacrificial lamb...” I slowly muttered with a pout.

Fuck. That’s a habit that’s going to be hard to fix. I just know it.

Lauren actually smirked a little before she sighed.

“Stopping time would be extremely costly to you. Your energy levels are already low, to begin with. I wouldn’t advise doing something so risky when your journey is only reaching the halfway point,” she advised. “You don’t know what’s on the other side of the lagoon or what Malifer may be facing. He’ll need your aid, and if you’re not in a good state, to begin with, you’ll become a liability rather than an asset that can face whatever enemy hopes to stop you guys from locating and acquiring the crown.”

“She has a good point,” Colton acknowledged.

“You also can’t move much when you stop time. Your voodoo doll form runs by different rules which is why you had more freedom, but in your current state, you’ll need to remain here if you stopped time and that’s simply counterproductive,” Lauren further elaborated.

“Could you manage to stop time?” Colton inquired. “To do it without affecting Lexianne? That way, she can go ahead and

find Alpha Malifer while we stay here.”

“Why would ‘we’ stay here?” she inquired with a brow raised.

“Well, I wouldn’t leave you alone,” Colton stated like it was obvious. “And from this stage onward, we can’t follow Lexianne anyways. I have to be here and make sure you’re breathing and safe from any surprises.”

“You’d be frozen too, Colton,” I muttered with a slight smile, which made the puppeteer assassin begin to blush before he quickly added, “Well, I’d hoist us to a safe spot before being frozen so when you return, we’ll be out of harm’s way.”

“I could stop time,” Lauren noted but her expression was grim as she added, “but it would require a bargain.”

“Really?” I hadn’t even thought about that.

“If I stop time, I’m not stopping simply this sector of the valley,” she confessed. “Everything from outside to where we left the voodoo fleet, and the valley itself, would be included,” she revealed.

“Why?” Colton questioned with haste as we noticed the flames were getting far too tall for our comfort.

“I have a strong feeling these flames are from a third party, which means when Lexianne enters the core of the valley, she may potentially confront someone other than Malifer,” she guessed with seriousness. “If that’s so, that means that individual may call for backup. Possibly Baker or a whole pack full of wolves or shifters that can overpower Lexianne. I don’t question her strength, but even the strongest shifters of our world can fall if bombarded by a magnitude of force.”

She was stating pure facts.

“Freezing everywhere but the core of the valley where Lexianne and Malifer are will ensure literally no one can enter the valley, which includes the core.”

“Doesn’t that mean no one can escape?” I clarified.

“As long as you teleport while in the core of the valley, you’ll be okay. It also means your enemy can do the same, but seeing as you’re the current ruler of the valley, you’ll be able to return here.”

“Can you make it so that both Lexianne and her Astra can come back here?” Colton offered, which was an intriguing question.

“I could,” Lauren confirmed. “They’re of the same essence. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“So what if you make it so that time will freeze until either Lexiboo or her Astra returns to these sacred waters? That way, Lexi can work on getting rid of this potential third party if they’re actually present by teleporting them outside of the valley, and when they’ve ensured the enemy can’t return, she can encourage her Astra to come trigger time again in the valley?” he offered the example. “Then we can go back, get Goldibitch, and regroup with the voodoo fleet where we can stay on guard for potential battle in case a shifter war is upon us.”

It sounded like a good plan.

“But what are we going to bargain?” I asked Colton, who was already grinning.

“I have an idea, but you gotta get in the water and I and Lauren have to suspend ourselves above the lagoon,” he explained. “That will keep our bodies a good distance from the

flames so when we return, we can figure out how to combat them.”

“When Lexianne gets the crown of the valley she’ll send something that also holds her essence to extinguish the flames,” Lauren offered.

“Meaning it can’t be Astra Lexianne?”

“No.” Lauren shook her head. “It has to be another entity seeing as Astra Lexianne would be triggering the movement of time.

“Then...” I needed a second to think. “What about Momo?”

“Momo would work,” Lauren approved. “All I need is the bargain, and we can set things into motion.”

“I’ve got that covered.” Colton winked and turned to face me.

I glanced at Colton with worry but he seemed so confident in what he was going to bargain as he turned to face me specifically.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, squeezing them lightly while staring into my eyes with determination.

“We’re leaving everything in your hands, Lexiboo,” he stressed. “I hate that we have to, but we have enough confidence in your desire to save Alpha Malifer, our demon pack, and all of Demon Valley to risk it all so we can achieve the future Alpha Malifer wished for us all. Remember that all you have to do is reach Malifer. Once you do, together you can find the heart of the valley that glimmers in the form of a crown of domination.”

“Colton...” I whispered.

“And don’t forget,” he said with a wink as he leaned in to whisper, “my blanket will keep you both nice and warm.”

I smiled and blinked away tears before I quickly hugged him tightly.

We barely knew each other, and yet the mere instances we’d shared were enough to validate our friendship. I knew with him in my life as a partner in the pack, I’d have someone to lean on when all of this was over and we returned to the rejuvenated pack life of Demon Valley.

I was fighting for a future that would bring me the happiness I’d always dreamed of enjoying during those long torturous nights.

I was mere steps away from it becoming a reality I could be proud of igniting thanks to my perseverance.

As he said, all I had to focus on was getting to Alpha.

Once I’m in his arms, we’ll be able to tackle the final hurdle toward ours and the valley’s freedom together.

“Please don’t bargain your life,” I muttered against him before I pulled back to look into his eyes.

“Never.” He laughed and shook his head for added measure. “I love life far too much to sacrifice myself on my own accord. I’ve gotta travel the world and knit blankets for everyone in the valley.”

“I can’t believe you made that a goal,” I muttered as I let him go so he could prepare to do what Lauren asked.

“It sounded like a smart idea at the time, only I didn’t consider that there would be so many new pack members surviving the valley,” he noted with a sly grin before he turned

to face Lauren. “I know what to bargain. Should I tell you once I make our little hanging spot?”

“Sure,” Lauren encouraged.

With one last look my way matched with a wink, he pushed off the ground and began to summon a magnitude of threads that worked their way across the room at a height high enough over the lagoon waters that it would be the safe to remain and potentially drop from.

That left me to look back at Lauren before she walked up to me.

“Remember the challenges you’ve overcome to obtain the freedom you carry now,” she encouraged. “As long as you remember that, you’ll be victorious.”

“I appreciate the advice,” I whispered before my voice dipped further so my next words would be between us. “Thank you for contributing to my survival for all these years.”

She looked conflicted at my words as she muttered, “It’s my fault your king has lost his way in exchange for restoring what you lost.”

“That may be true,” I began as I took a second to think before I spoke. “However, every action becomes a lesson for us to learn from. Despite the trials we’ve already endured and the ones ahead, I know when all of this is over, Malifer and I will grow even more as we come to embrace our lives and the various titles of power we carry upon our shoulders. We will no longer be dependent on these levels of rank and authority and allow ourselves to be defined by their worth. This is the end of an era, and once we follow through with this final challenge, we’ll have a new world and life for all of us.”

“I knew there was always something special about you,” she voiced more to herself before she reached out to tap my shoulders.

“I’ll do my part to still the valley so you can bring back your destined mate.”

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help but lean in to hug her. “I’ll return as fast as I can.”

“I know,” she replied and gave me a gentle squeeze back before letting me go. “Head into the lagoon. You already know what you need to do to get to the other side.”

I slowly nodded before I took a single step and watched as thick ropes of string created a sort of staircase for Lauren to step upon.

We glanced up to confirm Colton was sitting comfortably on his created masterpiece of strings — his legs dangling as he watched us with a wide grin.

“Show off,” Lauren muttered, but I could see the slight flush that began to form upon her cheeks.

Without hesitation, she began her climb. I took a deep breath and glanced away to look at the lagoon. I couldn’t watch or listen to their agreement, as the moment they initiated such, time would be still.

Let them be protected until I return.

I took a single deep breath and let it out slowly while every inch of tension escaped my limbs.

Without delay, I walked into the waters and took one final deep breath.

Let me delve into the rooted depths of the valley.

A Field Of Traumatic Memories

I gasped for breath as my head pierced through the surface of the once-still waters.

Opening my eyes rewarded me with a mystical sky of magenta, red, and navy blue, while the stars twinkled in gold.

I quickly surveyed my surroundings, realizing I was in the middle of the lagoon where the waters were a baby pink and glimmered with silver and gold.

“Made it,” I breathed before fighting for breath.

I almost thought I wouldn’t make it, as I’d held my breath for eleven minutes and twenty-five seconds.

It was the twinkling light of the sky that encouraged my last set of strides underwater that aided me in piercing the surface, and my reward was being alive and being able to take in the mesmerizing sight above me.

After a minute of taming my rapid inhales and exhales, I proceeded to swim to the north edge of the lagoon. I pulled myself out of the waters, and my body felt immensely heavy. My knees buckled as I attempted to rise up so soon after such a strenuous challenge

“We can’t be wasting time.” I spoke to myself as if my aching limbs would listen to my words of scrutiny. I didn’t

know what Colton had bargained for or whether Lauren could keep time still for as long as I needed.

The lack of information was what was pushing me to get this over with as quickly as possible.

I'd finally be reunited with Malifer.

Just the mention of his name in my mind made my heart skip, and fluttering warmth rushed through me. Our connection was stronger in the depths of the valley's core, which gave me a bit of reassurance that he was not only alive but close by.

I'd just have to keep pushing until I managed to locate him.

Or maybe he'd find me like he stated in that lustful dream.

I could barely remember what happened for a good chunk of it, but I remembered the lovemaking with Demon Malifer.

That was something I'd have engraved in my mind forever.

"There's foreign energy here."

I flinched at Lily's voice. Her stern voice made it sound as if she was upset with this new knowledge.

What do you mean? Someone other than Malifer and I is somewhere here?

Xiao howled and got on all fours as if ready to pounce on this unannounced enemy.

"Yes," Lily answered. "Someone's breached our valley's sacred space. We must ensure they do not reach the core that holds the crown."

Her words sent goosebumps through me, and I felt this burning urge to get moving and locate this culprit at once.

Would it be best for us to shift?

Xiao would be able to catch the foreign scent which would make it easy enough for us to reach the culprit. Then I could shift back and use the aid of Lily to take down this being, who was clearly one step ahead of us.

“That would be the smartest decision,” she agreed, and we shifted our focus to Xiao, who was ready to get to work.

Leaving this part to you, Xiao!

“WOOF!” she howled in pride and charged forward. I relaxed my body for the approaching seconds, knowing I was about to shift. There was the sound of my bones cracking out of place and my vision became altered until I was witnessing everything through the eyes of a wolf.

A howl escaped our throat. The sound was so loud that it vibrated in the air and echoed far and wide. The sensation of being in wolf form was so different in comparison to how tired and weak I’d felt from the lengthy swim.

It was like I’d been rejuvenated with new life, and the burning excitement to remove our marked prey was what pushed Xiao forward as we began to race into this new world of majestic discovery.

The objective was clear, but it was so hard to not get distracted by the internal beauty this serene place had protected all this while. The unique trees of black were covered with various shadows and illuminated with shades of purple and blue.

Various bugs like fireflies and dragonflies roamed the skies as they buzzed, glowing when they sensed my swift approach. Purple butterflies and even mystical-looking foxes caught my attention as we raced and enjoyed the moment of freedom this

world delivered for us to run and explore. I could only imagine what it would be like to adventure through this sacred place with those I cherished in this new pack life.

To run through these blessed lands of darkness with Malifer and those who'd never lost faith in us.

It was a dream, like many of the thoughts I'd had since embarking on this mission to locate my destined mate, but I felt so much closer to obtaining it.

Only a little more, and I'll finally have everything I wish...

Xiao suddenly skidded to a stop, forcing me to focus as she began to sniff the air. I could smell what she did, and the thick sensation of smoke only reminded me of the ongoing flames that we'd just left behind so I could discover the crown and Malifer.

The mere idea of this place being burnt and destroyed by those ongoing flames made Xiao growl lowly before she was running at full speed. Her urgency mixed with mine as I urged this world of tainted beauty to aid us in our new conquest.

As if hearing my internal call, the ground beneath our feet began to shift and move, as though we'd gotten upon some sort of ride that could direct us in the right direction without interfering with our speed.

Everything was becoming one big blur as we pushed to our fastest speed. I couldn't remember the last time I'd run this hard, but I knew within my very soul that if I made it too late, I'd regret it.

This is our valley! I can't let anyone destroy what's so precious to Malifer...and me.

That prime moment of uncertainty and hidden despair made me realize just how symbolic Demon Valley was. It was

the catalyst to change in my life, and though I'd fallen into its grasp as a sacrifice, it really had become the safe haven I needed to be set free from years of captivity.

I won't let anyone destroy my sanctuary of acceptance.

The scent grew stronger and I knew that the intensity of their aura would leave me riddled with goosebumps if I was in human form, but I was running solely on adrenaline as Xiao's desire to reach the culprit behind this scent pushed us past our limits.

Our body burned — markings illuminated against our fur and made us glow profoundly in the blurring darkness. It further empowered us to move even faster as our surroundings shifted into a huge lake.

It took me a moment to realize we were running along a single stone trail that was appearing — *and disappearing* — as it headed toward a miniature island that was completely pitch black. The only illumination in this part was the massive moon of pink and twinkling stars of white and purple that hovered in the sky. Around the moon's surface was a black aura that seemed to empower it with magnetizing power that would pull anyone's attention to acknowledge its alluring beauty, but my resolve was still as strong as ever, which was why we were able to tug our eyes away and keep them on our grand prize.

The island...

We were only a few strides to the shore of the island when we caught onto the single flicker of fire that burned from some sort of match.

I urged the world to shield us immediately, and our approach was suddenly silent as the waters swiftly lifted and

spiraled around our body as if to surround and blend us perfectly with our surroundings.

It felt like I was invisible, which I was grateful for, seeing as I wished to save the blanket Colton had made for later if I reached a state of needing rest.

What we were confronting now was an enemy that needed to be eliminated, but the priority right this second was getting rid of that flame. My sensitive hearing picked up on the individual's mumbles as the cloak that hid their identity began to elevate thanks to the intensity of the magic that began to ooze out of them in waves.

“You think you can win? That you can have your happy ever after? Nonsense. Utter nonsense.”

Every strand of fur stood at that voice while our paws pushed with all their might to send us soaring through the air. The darkness bubbled around us completely, silencing my shift back as Xiao pulled back entirely, which rewarded me with the sound of my bones clicking back into place.

“I'm your master. Your ultimate creator. If I can't have you...well...” the person paused, followed by a deep chuckle, “no one will.”

My body collided with theirs head-on, just as a wave of water toppled upon us, which left us completely drenched. I rolled off the individual before they could strike me with a kick before I managed a tucked roll that helped me press my hands into the black sand and flip my entire body so I could land on my feet.

I spun around and conjured a blade of darkness in time to stop the venomous whip that wrapped around my tainted blade. The leather texture of the whip sizzled as the

temperature of my blade continued to rise, but that was all but a distraction while my eyes were locked upon the pair of spheres that haunted me in my nightmares.

“You know, your obsession is becoming rather toxic if you ask me,” I voiced slowly as my voice didn’t show a hint of fear. “If you keep this up, they may have to throw you into a shifter psych ward for having a strong addiction to stalking your eldest son and his villainous mate.”

Those scornful eyes of red couldn’t possibly project any more hatred toward me because they were at their peak intensity, which was what was making my legs tremble in hopes that I’d submit like I’d always done in the past.

By force, obviously.

I had to remind myself that I was no longer chained like a dog begging to be heard and saved from the calamity one’s owner brought to their world of captivity.

I’d earned my freedom with the help of Malifer and Nathan, and I was sure that was another tick on this man’s list of why he absolutely despised his son, who was destined to break the curse upon the Shade family.

The curse Alpha Shade doesn’t wish to go crumbling down.

“How dare you try to defy me?” he snarled.

It was a shame his words still held power over me to some extent. The trembling in my limbs became more obvious while my goosebumps ran up my bare arms.

Despite our current confrontation, I could see the way he looked at me, how those spheres of disgust trailed down me slowly as I continued to hold off his whip that was begging to hit my flesh and leave plentiful marks of domination over me.

Those black rings around his dilated pupils and the slight flare of his nostrils confirmed how desperate he was to take in my scent — *to attempt to catch a whiff of arousal that would empower that sick sense of pride he carried within his overconfident ego.*

His anger could be the persona he wished the world to witness, but I knew what he really wanted.

What he'd always craved to steal from his son who was destined to be mine — and mine alone.

“I believe it’s my right to do so after you ordered for me to be discarded,” I tossed back to play the game. I needed to know if this was an illusion or the real deal, and if it was real, how much did this man know?

“I didn’t order for you to be discarded off the cliff,” he growled. “That fucker of a son decided to get rid of you and reject you. The man you’ve gone over and beyond for years, all for what? To be discarded like the utter piece of trash you are.”

I could see the smug smile begin to take over his dry lips as he began to tug on his whip, which caught me off guard.

I widened my stance to force myself to remain still. The temperature of the blade began to spike rapidly in hopes of burning right through the leather weapon of brutality.

“What a shame,” I voiced and attempted to shrug before I spun my body once to force the blade to cut through the leather, which sent the man in question back onto his ass.

Without delay, I pushed my hands forward, sending waves of shadows at him, which sent him not only back, but off the ground entirely. I clapped my hands together and dropped to the floor, then pressed my palms into the black sand while

power surged into my eyes to the point that they burned to the point of shedding tears.

I didn't think as my survival instincts empowered my next moves. Spinning pillars of sand and spouts of water burst out of the ground right where Alpha Shade's body was hovering.

The spinning forces not only surrounded him, but two hit him head-on, which made him gasp in agony as he was forced to further soar upward. I moved my hands swiftly, sending the tornados of black sand mixed with the spouts of water towards our prime target. Each one hit, sending him higher and higher as he cried out in pain.

I did that until I was completely out of breath and I could barely see the man in question. But I knew it wouldn't be that easy to finish him off.

The drop back to the ground would probably be child's play to the old Alpha, who sadly had a high survival rate.

Despite the glaring disadvantages, I wasn't going to give up hope just yet. This was my moment to release that pent-up anger and magic that I'd begged to strike him with all those years when I'd screamed with all my might for a savior to take me from the cycle of endless suffering.

I may not stand a chance, especially with how weak I felt matched with the mere idea of fighting him in such a sacred land, but I couldn't help but at least try to fight and potentially defeat my torturer.

Trying was better than submitting to this devil.

With that boost of motivation, I caught onto the descending man. My eyes narrowed to ensure I truly had a mental target on his body as he continued to descend downward.

With a rise of my arms, I envisioned another spout piercing the surface of the black sand and hitting our target directly. The action unfolded before my eyes before the collided particles began to shift in shape.

They expanded swiftly, the move unpredictable as strings began to expand and wrapped around this man as if he'd suddenly fallen into the middle of a tornado. The new objective was to keep him caught in the makeshift web, at least long enough for me to create some sort of prison that would keep him still long enough for me to locate Malifer and find the crown.

I worked vigorously as my magic fought to create the vision in my mind, but I noticed how he wasn't resisting my advances to capture him.

In fact, it almost felt like he was encouraging it...

“Hold on, Lexianne,” Lily cautioned, and that cued me to come to a dramatic stop as I fought for breath. If this man wasn't fighting me, it meant he had something up his sleeve.

I tried to think of what he could be scheming. My gaze dropped to my feet, which made me notice the droplet of blood that fell to the sand. I blinked a few times, watching as more droplets fell to the surface of black sand, which made me realize my nose was the culprit.

Nosebleed...

“Something in the atmosphere is making us use triple the energy we should be,” Lily revealed. She sounded pissed at this uncovered nuisance.

Meaning the more power we use, the harder it's gonna get on our body.

“Essentially,” she muttered. **“Until we die.”**

How divine. I guess that means I can't seal him in a glass prison like I wanted to.

“Unless you wish for your heart to give out,” she pointed out. ***“We can't fight this battle with any more dark magic. He wants our levels to be at the bare minimum so he can try to put on another collar on us.”***

The mere reminder made my lips press firmly together before I conjured up a blade and flicked it with enough force to make it mimic the spinning movement of a boomerang.

It spun majestically in the air until it began cutting through the mass of strings I'd created and my captive prey fell to the ground.

By the time he landed, the blade was back in my possession – my hand catching the hilt of the blade before I lowered my arms to my sides.

Seeing how easily Alpha Shade had landed from the drop only confirmed he knew what he'd been doing by provoking me, but I guessed he didn't believe I'd figure it out in time, which left him with a scowl on his strained face.

“I guess we can both be upset about that not going as planned, can't we?” I offered as I rolled my eyes. “You're really pulling out all the cards to get me back, huh?”

My eyes narrowed as he began to walk towards me, my lips curling into a mocking smile as I tilted my head to one side.

“You'd never go to such lengths for me. Nor would you even dare do so for your 'beloved' son. I'll say son cause I'm going to assume you already know Malifer and Nathan are the same person. If you don't, then I'll have to conclude you're stupider than I recall.”

My words were only fueling his boiling rage as his aura spiked tremendously, but I didn't care about his wrath. He needed me for something — a different reason than usual — and I had to figure it out.

He was mere steps from me now, and his fury was palpable. If this had happened back in my pack days, I'd be utterly frightened of what the punishment would be.

It had to be one that would riddle me with nightmares for weeks on end.

Before he could dare get his hands on me, he crashed straight into a wall. His surprise was written all over his face as he was forced to take a step back to acknowledge the invisible force that dared to get in his way.

I couldn't help but grin like a fool. The expression only made the man visibly enraged before he began slamming his fists against the invisible barrier.

“You think a barrier will stop me?” he hissed and moved swiftly to kick me from the side, but his leg slammed into another invisible wall.

His face was growing red as he watched my smirk widen to a wide smile. A kick to my right side confirmed yet another wall shielding me from his wrath, and I wasn't even surprised that he vanished from my sight and tried to hit me from behind.

Only to hit a wall once again.

“I'd say the fifth time is a charm but who am I kidding?” I pondered more to myself as I crossed my arms in hopes of hiding their trembling.

He couldn't understand what I was doing until it was far too late.

“You boxed yourself in?” he questioned with pure mockery as he was back to face me with an arched eyebrow. “And what possible reason would you have to do something as stupid as that?”

“Well, it would be a grand discussion to have with a cup of tea or even some vodka, but last time I checked we’re enemies. More than that, I’m trying to protect myself from your wrath, so this is pretty logical if you think about it.”

I guessed my matter-of-fact tone wasn’t as amusing to him because he trembled with so much fury, he reminded me of a rocket ship that was about to explode into the air.

“What foolish protection is this?!” he screamed and slammed his fists again and again against the wall. It got to the point where I couldn’t help but cough as my arms further tightened around my waist.

“Now, now,” I coughed and tried not to cringe at the metallic taste in my mouth. “Getting your frustration out on my invisible box isn’t very nice. There are consequences you don’t want to trigger or witness, so it would be best if you just give up on trying to get a hold of me.”

He gritted his teeth as those red venomous eyes bored into mine, which danced with glee.

“You shouldn’t be coughing blood,” he acknowledged as his eyes further narrowed in judgment.

“You’re right,” I voiced the obvious. “Maybe if this glass box wasn’t inflicting physical damage to my body, I wouldn’t be coughing up blood and feeling like I’d die if you kept doing that for a solid minute.”

It clicked in his mind as his eyes suddenly widened at what I’d unexpectedly done. It made me giggle manically before I

began another coughing fit, which forced me to turn my head and spit out the pooling blood in my mouth.

“Man. I’ve been close to death plenty of times in your domain, but how empowering it feels when I get to control my end. Odd...frightening...and yet humbly satisfying, if you ask me.”

“Are you fucking mad?” he dared to ask, which made me tilt my head to the side as I gave him my best white-toothed smile.

“Would you blame me for having a few missing marbles after years of torture by a man with a strong obsession for power, an even stronger desire for an heir, and the devilish intentions of killing his own son, stealing his fated mate so he can rape, torture, and get what he wants before abandoning her to starve to death and igniting a shifter war for the sake of remaining in power?” I summed up the rambled explanation and sighed. “No. You wouldn’t blame me for being absolutely insane, but thanks to our Moon Goddess and my brilliant mind, I can use such mental disparities to my advantage.”

I licked my bottom lip slowly to spread my blood along my lips as if it was a shade of lipstick that deserve to mark my brittle flesh.

“Like letting that immense rage of yours kill what you seek the most.”

His eyes exactly widened while his nostrils flared with anger. He didn’t hesitate to slam the walls before him once more, which made me flinch in pain as I bit my bottom lip hard and tried not to bend forward in agony.

“Ow,” I cursed when it didn’t feel like my insides were going to self-destruct. “Now, you just did that on fucking

purpose.”

“WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVE?!” he demanded as he took a step back as if the wall had burned him in return.

His whip was back in his grasp before it struck the side of the invisible box. It made me grasp my ribs, which sounded like they were on the verge of breaking.

I was going to answer his question initially because I was catching my breath in slow breaths. “C’mon, Master,” I hummed in delight as I lifted my weak eyes to look at his shaking stature. “You’re a smart cookie. Can’t you figure out my purpose?”

He growled and began whipping the box with no fucking remorse. I had to mentally regret this idea because fuck.

This hurts like a damn bitch.

“You thought this was a smart idea because?” Lily sounded like she pitied me. **“You’re inching closer to death by the second.”**

I’m beginning to realize that...

I needed to fight not to pass the fuck out as I continued to hug myself and try to breathe through the agonizing pain.

He wants to use me to get to Malifer. If he kills me, he can’t really do that.

“True...” She didn’t sound very convinced though. **“And if we die?”**

Well...we’ll respawn...probably...

“Why do I feel like that’s not the ending you want?” she inquired.

Well...if I respawn, I'm not sure if we'll end up here or back at the very beginning where the voodoo fleet is. Goldibitch gets away with returning to where we are because my respawn energy is infused in her, but in my case...well...

I was struggling to keep conscious at this point as I still fought to remain standing.

“You’d return to Malifer.”

Bingo.

“If you return to Malifer, respawned and rejuvenated, why is that a problem?”

It could potentially backfire on me. If Malifer is where the crown is, what if Shade has a backup plan that involves me dying or something? I’d be bringing him to the man he despises and the crown he seeks to destroy, just like Baker.

“Right...but if it works, you’ll be at Malifer’s side, closer to the crown, and even closer to freeing the valley and getting rid of Baker and Alpha Shade.”

That brings up one more thing.

“What?”

What if Baker’s objective was to see if Alpha Shade would go to the extent of intruding into the valley and attempting to claim what he knows Baker wants? I may have been slowing his trail on the outside but Baker isn’t stupid. He’s as cunningly smart as we are. He had to have caught onto my ploy by now.

“You have a point...”

So what if Baker is just allowing Alpha Shade to get his way to lead him as close to the crown as he can? Baker has to have some sort of connection to Alpha Shade, especially if he’s

the favorite “half child.” So keeping Alpha Shade here will force Baker to meet us here instead of where the crown is.

“That sounds intelligent,” she praised. “But there are two flaws with your plan.”

Aww. What are they?

“Well, for one, you’re literally on the verge of unconsciousness, which would lead to death, and that goes back to the dilemma about whether you’ll respawn in Malifer’s arms or back at the entrance where the voodoo fleet is, which may potentially trigger time to move again but risk Colton and Lauren to burn the valley’s core lagoon and block your access from reaching this point again,” she explained. “The second prominent problem is you potentially not dying and Alpha Shade getting us as his grand prize before bringing Baker here somehow and basically leading us down a path that involves blackmail and death.”

Hmm. When you say it like that, I feel like I missed a step in this diabolical plan.

“Well, you kind of did.”

What step did I miss?

“More like an observation that rules out your first gamble.”

What?

“Your blood,” she voiced. “It’s red again.”

Wait...what?

I attempted to open my eyes but I realized my ass really was on the verge of unconsciousness.

And the pain was fucking brutal.

I could barely breath. My shoulders were moving up and down with my labored inhales and exhales as I was on my knees with my arms still wrapped around my stomach. My forehead was pressed against the black sand while the scent of sweat and blood harassed my nostrils.

“Ya...fuck...I messed up with this one.” I struggled to speak and not choke on my own pooling blood that I forced out a second later.

“Foolish cunt.” The muttered curse was in between heavy breaths as my not-so-cunning plan was at least weakening the man who was so close and yet so far to obtaining me once more.

I bet it was grinding him to the very core that he’d yet to have me in his grasp and chain me up like the dog he couldn’t wait to have back in his care.

“Did you think I was going to kill you? You’re my getaway ticket out of here with that damn crown I’ve been trying to acquire for years!”

That actually intrigued me as my ears perked up in hopes he’d keep feeding me info while I fought for breath.

“These lands. This valley. All the useless fuckers sacrificed. They should have been in my control. My possession to use and abuse for whatever I deemed fit!” he declared. “Generations after that bitch was sacrificed, the curse of these lands forbids me from exploring the vast lands that were unclaimed. That Time Keeper told me there was something hidden within the root of these tainted lands. That within its depths was a crown full of power that could grant me everything I seek in life. I could have used it to find the perfect woman for me, and together, we would have been given the power to rule these lands effortlessly with no one’s

interference, but I chose wrong. I had to have fallen in love with a woman with a fucking heart of gold. No wonder why my son became so soft. He's so unworthy of being an Alpha, let alone a king of a pack as grand and overpowered as the Shade Pack."

He began to chuckle as I finally managed to open my eyes just slightly to stare at the sand beneath me. Pools of red blood continued to soak into those onyx microbeads.

I could only imagine what I looked like, and yet it made me smirk like a damn fool as I slowly managed to lift my heavy head enough to peer at the man who had always been the ruler of my agony.

"The Goddess must enjoy mocking me since she made me get the twin that was as pitifully troublesome as you." Those glaring eyes couldn't stop scrutinizing me. "You were the stronger one. I'm sure that pitiful copy of yours would have died eons ago from my wrath."

That made him chuckle as he took slow steps until it was just that invisible wall stopping him from wrapping that large hand around my brittle throat. He crouched down slowly, his eyes never leaving mine as he further grinned.

How he tried to look like he was winning, but I could read those eyes. I could decipher how much he wished to destroy me with his hands and hear me scream like those long nights that brought him nothing but pleasure thanks to the sight of my agony.

"This is a ploy, isn't it?" he offered quietly, like this was a secret between us. "Are you waiting for your knight in shining armor to come and rescue you?"

My smile fell, which left him laughing loud and hard as he shook his head before he reached out and lightly trailed his finger along the wall, making me shiver.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he pondered and for a mere moment, I could picture us back in the depths of his torture dungeon.

Thirty feet under, illuminated by flames that danced against the tall walls of rock. The scent of my blood mixed with the scent of alcohol and burning coal.

“My son is a coward. A weasel who enjoys the crown of power that sits upon his head. But he could never truly face the cruel world that yearned to rip him to pieces,” he whispered while caressing the wall as if it was my cheek. The action was one of the few tender gestures he’d do to me before another round of endless suffering. “I protected him. Shielded him from all those who wished to destroy him before he could reach of age. How innocent that boy was. No matter if it was the son who earned my affection or the one who yearned for independence.”

He allowed himself to smile as he closed his eyes.

“I tried to play to his tune. To pretend that I knew nothing of his desire to be two different individuals. I should blame myself for that, really. I was the one who made him into a monster. I tortured him in the depths of the night with various liquids of tainted blood that could mutate him and make him stronger. Any true Alpha would have embraced the gift I’d delivered at such a young age and used it to become stronger. Wiser. To gain allies and build an empire that could come in good use when we’re so close to a shifter war. If he’d proven himself, maybe I wouldn’t have had to put you through such a strenuous childhood. Maybe you could have enjoyed being his

destined mate and bringing an heir that is even stronger and far worthier to take on the Shade Pack. There are so many paths our lives could have gone on if he'd just been the son I sought for. A ruthless Alpha who'd do anything to get what he wants. But alas. He has to be what none of us need in this world." He shook his head again. "A coward."

"Malifer isn't a coward," I managed to mutter, and it made his father smirk further.

"Always defending him. Always willing to go through the wringer for a man who can't even come and save you. Is that the life you sought to live? To enjoy years of putting yourself last while everyone goes ahead of you?" he pondered as his brows furrowed in dismay. "You heal our pack members. Heal anyone who needs aid no matter how exhausted you are. They belittled you from day one. Marked you as an outcast. They would never defend you, even when you saved many of their lives from the hands of death. When the mere thought of sacrificing you hit the air, not one rose their hands up to ask for your salvation. And yet if the clock was turned back and you had to heal those deceitful wolves once more, you'd do it without a single hint of regret."

He obviously pitied me as he stared into my eyes once more.

"My son has always had your protection. Your loyalty. Your dedication to keeping him as far away from my wrath as you could. If death was here to claim yours and his soul, you wouldn't dare hesitate to step forward and let yourself be reaped by the Angel of Death himself if it meant your love... your apparent king...would get another chance at life." He then let out a hearty laugh. "But the real question is, would he do the same for you? If the tables were ever turned, would he

be tortured by me every night to save you? Would he have suffered the wounds and scars I landed upon your flesh without a care in the world as to whether they would heal or not? In fact, would he do what you're doing now? Boxing yourself up in a cage, knowing damn well I could electrocute it with enough power to kill you."

I swallowed at his words as further leaned in and slowly licked the very wall like it was my flesh. A whimper left my lips as I fought against the tremors that rushed through my body.

"Would he do that for you, my pretty little monster?"

I bit my lip hard as I closed my eyes as tightly as I could. I needed a moment just to breathe so I wouldn't fall into his hypnotic trap.

"It doesn't matter," I finally answered, not caring how weak my voice sounded.

"It doesn't matter?" he repeated. "You and I know your answer does matter."

"I don't care about the 'what ifs' or whether Malifer would do what I've done for years to protect him. That's not my present. That's not something that can be changed, and it won't determine the future. What matters is that I've loved him in the past. I love him in the present, and no matter if I have a future or not, my love for him will never falter," I vowed as I used every fiber of strength to open my heavy eyelids, just so I could peer into my punisher's eyes. "With the valley as my witness, I'll always love King Malifer Shade of Demon Valley Pack. Nothing...no power, no spirit, and no influence that exists in this realm and among the realm of life above will strip such passion away from me."

The lines of parody on his face began to ooze away, the mask of amusement finally falling away and revealing the villain I knew was hiding beneath all those lies and deceit.

“I will always love your son. Even if you believe he’s nothing but a coward,” I emphasized. “He loved me despite my flaws. Loved me despite my scars and imperfections that you laid in hopes of igniting his disgust. He apologized for all the sacrifices I had to make on his behalf, and was willing to do anything he could to give me something I thought I’d lost.”

I let my tears fall as I let a brilliant smile form on my lips.

“I’m his pretty little monster now...and if my death gives him a single chance to secure this world as his own forever by claiming the crown of this valley...so be it,” I declared with pride. “For my death would ensure you lose everything that’s precious to you. Your son...this valley...and your most precious prisoner in all these lands.”

I showed him my blood-stained teeth.

“Me.”

He couldn’t say a single word as that last hint of compassion in his eyes was vanquished and replaced by the true reflection of the monster I knew all too well. He slowly rose up, darkness beginning to shadow his face like it always did when he’d internally snap and prepare for the symphony of my screams that would turn him on for hours.

“I could have been your savior,” he declared with an emotionless voice that made goosebumps of fear rush up my arms.

“You could have,” I agreed as I slowly sat back on my knees while I tightened my hold around my breasts as though

it was a final hug to myself. I knew this would be my end, for I wouldn't survive whatever he had in mind.

The final round of torture would make my heart stop entirely.

“But there's one thing you never understood about me, Alpha Shade,” I whispered with utmost truth. “I never wanted a savior. I never wished to be saved. The hours of torture...the dismay...the ridicule...all it did was make me stronger, didn't it?”

He held his tongue as I gave him my best smile.

“I endured it all. Your precious little monster took every blow, every whip, every shockwave, and every strike of pain you could deliver. I let you crumble all those walls. I let you riddle me with any type of mark that would ensure the world knew who I belonged to, and despite it all...you're my final executor. You'll be the one to take me out because you managed to make it so no one else could,” I acknowledged. “Not your son. Not Baker. Not any of those wolves who are so obsessed with seeing who'd be next to take your position. No one else was able to destroy your pretty little monster...so now you have no choice...but to do it yourself.”

I could see the conflict in his eyes. Could he destroy the weapon he'd created now that I'd pointed out just how powerful I was?

How truly precious I was.

“Finish what you started, Alpha,” I encouraged and braced for the inevitable. I could sense Lily's energy begin to filter through my veins as if she wanted to make this as painless as it could be, but I knew this would hurt. ***“I'll never bow to you again.”***

There it was, the final strike that made him remember what he'd forgotten.

I was no longer his chained pet. I was free, and he could never lay another collar upon my flesh without killing me.

“Go tell your Creator what a fool in love you are,” he snarled as his eyes blazed with fury as he summoned a red whip that buzzed with deadly shockwaves of black.

My cheeks hurt from the big-ass smile plastered on my face as I enjoyed the sight of his rage one last time. Closing my eyes, I took a final inhale and pondered what life would have been if I reached Malifer in time.

Being embraced by his strong arms and hugged tightly while taking in his amazing scent.

The mere imagination brought me a sense of safety and peace as my tense body suddenly relaxed. It didn't matter if I'd failed. At least he'd proven out of all those who'd entered my life for their own intrigued interest and need for survival, I was worthy of his compassion.

Worthy of his admiration...and most certainly worthy of his love.

It was a shame really because I wanted to feel what it was like to make love with him. For us to enjoy the warmth of Colton's blanket and embrace each other like lost lovers who were finally getting the moment to express their love to one another.

I had plenty of regrets, especially being a villainess to reach this point, but one thing I never regretted was being in love with Malifer. No part of me regretted falling in love and committing to them even if the universe wished to pull us apart, and that was something I could be proud of.

Even at the moment of death.

Letting my mind wander, I envisioned us meeting at the core of the valley. Our eyes locked and I watched the pride and relief swarm his handsome features. I wouldn't hesitate to run into his arms, and he'd hug me like the precious woman I was as he'd whisper wonderful things to me.

How proud and grateful he was to have me in his arms. He'd praise my courageous attempts to save all those he cherished.

It made me wonder what it would have been like to have him as my husband and for us to potentially raise children together. It was funny because I would never be ready to have children anytime soon, but the idea of bringing life seemed like something I now yearned to endure and experience firsthand.

Maybe in the next life, my Goddess will grant me my ultimate wish.

“Are you sure you want this to end this way?” Lily's voice was barely there as if I was at the end of the hall and she was on the other side.

“If it protects Malifer from the likes of his father...and potentially me from being a weapon formed against him, I accept such fate with open arms.”

It would kill my being if I allowed Alpha Shade to use me against Malifer, and maybe that was what I was avoiding all along. Being used as a weapon against the man I loved and cherished. I couldn't do that to him, for I knew what the end result would be.

The extent my Demon King would go...just to keep me alive.

It was exactly why I was doing all of this. I didn't need anyone to paint the possibilities of whether Malifer would do the same for me. He would sacrifice himself in a heartbeat to keep my heart beating — even if it meant I was used against him and resulted in my very blade striking him through the heart.

This is why this has to be done...for the sake of everyone.

I knew many would mourn my death in this realm, but I'd prepared for this as a last resort. My death would force Momo to return to where Colton and Lauren were, and they wouldn't feel my lost essence until they were in the safe bubble of the Voodoo Fleet.

The power of the valley would return to the one I cherished the most — Malifer — and he'd have power over the valley, which would mean he wouldn't need the crown any longer. Baker wouldn't have access to the valley anymore for Laura would perish from my death thanks to her respawn capabilities being revoked with the absence of my magic, and, well...my sister would sadly not get a chance to meet me, but at least she'd be alive and not further pulled into this demonic side of our shifter world.

My death would ruin Malifer the most, and I hated the reality my demise would lay upon him. I was sure he wouldn't smile for a long time — *and he may never love another again* — but at least the valley would have a merciful king.

One who'd love every shifter in our valley and allow them to experience the pack life we always yearned for.

I could die knowing that everyone would eventually get their happy-ever-after.

Even if I never got my own.

“A selfless Queen deserves to wear the crown she earned,” Lily quietly whispered, and her words made me feel more at peace as it felt like my consciousness was slipping away.

“I hope in the next life...I get to meet you face to face, Lily,” I whispered. “Tell Xiao...if you can...that I’m thankful for all she’s given me by being my trusty wolf.”

I was slipping away as the buzzing electricity began to course through my veins.

Thankfully, I was numb, even as it felt like I was screaming on the other side of this oasis Lily had probably pulled me into. It made accepting my end easier, which may have been why the world began to fade away until I was surrounded by darkness.

The shadows had always embraced me throughout my existence, and even in my last moments, here there were, to take me away from the madness this world had put me through again and again.

“Lexianne.”

The grip on my chin should have made me open my eyes, but I didn’t allow myself to do such a thing, for I knew what I’d see if I opened those heavy eyelids.

Pain. Anger. Sadness. Defeat. Undying love.

What I got in return was even better than I expected — a single kiss that allowed me to let go of the final threads of constraint that held me back from ascending to my next purpose.

My consciousness began to fade, and I allowed it as the last bits of pleasure and warmth seeped into me from those delicate lips I’d missed.

*We may have not gotten our happy ending, but maybe...
just maybe...we'd get a new beginning.*

CHAPTER 5

Slay The One That Ruined You Part One

~M *ALIFER*~

The screams of my love pushed me to run as fast as my paws allowed while my heart hammered against my chest with the fear of her perishing before I could reach her side.

Never had I felt so filled with anger, so filled with the overpowering desire to shed blood that I knew belonged to my own bloodline. My depressive, naive state had made me think it was impossible for the man to venture into these parts, but then I'd caught a whiff of his scent. It seemed like an eternity since I'd last taken in the musky aroma mixed with smoke and alcohol, but alas.

My apprehension was now causing nothing but pain to my destined mate.

His laughter pierced the air as the screams of my love began to wither away.

She's losing this battle and if I don't get there on time, I'll lose what's most precious to me.

I knew the moment I met Lexianne once again in the valley that she'd be the ultimate weapon formed against me. She had to be, for she was someone who could make anyone love her like an addiction that wrapped you in its welcoming arms and embraced you no matter your flaws and imperfections.

Only, compared to the many individuals who'd entered or left her life, I was the one who would stick to her like super glue.

Alpha Shade had to have realized that by now.

No. He always knew that.

Which was why he was here, in the valley's core, attempting to use my woman against me for whatever plan he had in store for me...for us.

And as of now, he was fucking winning.

My wolf howled loudly into the atmosphere as if to warn every damn enemy in our path that we were about destroy them, strip their life force from their bodies. I wanted that disgusting man I was related to to have the opportunity to think wisely of his actions, for this time, I wasn't planning to run away from his advances for conflict.

I was ready to face him head-on, no matter if it meant I'd win...or lose.

The echoes of my howl continued to extend outward as if to reach far and wide in warning to anyone else who remained in this shadowed oasis. The animals would scurry to the edges of this world, in hopes of avoiding the battle that would surely be abrupt in their sacred grounds, but the silence made me realize something.

My Sweet Lex's screams had come to a stop...

She will not perish.

I wondered if my demon was stating that to give me some sort of reassurance or if he needed to say it to convince himself. Panic raced through me either way, and my wolf

responded to the anxiety by pushing himself to surpass our limits.

If this world didn't stop us from teleporting from this sector, I would have been at her side in a heartbeat, but the constraints of the valley's core were made to ensure no one easily got in or out.

Not without fighting to reach its most vulnerable part.

It was only a few seconds before my nostrils took in the familiar scent of my love, and my heart skipped in fear at the intensity of blood that didn't carry a tainted aroma to it.

Why does it smell like human blood?

No one could answer my internal question, which may have been why I pushed for my wolf to pull back entirely, triggering my shift.

I began running on my two legs and suddenly skidded to a stop just as my eyes locked onto the sight just a few steps before me.

Blood.

Pools of blood.

Shades of dark red with hints of black, mixed with pretty magenta strands that floated on top of the thick surface that continued to spread from the being lying upon the black sand surface.

My woman.

My mate.

My pretty little monster.

My hammering heart came to a dramatic stop as my pounding ears only fought harder to ignore my pumping blood

to try to find the heartbeat of my fated mate.

Trembling in place, I stood ever so still, fighting every urge to scream, cry, and race to her side because I knew my enemy was waiting for my erratic reaction.

Waiting for me to lose my sanity so I could be his next victim in this game.

I fought to hear it...begged the Goddess herself to ensure my queen was alive within that pool of red, but the seconds passed — tick-tock, tick-tock — and yet I couldn't grasp a single beat. I knew my expression had to be completely void of emotion as the demon of mine began to growl and allow his boiling fury to crash through me.

My wolf was still taking in the scene — as if he was attempting to find any sort of flaw that would make this all but an illusion. Acknowledging our mate, naked with her flesh bruised in various areas, made me realize that what attacked her wasn't simply physical.

It had to be something internal. The pain from such an attack led to it beginning to ooze to the surface of her flesh where her bruises were showing and spreading with every second that passed.

I didn't want to think of what she'd just gone through, or more importantly, force myself to acknowledge how late I was in saving my dear beloved from my father's wrath, and yet here I was, being forced to witness the fact that I'd let my queen down.

That despite how fast we'd run from the hidden depths of the valley's core, we were seconds late from saving her from the hands of death.

**NO! She can't be dead. She's ours! Our Demon Queen!
Our Sweet Lex! OURS!**

My demon would never fathom such a tragic ending, and I wanted to play along to this tune. To the level of disbelief that would let us sway to its melodic sound until our brain forced us to accept reality as it was, but my wolf knew better.

My poor wolf could sense that his other half was gone...

He howled long and hard within my subconscious. The sound made it almost impossible to continue standing here, acting like the scene before me hadn't shattered my heart into a million pieces.

It was already taking so much to not shed tears and crumble in defeat, but I couldn't do it. I wouldn't do that. I couldn't give this man the satisfaction of seeing me become the brittle weakling that he always told the world I was.

I bet you he did the same in this moment. Riddled my name to the ground and destroyed my image to Lexianne before stealing her flame that burned with so much force and life.

So much determination and striving to survive...all in hopes of gaining a happy ending that would lead her to a life of happiness after all the struggle and torment she'd gone through in this cruel world.

I braced for the collateral toll of my agony to cripple me, and yet, my body just felt numb. From my hands to my toes, the various feelings that should have continued to contribute to my internal suffering simply melted away until there was nothing to experience anymore.

It was if my mind finally understood what had been holding me back.

All these emotions did nothing to help me take action — *to take vengeance to a new level of execution* — but that was no longer going to stop me from destroying those who were living on borrowed time.

My vengeance was long overdue, and without my pretty little monster to talk some sense into me, there was nothing to stop me from tainting my hands with the blood of all those who deserved to perish by my tainted claws.

A snicker caught my attention as I managed to pull my eyes away to meet the culprit of the sound. His body shook as he laid his hand over his mouth to stop the mocking sound, but more snickers followed, again and again, until he was laughing uncontrollably in utter triumph.

“Finally. FINALLY!” he cheered and put his hands in the air as if he was praising some invisible god. “I get to see it. To see the spark in your eyes finally vanish like a flame being extinguished!”

The man literally jumped up and down as he clapped his hands and continued to laugh like he’d truly lost all his fucking marbles.

“If I knew simply killing her would be the thing needed to destroy every thread of emotion left within you, I would have done it ages ago, but maybe then it wouldn’t have such a marvelous impact on your wellbeing,” he voiced in glee. “It’s a shame that I actually killed her for she was a beauty and a weapon I would have benefited from once I laid out the new order of the shifter world. But at the end of the day, sacrifices have to be made, and witnessing the last blub of mercy shatter in your eyes makes all of this worth it!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing or seeing, but I wouldn’t be foolish enough to deny what was happening

before my very eyes. Seeing my own father celebrate my mate's death. Seeing him dance, jump, clap, and scream hymns of joy because I was finally the emotionless monster his pack wished for me to become.

How utterly insulting.

It was another reminder of what a villain he'd always been — from plotting to rid me of my existence again and again before using my mate to make a new heir to take away my birthright. Despite it all, this was the true icing on the cake.

And now he's going to feel what it's like to face the ruthless king everyone believed me to be in the outside world.

He raised his arms up from his sides before he dared to bow as if his actions were something worthy of praise.

“I've finally secured the curse upon our family lineage. What was cast upon us for generations will now continue. Again, it's a shame that we have to sacrifice someone who could have created an overpowered heir, but like they say, there are plenty of fish in the se—”

He couldn't finish — *no, I wouldn't let him finish* — for my fist crashed into his face, cracking his jaw as I sent him flying back and skidding along the black sand beneath us. All that did was send him on a manic carol of laughter before he was up and pressing his hand to his right side to confirm I'd done enough damage to break his jaw.

The acknowledgement was simply fuel to him as he continued to express his merriment at my display of anger. With a crack of his neck, he allowed himself to calm down before he clicked his jaw back into place as if I hadn't shattered it completely.

“That’s the first punch you’ve delivered that actually feels like the fist of an Alpha and not a weakling boy with morals,” he praised. He looked so fucking proud, it would have made me sick to my stomach if that emotional side of me still existed in this state. “Why couldn’t you have been like this from the beginning? Hmm? You would have saved me so much hassle. I won’t deny that torturing your woman was a form of pleasure for me, but she could have lived a better life if you’d been a man with balls from the get-go. I wouldn’t have needed to torture her every night, or beat her until she could barely keep her eyes open. In fact, I wouldn’t have gotten the pleasure of forcing her mouth on my coc—”

My demon took over completely unexpectedly. My wings that were once red were now pitch-black and oozing with so much power, I didn’t think I was capable of carrying such intense force within.

I collided into him head-on, and the two of us rolled in the sand while my fists moved in a blur. His laughter only continued as he defended against my assault the best he could. Some blows hit him dead-on in the face while other blows were blocked by his bare fists.

“Finally a worthy fight,” he declared with pride. “Show me if what your mate was saying about you was true. That you’re worth her sacrifice and years of torture!”

It’s time for my revenge.

CHAPTER 6

Slay The One That Ruined You Part Two

He managed to push me off him before he got on his feet and charged right at me.

My demon pulled back as my wings retracted into my back, but my wolf pushed to the surface — triggering my shift into my massive shadow wolf.

He couldn't support my weight as we crashed into the ground once more, and I wildly thrashed against him, tearing through anything I could as my mangled growls overpowered his laughter.

I could feel the strike of his counterattacks that cut my furry flesh, but it was nothing compared to the pain that pulsed within my heart.

Nothing like the years of torture my sweet queen had endured on my behalf.

She deserved to witness this. To see this man's end by my very hands. If it was my way, she'd join me in ownership of this man's demise, and together, we'd walk through the rest of our lives with his blood on our hands.

She'd get to experience the ultimate revenge and be crowned the queen of the valley she swore to protect.

But that was stolen from her...thanks to this man right here.

By the time we pushed off one another and created some distance, we were both riddled with various wounds and scratches. Compared to him, I was in better shape. I shook off the remaining rags of clothes that were barely hanging on from

the brutal assault I'd just endured, which left me in just my black boxers.

Despite my wounds and the deep gash in my upper left thigh, I had plenty of endurance and stamina left in me. My old man, on the other hand, was struggling to heal, which was finally dawning on him as he arched an eyebrow in question my way.

“What have you done?” he snarled, his once cocky composure beginning to falter as he realized just how slowly his body was healing.

“You enter MY valley, the world I was blessed with after everyone marked it as cursed lands, and believe you'd actually win?” I tossed at him, and it was my turn to laugh as I slowly shook my head. “You belittled me as a child. Labeled me weak, soft, a boy not worthy to take the lead of a pack as powerful as ours. You compared me to Baker any chance you got, and no matter the various experiments of utter torture you forced me to participate in, nothing could please you. Absolutely nothing. I was but a bane to your existence. A thorn in your side that you wished to be rid of. You did anything you could to destroy me. Not because you wanted the curse to remain in our family line. No. That was another excuse. You wanted to keep the power in your grasp for as long as possible. In fact, if you could become eternal like I am in this world, you'd be the Alpha of Shade Pack for the rest of our world's existence, wouldn't you?”

His eyes narrowed at my words, and I simply copied him by narrowing mine.

“You say you wished for a heir, but if that was so, you never would have killed Lexianne. Never would have tortured her to the extreme because that would ruin your chances of

possibly getting her pregnant with all the torture and immense stress put on her body. You'd fuck her...yes. If you were truly able to, you would have stolen her purity from her for your own selfish pleasure, but you didn't have the intentions of impregnating her," I voiced. "But Baker did. Baker wanted Lexianne just as badly as you did, and that's what put that fascinating obsession of yours in your mind. The possibility of making an heir just so you did it before Baker could. So you'd be able to claim yet another possession of worth from the very boy you always praised for being better than me."

He didn't dare speak as I finally figured out his hidden motive.

His hidden need to be better than the con artist he'd trained from the moment her could walk.

"I was simply a hindrance for you to put your frustration and anger on, but the one you truly wished to have control over was Baker, wasn't it?" I instigated and watched that mask of triumph begin to falter at my accusation. "You didn't care about me taking your Alpha position. In fact, you didn't believe I'd ever be capable of claiming your role for you've painted me as nothing but a weakling to the pack for years. They wouldn't allow me to take your place unless it was deemed temporary. Which was why when you were in 'coma,' I didn't get hit with as much backlash. It wasn't something permanent."

He tried to hide his surprise as I revealed how observant my maleficent astra had been all this while, but this man's eyes always gave him up.

Their widened gaze only proved he didn't expect me to know so much.

“But you feared Baker. Feared his drive and passion to achieve whatever he put his mind on. You were grateful that his deep desire to be reunited with his Coven took a good chunk of his devotion, but there was always that ‘what if’ that nagged you in the back of your mind. What if he wishes to take over my pack? What if he yearns to steal what I’ve claimed all this while? What if he surpasses me to the point that my own pack members wish to have him as an Alpha and not me? What if the world seeks the greater con artist in this world where a few power moves can change the shifter dynamic by the masses?”

I was hitting the nail on the head because he could no longer hide how my questions irritated his very soul. Lines of frustration began to form along his forehead, while his aura rose in opposition.

“Despite it all, you gave him the benefit of the doubt, for he was your favorite. Your prodigy. And you expected that no matter whether you both had hidden intentions for one another, you could come to an agreement that making my life utterly miserable is but a form of entertainment you could enjoy and bond over,” I offered as my eyes darkened and my lips dared to creep up at the corners. “Until the bomb incident.”

“Your assumptions are just that,” he muttered. “No conviction in them.”

“If they were just assumptions, you wouldn’t waste the energy to point it out,” I countered as I cracked my neck. “You didn’t take the risk of coming into my domain to aid Baker.” I got straight to the point. “You want to overpower him. To get rid of what will be more beneficial to him and claim what would be most beneficial to you. In this case, Lexianne’s survival wouldn’t benefit you, but Baker, for he needs an heir

to be granted immunity by his Coven, which would eventually give him access to more power. As for the crown, that would benefit you in gaining power over the valley and my pack that I'm sure you're aware can respawn."

He let out a huff as he tilted his head to one side out of pure curiosity.

"So you're suddenly a problem solver, huh?" he tossed at me as he lifted his arms in the air and shook his hands as if trying to act as though he was afraid. "Am I supposed to apologize? No. Praise you for figuring shit out? You put a few pieces together to figure out my objective and now think you're going to ruin my ultimate plan. You despise me and yet it's clear you've taken some of my cockiness for here you are, showing all your cards in hopes I'll submit and crumble, is that right?"

I didn't speak as I simply stared back at him, which encouraged him to laugh at me once more.

"Fine. Let me enlighten you while your heart is still beating," he declared as he pointed to his chest. "You're right. I wish to secure my Alpha position from my own prodigy. I trained him so well that he got too good for his old man. Do I care that he took my title of con artist in Hollow City? Yes, for it made me lose quite a bit of deals. But one thing I'll never allow is for my position as Alpha of the strongest pack in these lands to be stripped from my grasp. I DESERVE to be here. I earned this grand rank, like a king who's earned his crown, and I won't let anyone take that away from me. Not even my own blood."

"You have no shame," I muttered, and he all but laughed back at me.

“Shame? I should carry an ounce of shame for wanting to keep this position I earned and upheld for years? Vampires, Purebloods to be exact, get to be the Heads of their Covens for decades if not centuries, but God forbid an Alpha as powerful and ruthless as I wish to remain on my throne of power for a few decades, and it’s deemed a sin in your eyes.”

“You and I know I don’t give a bloody shit about your pack position. You made it my business by assuming I wanted your fucking pack that despised me for being open-minded and seeking a world that didn’t require us to be senselessly sacrificed and abused because we didn’t fit the standards of what you deem as ‘powerful,’” I argued back. “You ruined my life for the sake of protecting your legacy and the curse that plagues our family, and now you’re here to claim what I’ve worked hard to create out of absolutely nothing.”

It was beyond insulting to vocally acknowledge it.

“Pretty hypocritical, don’t you think? It’s okay for you to rule and remain upon a throne of power and domination, but you can come into my world, my land, my valley’s core and steal what you didn’t earn. The land that you didn’t shed blood, sweat, and tears for, because in your eyes, I’m not deserving of this powerful realm that I’ve single-handedly manifested until recently, and you wouldn’t dare let Baker sneak in here and take it for his own benefit. The moment he claims such assets, you’ll be next on the chopping block.”

It was his turn to be rendered speechless, and I decided this conversation wouldn’t lead us anywhere.

His decision to destroy me was already made. Nothing I said would change that.

“You’re no longer a king of this realm. It shouldn’t matter that I wish to claim the throne and all those useless disciples,”

he argued. His revelation intrigued me, for he shouldn't have known about that fact. "You came into my sacred lagoon thinking I wouldn't know about it?"

His revelation simply made me yearn to destroy him, but I had to be patient.

A little longer.

"Your sacrifice is all in vain, isn't it?" he offered and leaned forward as if he was mere inches away from me and could whisper in my ear. "Sacrificed your role as king to let her conceive, and where did that get you? A king without a crown, an Alpha without a mate, and a man stripped of everything he once deemed vital to his existence. In the end, you really don't have anything to fight for, which makes me wonder why you'll play a game you're destined to lose?"

He lifted his arms around as if he could simply levitate into the sky to emphasize the power he had in comparison to me.

"I have my pack, and have the power to make any of them submit to my rulership. I can snap my fingers and have armies of packs reach the very borders of this beloved valley of yours and leave it in shambles and flames. I can make all those sacrificed fiends into puppets that would be forced to respawn and enjoy my reign. And as the murderer of your mate, I will always carry that trophy of triumph in stealing that last speck of hope you had in this world," he pointed out with not a hint of remorse. "If you look at it, you've already lost, but getting rid of you and crowning myself as the true King of Demon Valley would seal another accomplishment on my list, and I'll be that much closer to changing our world into one that runs purely on the order of power."

He looked to the sky and grinned so widely, it made him look utterly cynical.

“And with that, I’d be ranked a god, and the world of shifters would have no choice but to bow and pray to me for all eternity.”

He lowered his gaze and began to roll his shoulders. Staticky shockwaves of black and red began to pulse through his body, which seemed to speed his healing process.

“So your end is inevitable, for in order for this world to be reborn, a stronger shifter worthy of becoming a god deserves to rise and claim what has always been destined for them,” he concluded like his words were absolute. “That shifter is me, and not even my least favorite son will stop me from achieving such.”

“At least you’re being truthful for once,” I muttered and slowly cracked my neck. “I guess it means you’re deserving enough to know that I’ll be the one to kill you in these very lands. No matter if I’m king or not, I vow that you’ll never proclaim these lands as yours. Never.”

“It’s a shame to say it’s already too late for that,” he vowed. Suddenly, he wasn’t standing before me.

No, he was suddenly behind me.

I spun and avoided his initial attack, but I didn’t expect him to shift into the gigantic wolf that was big enough to take me down with one solid tackle. I used my bare hands to protect myself as he did everything he could to try to rip my head off my body.

It got to the point where I had to force some distance between us. My strong arms matched with my overpowering strength in these parts that surrounded us with dark energy gave me the chance to throw his gigantic wolf off me entirely.

With a roll to the left and a quick push off the ground to make a smooth transition from plank to standing, I was already mid-shift as I collided with him with immense force.

Now we could fight fairly — Alpha wolf to Alpha wolf.

Our claws and teeth sank into each other and ripped at each other mercilessly. I allowed myself to fall into the flight-or-fight response that activated my animalistic instincts. He might have had strength on his side, but I had speed and the power of the valley in my favor as our environment shifted as we tumbled and turned – making the moving sand rise and fall like wild waves at sea.

It made it impossible for him to regain his balance, which allowed me to collide with him again and again. My speed continued to rise, my movements a blur of shadows with strikes of red and black bolts of lightning.

His cries of pain only motivated me further, pushing me to continue tackling and ripping this man to shreds again and again. I wanted him to feel a glimpse of agony he delivered to so many. To endure what it was like to have piece by piece of your flesh be ripped, torn, scratched, and plagued with the burning agony he delivered to so many victims that he discarded as nothing but slaves to his mercy.

This was my moment to let all that boiling rage and anger come through with each strike – to finally acquire the vengeance I deserved to proclaim.

After a final crash into his bleeding frame, he crashed into the ground but didn't bother getting up.

I didn't hesitate to shift yet again — my body now on top of his wolf as I created a red leather whip and began to brutally whip him again and again. His yelps were loud and

filled with suffering as the poisonous weapon continued to strike his broken flesh and send bouts of venom into his blood system.

His cries weren't enough. My demon was growing angrier at what he'd done to our queen, leaving me to submit to his desire to take control, which triggered our demonic wings to spread out from our back and lift us into the air so we could whip him with striking force from above.

His yelps turned to whimpers, and I caught onto the sound of his bones beginning to crack back in place. His wolf was losing the battle for dominance. When his human form returned, I didn't stop my abuse. My whips kept coming, igniting another round of cries from his very lips as he struggled to remain on his hands and knees.

I didn't know how long I went for, but by the time I was finished and my demon's energy retracted to give me ultimate control, I was absolutely breathless while my body buzzed with excess energy.

Dropping to the ground, I let go of the whip in my grasp. The weapon began to fade away into tiny orbs of black and red. The pool of blood beneath my old man continued to ooze out of his body freely, but the sight of it all didn't give me the satisfaction I'd always been looking for.

Despite the torture and the sight of this man finally on his hands and knees before me, the hollowness within my soul was unchanged.

The pain of losing my woman was still raw and unforgiving.

Before I knew it, I was tugging at his shoulder-length strands, which forced his head back while I sat on his back – a

dark blade against his neck while my narrowed eyes took in his battered face. Despite it all, he fought to smile the best he could — even as his eyes continued to swell from my punches and his mouth oozed with blood.

“How does it feel to be a villain now?” he questioned in glee. “You realize it, huh? That no matter what you do, from beating me to the brink of death to preparing to slice my fucking throat, the massive hole in your heart will never be filled again.”

He tried to chuckle but all that did was make him cough and wheeze thanks to the few broken ribs he endured and my weight on his diaphragm.

“That was your end game?” I whispered. “To make me your villain?”

“No,” he wheezed and tried to meet my gaze by leaning his head back as far as he could. “I wanted to see you lose everything until you were nothing but the monster you wished to never become,” he said with pride. “Now...I’ve finally succeeded.”

He used everything he had left to have his last laugh as he anticipated the blade in my grasp that would seal his fate by cutting his head off. With one final stare at the pitiful man in my hold, I let my hand move swiftly as I finished what I’d started.

By slicing right through his neck.

CHAPTER 7

Slay The One That Ruined You Part Three

I heard the drop of his head hit the moving sand. The sand began to ease as if its job was finally complete. I was already walking away, my eyes on my Sweet Lex as I approached her body once more.

I was waiting for the sensation to sink in, to realize I'd lost my love and killed the man who stole her shining light, but the numb hollowness continued to blaze through me, leaving me to walk aimlessly forward as I waited to have some sort of reaction.

When I was a mere two steps from Lexianne's body, I couldn't will myself to walk any further. It was as if this was the moment I needed to just take her stillness in. To mentally allow myself to engrave this sight into my mind so I could remember how I failed the woman I loved.

My father had been right in a way.

I had been a coward who sought to change the world in hopes everything would go my way. I'd thought people would come to my aid and defense and support this new beginning with open arms. I didn't want to accept that this cruel world needed someone with power, perseverance, and a tainted persona to get what they wanted.

Even if it meant killing another to see the future you desired.

I'd known for a long time that my father would be a hindrance to my vision, but I allowed him to get the better of me, to set me up for failure again and again before sacrificing me to the land he wished to claim as his own.

Every action he made was to use me in some way, and now that he'd used me, abused me, and taken every good thing in my life, it was his turn to leave me with this state of hollowness that would torment me for the rest of my existence.

The slight poke to my neck only further contributed to my internal struggle as a lump formed in my throat and my vision blurred with tears.

I didn't want to face the familiar right now. I couldn't look into her spiraling eyes and acknowledge that I'd failed to protect her Mistress who had selflessly protected me from my father's wrath yet again. I may have executed my vengeance, but all it did was solve a problem.

It wouldn't bring back my soul mate...

“BiBiBo?!” The urgency in Momo's doll voice suddenly encouraged me to look over my shoulder — and my eyes locked onto the blazing fury of red spheres that looked so similar to mine.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

“BIBIBIBIBI!” Momo's laughter taunted the chilled air as I caught sight of her jumping up and down on the man's shoulder while he continued to fight against the black chains that were shackled along his wrists and ankles.

He was mere inches from me as I turned to give him a moment of attention, and it was my turn to allow myself to smile as I looked at him with complete triumph in my eyes.

“Did you actually believe I was going to kill you?” I inquired, mimicking his way of mockery by giving him a taste of his own medicine. “You tortured what was destined to be mine for years, dared to make her into some sort of pet and

shackle her up like a fucking dog, and you expected me to simply slice your throat and move one?"

The way I laughed made the man fight desperately to be freed from the chains, but they would be his new accessories in this world.

His new eternal prison.

"I've always wanted revenge, don't get me wrong, but what better way of making the man who belittled me my entire existence suffer than by making him into a demon at my own disposal?"

"I WILL KILL YOU!" he snarled.

"You could have done that earlier before I sliced your throat," I voiced the obvious as I smirked. "A precious voodoo doll showed me that sometimes you have to let your enemies taste a glimpse of death before keeping them as the perfect puppet to use and abuse for centuries to come. The least I can do is take what I observed and apply it to practice. I'm sure she'd be proud of me."

"BIBIBO!" Momo cheered with her knife in hand as she continued to jump up and down on my father's shoulder.

Before she stabbed him in the neck.

He tried to speak but gurgled as blood streamed out of the deep gash in his neck. Momo lifted her blade once more and cheered.

"BIBIBIBI!"

"KIKIKIKIKI!"

I frowned at the second sound as goosebumps rushed along my arms and down my back. A weight jumped up and down on my left shoulder, and all I could do was turn my head ever

so slightly to see the second voodoo doll holding a butcher knife of her own.

A pink butcher knife...

“KIKIKO!”

My heart stopped, my eyes widening like saucers as I continued to peer at the voodoo doll as if I'd seen a ghost. I took in the peachy yarn skin, the button eyes, and the bright neon pink strings of yarn. Clad in a miniature red dress, she clapped her hands at my attention before lifting those arms up to shake her hips in celebration.

“Lexianne?”

She paused mid-shake to peer into my eyes while hers glowed and swirled in all their pink glory.

“KIKIKO!” she cheered.

And stabbed me in the chest.

“Ow...” I began and flinched and when she jumped off my shoulder to hang on the end of the knife she'd just stabbed me with. I wondered if this was some sort of payback, but she used the handle as leverage before she pushed off to send a karate kick right into my father's face. It held enough force to send him flying into the air and skidding through the black sand in one smooth movement.

I blinked in disbelief as Momo and Voodoo Lexi began to float down to the ground with miniature parachutes, utterly speechless as the two landed and cheered in triumph.

“BIBIBOOOO!”

“KIKIKOOOO!”

They raised their arms and shook their hips, singing their theme song as they danced and proceeded to hug one another.

Then Voodoo Lexi skipped back to me until she stood at my feet.

Compared to my now seven-foot frame, she was like a miniature doll, but my shock was written all over my face while she grinned to show me her hollow mouth. Lifting her arms up, she moved them up and down in hopes I'd lift her up.

I swallowed the next lump that constricted my throat as if I feared this was all but an illusion and by picking her up, the dream would poof and bring me back to reality.

Pushing away my fears, I crouched down until my shaking hands gently embraced the doll before I lifted her up, leaving me to peer up into her swirling eyes as she wiggled her arms in hopes I'd bring her up close.

I did as she wanted me to and was rewarded with her yarn arms that pressed against my wet cheeks. They brushed away the tears that I realized were falling fluidly down my flushed cheeks before she pressed those fingerless hands upon my eyes as if to force me to close them.

Having no choice, I let them remain close until warmth spread along my eyes and the weight in my grasp shifted entirely.

The moment those hands moved from my eyelids, I opened my eyes slowly to acknowledge the beaming woman in my hold.

Alive...glowing with bouts of life...shimmering eyes full of pride and mischief.

“So you kept your promise,” she whispered to me, and before I knew it, her warm lips pressed firmly against mine. “I knew you’d come for me, my Demon King.”

“Lexi...Lexi...” I couldn’t even finish saying her name before I was hugging her for dear life as her body crashed firmly against mine.

My love... my destiny...my Sweet Lex...is alive.

*The Revelation of a
Crowned Queen*

~L *EXIANNE*~

I pressed my lips firmly against Malifer's one more time, allowing the last bit of tension in my limbs to leave while I let myself melt in his tight hold.

I couldn't believe I'd pulled off such a grand stunt, and yet it was all thanks to Lily's magic for creating the perfect illusion that would be impossible to recognize until the deed was done and Malifer had exacted the revenge he deserved.

"You can punish me later when we're out of all this mess," I voiced against his lips before hugging him tightly. "But for now, let me hug you extra tight."

He simply hugged me back, and the two of us shared a passionate embrace while our emotions swirled within our connection, which blossomed with hope and immense relief.

"I thought I lost you," he finally muttered into my shoulder as he inhaled deeply.

"If I didn't make it believable, it wouldn't have pushed you to get revenge for both of us," I voiced and leaned back to look into his eyes. "I knew you'd come for me and make him suffer, but you impressed me by not only killing him but

making him into a chained pet like Laura. I really didn't think you would."

"I didn't have the idea initially," he confessed as he pressed his forehead against mine and closed his eyes. I followed suit, the two of us remaining completely still as we focused on taming our breaths until it seemed were in sync. "It wasn't until I had the blade against his neck that I realized killing him wouldn't rid me of the hollowness in my heart. It wouldn't be enough for the years of torture and anguish we've experienced in our lives. Not to mention the many shifters who lost their lives because of his decisions and desire to have control of the world. Death would be an easy way out and a simple insult to all those who suffered or faced the ultimate price of death because of Alpha Shade's crimes."

He paused to pull me into his arms once more before he whispered in my ear, "Suffering for all eternity in a realm that forces you to acknowledge the survival of many executed shifters will eventually get into his brain and leave him feeling some sort of guilt for what he's done. It may take years or even centuries, but at least there'll come a time when he'll beg for death and we'll ensure he never gets what he wants."

He let me go, and hand immediately reached for mine — wrapping around my left hand firmly as if he didn't want to see me go anywhere without him in tow.

"I'm sorry for being late," he whispered to me, and I smiled lovingly back at him while my eyes softened.

"You weren't late," I reassured him as I squeezed his hand back. "You were right on time."

His eyes immediately lowered to my lips, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning in and kissing me deeply on the lips.

“BiBiBiBi! BiBi! BiBiBo!”

We broke the kiss to look down at our feet to see Momo singing happily while holding the black chain that was attached to Alpha Shade’s lovely new collar.

My voodoo doll kick had been enough to knock him right out, and I had a feeling he’d be out at least until we triggered time to move once more and brought him back to the valley for Bishop to play with until we could regroup and get things back into order.

“You know what the game plan is, right Momo?” I offered to her, and I watched the way she jumped up and down and gave me a devious smile.

“BIBIBIBIBI!”

“Excellent,” I praised and crouched down to stroke her head gently. “Just a bit longer and you’ll be back with the others. I’m sure Zasper and the rest of the knights are anxiously waiting for your return.”

“BiBiBo!” she cheered in triumph, as though we’d already won the battle.

Rising up, I held Malifer’s hand once more before I looked at him.

“Is the crown far from here?”

“No,” he assured me with a serious look. “Ten minutes and we should be there to claim it.”

“Alright. Let’s head there now.”

There was no point in delaying the inevitable. It was time for us to claim what was destined to be ours.

With one last wave to Momo, we headed straight to the true core of the valley where the crown resided. Neither of us spoke during the run as if we were simply lost in our own thoughts as we ran on foot until we reached the end of a cliff, which forced us to come to a stop as we concluded the last bit of the journey would need us to fly.

Taking one last look over the cliff, I didn't hesitate to summon a set of wings that eased out of my back and stretched to their full capacity. Switching from voodoo Lexi back to my original shifter state gave me a boost of energy and rejuvenated confidence, which made doing something as uniquely powerful as summoning wings feel almost natural.

I still didn't know how aerial flight would go, but I was pretty confident Malifer would have my back with this.

His hand was still holding mine, even though my attention was on the shadowed mist that was in between our cliff and the tall wall of darkness before us.

"If you let me fall to my demise, I won't forgive..." I looked back at him mid-speech, only to freeze at the sight. My eyes widened to their capacity as my jaw fell open in disbelief.

Blinking a few times, I couldn't believe what I was seeing as my gaze went up and down.

"M-Malifer...is...is that...the crown?" I gasped in absolute shock as I took in the miniature crown of onyx that carried a surprisingly immense power in its metallic body with ruby and rose quartz jewels.

It was big enough to be a ring instead of a crown that sat upon one's head, but despite its minuscule size, it oozed with

so much energy, there was no denying that it held the key to the valley's prosperity.

“A bit different than what you expected?” he inquired, and it took me a few more seconds to realize what exact position he was in.

Bent on one knee with my left hand in his grasp.

“M...Malifer.” My voice barely hit the surface, and my shock triggered pools of tears as I watched my Demon King begin to smile and fight his own tears from overflowing down his cheeks. “You...what...” I couldn't find my words.

“I took the journey to enter the core of the valley not because of Baker's potential intrusion,” he unexpectedly revealed. “In fact, Baker isn't in the valley, nor does he have a damn chance to try to get into the valley at this point.”

“What? What do you mean he isn't here and can't get a chance to be here?”

“When I knew Baker's intention was to take the valley and use it as a pawn for the rest of our eternal existence, I decided it was time to stop relying solely on myself to try to protect the people I care about. The ones I wholeheartedly love. Demon Valley Pack held hope in their king, their Alpha, to protect them from the forces that are desperate to use us for their own benefit, even in a land that was meant to be our death beds. Knowing this, I decided to reach out to the one Alpha I knew who carries loads of connection above in places I can't really easily reach, and together we formulated a plan to ensure Travis Baker and his Maleficent Astra would be forced to be in the same place at the same time.”

“And where would that possibly be?” I pondered as I stared into his eyes, which shimmered with excitement.

“The one place he takes pride in.”

“The...lab?” I inquired, figuring that that was the place he carried the most power in.

“The lab where he’ll be currently facing multiple allied packs, which includes Outcast Hollows Pack,” he revealed and further grinned. “The pack that is being led by your twin sister.”

My eyes widened yet again as I realized he’d somehow managed to set a trap for Baker without him even realizing it.

Without me even realizing it.

“So as we speak, Baker is enjoying the ultimate confrontation surrounded by two of the four empires of Hollow City,” he revealed and smirked as his eyes softened. “And well, we’re a bit late.”

“We...we’re late?” I whispered and clicked on to what he was saying. “We’re going to meet them? Like actually confront Baker and get rid of the labs and everything?”

He bobbed his head slowly and further grinned at the bubbling excitement that began to filter through me at realization that the valley was no longer in danger.

“Wait. That means...Alpha Shade. How did you lure him here? He came here thinking Baker would be here for the crown.”

“He did,” he admitted. “I have to thank Master Gaia for feeding him the information through the communication outlets he secretly uses to obtain information that’s not for him to listen to. He eavesdropped on a planted conversation between Wallas and Gaia that confirmed Baker was close to the valley with an army of demons and that he was going to acquire the crown to take over Demon Valley Pack. My old

man would never let such an opportunity slip from his grasp, so he took it upon himself to use the one method of getting into the valley that I knew he'd have access to."

"The cliff," I whispered. "Before the voodoo fleet and I arrived. That means those various monsters that slowed us down..."

"Were a distraction from me," he revealed and very gently kissed the palm of my hand. "My apologies for that. I know it was a bit troublesome."

"So you're actually a cunning badass of an Alpha," I gasped in exaggeration, which left him chuckling as he shook his head. "I've been getting some pointers from a certain Demon Queen who enjoys grinding my gears."

"Wait. So if Baker isn't coming, and we have to go, why are you on one knee as if you're going to propose to me?" I dared to ask as I looked at the way he grinned brilliantly back at me.

"My pretty little monster needs to be crowned by the one individual who can bestow the blessings of Demon Valley upon her," he revealed before he gave me his best smile as his eyes softened tremendously. "With that being said, Lexianne Monarch...my Sweet Lex...will you marry me?"

I stood there like a deer in headlights before squealing and jumping up and down like I'd won the fucking lottery.

"Are you fucking serious?!" I squealed and almost had a mental malfunction before the word he needed to hear tumbled out of my mouth. "YES! O-Of course! Omg. Malifer! Was this your plan all along?!"

He chuckled and didn't answer me as his focus was on slowly sliding the ring upon my ring finger. The onyx band

locked in place before it began to glow drastically as the black metallic surface began to peel away and reveal a golden ring that glimmered immensely.

I gasped in surprise as the magic burst from the ring outward, inviting intense gusts of wind that forced us to move into one another as we stood our ground against the whiplash of wind that danced around us before pushing outward in all directions.

The moment we leaned back to take in what had just happened, our eyes became as wide as saucers while we gasped in pure amazement.

“No...way...” I whispered as the valley of darkness that was filled with desolation was now filled with life.

Greenery, flowers, bright blue skies with fluffy white clouds. I witnessed the brilliant sun that seemed as though it was beginning to set, making our world look no different from above and leaving me to realize that we'd triggered something.

No...we'd broken something that was meant to be broken.

“It worked.”

I looked back to Malifer, noticing his tears. He now wore a brilliant golden crown and the perfect red suit. I looked at myself and realized I now wore a marvelous silky gown of red that hugged my body perfectly. The weight upon my head made me feel as though I, too, wore a crown upon my head.

“What worked?” I dared to ask, my voice breathless.

“The only way to claim the valley is to obtain the crown, but what no one knew was that the crown was but a symbol of power. It wasn't the root of it,” Malifer revealed. “Everyone sees the power in us demons. They see what we're capable of

matched with the ugly or distorted appearance that leads many to judge us and project to the world that we're nothing but tainted beings meant to be in the hollows of the shadows. But demon valley was made to be a safe haven for us all, to be a world that allowed us a chance to be together as one solid pack and enjoy the feeling of being somewhere where we belong. However, without a queen to rule at the side of the king, it felt like the kingdom wouldn't be able to function to new heights. That's why Lily created the crown to be in the shape of a ring. A wedding ring that would bind the King of Demon Valley Pack to the queen he believes will be the cure to our valley and all the tainted monsters who seek salvation."

He rose up then and held my hand tightly with his.

"That's why I knew that I could give up my king position, knowing my queen would not only go the distance for those I care about and cherish, but would endure anything to see me prevail and become king again. No matter how selfless you needed to be, you'd do it as long as I was victorious. That was the ultimate decision maker, and well, the reward is finally being able to propose to the woman I'm destined to be with." He leaned in then as he whispered against my lips, "To be with my queen who will one day fill this valley with younglings of our own."

"Malifer..." I couldn't even believe what I was hearing. He'd managed to truly fool the world and ignite the valley, which was now our new home and safe haven from all those who wished to use and destroy us.

"Now that we're demon valley crowned, we can set things back in motion, and you can reunite with your sister and the Monarch Empire that desperately wishes to meet its lost heirs."

He pulled back to look into my eyes as he gently cradled my face.

“Or we can stop time, have sex, and do all of that shit later.”

That actually made me laugh far too hard before I was kissing him deeply and wrapping my arms around his neck.

“You cunning demon of a king!” I squealed and hugged him tightly. “I think seeing Baker’s end would be swell with my sister by my side, but...” I pulled back just so I could lean in and kiss him long and hard. “But I’d love to tell my future husband how grateful I am to be loved by the King of Demon Valley.”

“Just as I’d love to admit to my Demon Queen how excited I am to have her as my beloved wife.”

Our tears fell as we shared a look that confirmed that all of this was finally over.

We’d actually won.

“So rain check on the sex?” I offered, and enjoyed the way he chuckled before he brushed his lips against mine.

“If we had something to lay on, I’d reconsider it.”

“What if I said I had a magical blanket that’s life proof?”

“Colton’s knitted blanket?” he inquired.

“Mhmm.”

“That could do,” he muttered and smirked. “As long as I get to kiss you here and now.”

“Do whatever you wish, my Alpha King,” I teased as I pulled him close and pressed my forehead against his. “I think we’ve earned a moment of gratification.”

“A calm before witnessing the end of the storm,” he whispered as his lips barely touched mine. “You’re right. We deserve to enjoy this moment of happiness.”

This moment of bliss.

With his lips claiming mine and our crowns sitting upon our heads, we officially became the rulers of Demon Valley Pack.

And this is the beginning of our new world where demons can finally enjoy what it’s like to be happy in a world of darkness...and light.

Epilogue: My Crowned Queen Of Paradise

“**D**idn’t you say we have to go and blow up the lab?” I offered while I admired the golden ring around my finger. The band vibrated against my flesh while twinkling so enchantingly in the rays of sunlight.

I still hadn’t grasped everything that had just occurred — the paradise of life that surrounded this place that was once nothing but shadows with specks of color.

Malifer moved to face me, his arms hooking around my waist effortlessly while bringing me nice and close so he could admire my eyes, which were surely twinkling with pure happiness.

“You know your eyes change color when you’re happy,” he pointed out while maintaining the most genuine smile I’d ever seen on his handsome face.

“Do you know how hot you look when you smile?” I countered.

“You pointed that out already,” he chuckled.

“Doesn’t hurt to say it again,” I voiced with a wink and smirk. “Why are you stalling?”

“Who said I was stalling?” he countered.

“I did,” I voiced and proceeded to hug him. Looking up and pressing my chin against his chest, I waited for his eyes to meet mine before I whispered, “You stopped time, didn’t you?”

“How did you notice?”

“The atmosphere is too quiet,” I voiced. “Stillness in this newly awakened land proves time has stopped.”

“Always so observant,” he stated with a tone of praise before he leaned down to kiss the top of my head. “I want to show you one more thing before we venture off to witness Baker’s empire go crashing down.”

“Will stopping time here affect the other side?” I inquired out of curiosity.

“It slows it down tremendously,” he revealed. “No one would notice in the real world. It’s something I rarely do because it’s energy-draining, but the awakening of the valley has given me an excessive amount of power that I would rather expel here than on the surface where I would rather give my fiancé the honors of demonstrating her lethal power to those who need to be reminded of how dangerous a Monarch is in our world.”

“You enjoy making me look like a badass, huh?” I offered and watched him shrug before he had my hand in his and was encouraging me to follow him.

“It’s long overdue for the world of Hollow City to witness the true power our Luna carries effortlessly in the shadows,” he reasoned as he squeezed my hand. “Frankly, I’m more excited to see you kick some ass.”

“And why would I be kicking ass?” I inquired in amusement.

“To simply put it, some of my mafia men don’t believe I’m in a relationship,” he admitted. “They think you’re an imaginary princess who probably can’t hurt a fly and needs a bodyguard to protect her from the wrath of Hollow City’s streets.”

The way I laughed had us stopping briefly because my joyous expression made the wind pick up and bring us waves of flower petals that rained down upon us while butterflies of purple and blue fluttered from the nearby trees.

“So only Romeo had hope in me,” I dramatically gasped in horror.

“He actually thought you weren’t very powerful until you almost stabbed me with your knife during the last car ride.”

“Oh ya.” I’d forgotten about that. “Oops.”

“If you’d actually stabbed me, I feel like you wouldn’t have regretted it.”

“Probably not.” I held no remorse, which made him chuckle and shake his head.

“At least you’re honest.”

“It feels nice to be able to truthfully speak to you without having to act naive,” I admitted as we now reached the cliff from before.

Instead of thick clouds of black mist, our surroundings were crystal clear. Below us was a beautiful stream of water that flowed at a tranquil pace.

“We can love one another in peace now,” he whispered as he ended up pressing his lips onto my left temple.

“What if there’s a bit of backlash from above?” I pondered because I wasn’t sure how things would go in that department.

My whole life had been sheltered from the shifter society and their common practices, so I didn't know what to expect now that I was returning to a world where shifters were pretty judgemental, to begin with.

"I don't care what anyone else says," he voiced with confidence as his striking red wings eased out of his back and stretched. "The valley itself has accepted you as its queen and the pack genuinely loves you, despite their initial opposition."

"Wait. You were able to see that?"

I called for my wings, feeling a bit giddy about finally using so many of the skills and abilities I carried as a hybrid but couldn't share due to my circumstances.

"Mhmm," he replied and used a single flap of his wings to lift him slightly off the ground. He was clearly waiting for me, which was why he didn't take a dramatic lift-off — especially when we were still holding hands.

It took me a moment, but I managed to lift off the ground with a flap of my own wings. The two of us continued holding hands as Malifer led the way until we were not only on the other side of the cliff, but had gone through a magical wall that was clearly set to be there for a reason.

"Did we just go through..." I trailed off the moment my eyes looked ahead — my gaze growing massive as if to take in every speck of detail of the immaculate sight that was upon the setting horizon.

"This was probably the hardest secret to keep from you and the rest of the pack," Malifer admitted as he turned his head so he could meet my baffled gaze that dared to pull away from the approaching masterpiece of architecture. "Everything

was in place, but I needed the valley to be awakened to show the end result. It turned out better than expected.”

It wasn't until we landed before a set of golden gates that opened in our presence that I really grasped Malifer's creation.

“Malifer...” I didn't know where to look as my hand slipped from his and I ventured right into the massive newfound city before us. “This place. It's HUGE! Is that literally a black castle decorated with roses? Are those all shops? Wow...there's a fountain! It actually works. We have to throw money in there. Wait. Do we even have money down here?”

I was practically spinning in circles trying to get a glimpse of everything because, despite the few instances I'd shared with Malifer walking down the streets of the outside world, this was as close as I'd ever experienced.

His hands landed on my shoulders to stop me from my spinning merry-go-round, and all I could do was look up at him as he peered down into my wondrous gaze.

“Everything we need to make a society of our own is down here,” he revealed as he began to smile sweetly at me. “This city will expand and grow in time but will give our pack more activities and roles to play in our world. Those who enjoy baking will be able to bake and run a business here. Others who simply want to live and raise a family can do so. The kids will have access to school and learning, and there will be a place for entertainment and crafts.”

He looked to the east and I followed his gaze, noticing that there was a tall mountain in the distance.

“The Pack House will be moved up that mountain. There’ll be one where everyone will have access, and further up will be our private Pack House, which will be secured for us and really close members of the pack,” he explained. “It can also be where we meet those from above who are also deemed important to us. There’s enough space for Momo and the Voodoo fleet, as well as Wallas, Gaia, Felix and Fynn, Colton, and Lauren to have their own space and place of refuge.”

He looked a bit over and specifically pointed to a place that had a bit of steam rising into the sky.

“There are hot springs there and near them is the sacred lagoon that only the Luna of Demon Valley Pack and the Time Keepers will have access to. Only those Time Keepers with genuine intentions will have access to it.”

He lowered his hand back onto my shoulder before he maneuvered me to turn around so I could fully face him.

“This is what I planned for years while projecting to the world that I sought only revenge,” he quietly revealed. “I wanted to create a place where I could proudly make...and raise a family in. A place that would give every member of my pack some sort of validation and help heal the trauma we all experienced in our previous lives. It was a slow process... because I had to explore the world above and see the places that bring the most joy. I had to see what made children laugh and grown men and women smile. I’d never enjoyed experiencing such as the son of Alpha Shade, but I knew despite the challenges against me, I didn’t want our pack to feel helpless or trapped in a bubble. I didn’t want our future generation to not get a glimpse of how beautiful the world can be when surrounded by love.”

He expressed a sense of pride as he took the chance to lift his gaze and stare at what had been unlocked by his devotion and our crowned awakening.

“I wanted to show you first because it’s thanks to your perseverance to protect me all this while that we reached the end of this tedious journey. We’re finally going to stop and smell the flowers after all the blood, sweat, and tears shed to help us become victorious.” He moved his hands from my shoulder so he could cradle my cheek, which was already wet with tears.

With a gentle kiss on my nose, he whispered, “I know some scars will never heal, and it’ll be a long road for us to move forward from all the torture my father delivered to our lives, but let this new world remind you every day that everything you did and sacrificed is the reason we have a future. Our pack will grow and rise from this valley into a force that no one will dare plot against ever again.”

“Malifer...” There really weren’t any words that could be said to express how happy I was.

How it felt like all my suffering and pain was truly worth it to give us a future.

He kissed me before we embraced for a long time. I wanted him to feel all the emotions that spiraled inside me, and how thankful I was to have been mated to a man who not only acknowledged my worth and sacrifices but was willing to go the distance to reward me for not giving up.

“Can we go check out the private Pack House?” I offered. “Just for a bit?”

“Anything you wish, Sweet Lex,” he assured me and kissed my cheek.

Flying out there was a breeze. Once we arrived, we took the opportunity to explore the cozy yet classy exterior of home. This had to be one of the last buildings he created because the entire home mimicked the latest house trends I'd seen on posters when we headed to the club.

He showed me each room before we finally reached the main suite, which was absolutely huge. I couldn't help but spin around in my red dress before I approached the bed and snapped my fingers.

With a poof, there was Colton's blanket, looking perfectly intact as it lay on the king-size bed. Turning around, I gave Malifer a big ass grin while he acknowledged the blanket with an eyebrow raise.

"You really like that blanket."

"How would you know?"

"You kept it in miniature form and hidden this entire time so it wouldn't get damaged during the battles you fought earlier," he acknowledged.

"Well..." He had a point. "I don't really get gifts often," I voiced a bit shyly as I tried to smile it off. "So...I want to make sure it remains in good condition because it's precious to me."

He stared at me for a long moment before he moved from the doorway to reach where I stood.

"Then we should put it in the other room," he suggested and snapped his fingers. The blanket poofed out of sight.

"Why the other room?"

"So when we have late nights singing lullabies and feeding our child, you have a cozy blanket full of love to keep you

warm,” he muttered as his eyes never left mine.

“Lullabies,” I muttered while trying not to blush so hard at his comforting words. “I-I-I guess.”

His hand lifted my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes once more before he very gently kissed my parted lips. The kiss was slow and deep, allowing me to relax as I slowly rested my hands against his chest and leaned in closer in hopes he’d keep going.

Everything moved so smoothly. His hands began to peel the silky red fabric from my shoulders, down my arms, until it had no choice but to slide off me until it hit the floor. Those fingers didn’t hesitate to run through my hair, and he let them roam free through the long strands that now ran down to my waist.

I was already undressing him — unbuttoning his shirt and sliding the expensive material off his bulky arms. His pants were next, the sound of his belt buckle coming undone by my fumbling hands only following with the sound of his zipper as I tugged it open nice and slow.

He was just in his boxers while I was in lace panties, but they both ended up slipping off our bodies before I was up in his arms and wrapped around him like he’d become a tree I was desperate to climb upon.

Everything felt like a blur then.

Our kisses grew deep and desperate, our moans and breathing growing loud and frequent. Warmth and static buzz between us, until the room itself was suffocating with power. His lips praised me with romantic words, gliding down my flesh and leaving bruises of love and lust on every inch of my flesh.

Everywhere tingled with bits of pain and pleasure, while my pussy fluttered with heat as it ached to be filled by the man that lit up from the inside out. We kissed greedily as he hovered over me, the two of us impatient as the desire to be together was at its peak.

I stilled as his massive cock teased my pussy folds, and he gave me one last passionate kiss before he spoke against my lips.

“I love you so fucking much, Lexianne,” he muttered with immense admiration, and I knew it was taking everything in him to remain still and not fuck me into oblivion. “You want this?” he dared to ask. “Want me to be your first?”

He already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from my very lips.

“I want this,” I breathed. “You. Us. To be your wife...and the mother of our children. I want this love for as long as we live and rule in this world and above, and when our time is up, I want our Goddess to unite us again in paradise, so we can love for all eternity.”

I sealed my words with a kiss, and it was all the permission he needed to do what we’d both craved all this while.

“I’ll be gentle,” he assured me before he began to inch into me. We both knew I had the pain tolerance for this, and yet the fact that he needed to vocally reassure me that he’d tame his ferocity for this moment really made my heart swell in gratitude.

When he hit that wall of resistance, he sealed my lips with a passionate kiss that stole my attention from what was about to happen by the way his tongue tangled with mine. With one

movement, that wall of purity was broken, leaving me to tense up slightly at the wave of pain.

He remained still just enough for me to breathe and adjust to his thickness before I kissed him back so he knew he could begin to move. He went slow while he assessed my face as if to ensure I wasn't in too much pain, while I focused on breathing until it felt like I was getting used to his movement.

With a shared look, we closed the distance between us before he really began to find a rhythm that pleased both of us. He groaned into my mouth before smothering my lips and pressing me back against the sheets. The two of us were moaning and moving to our bodies' need for more pleasure.

I'd always wondered what it would feel like to have sex. To experience it with someone who genuinely carried a connection with me that grew and blossomed into something magical.

To think I was experiencing it here and now felt unreal — felt like such a blessing that I'd earned the right to enjoy — and now it was time for me to fall into the warm embrace of this pleasurable moment.

“Sweet Lex,” Malifer groaned into my neck as he sucked at it and began to move faster. “So tight, baby. So fucking tight...and good...and all mine.”

“Malifer,” I moaned his name as my arms wrapped around his neck to keep him close. “Faster. Deeper. More please,” I begged. The pain was nothing now in comparison to the building sensation of pleasure coursing through my body.

The heat from our bonded marks blazed to life, burning against our flesh, and only heightened our senses further, which made things feel so damn good.

So damn right.

He rocked into me, moaning and cursing at how fucking amazing this all was. My hot pussy spasmed around him, locking around his thick length as if to keep him captive as he fucked me nice and deep. Our breaths were out of control, the heat burning between us becoming so intense, we began to sweat.

I begged him for more, to fuck me harder, deep, faster than he would dare do, and he followed my lead as we braced for ourselves for the approaching magnitude of pleasure our climax would deliver like a tidal wave.

“Malifer. Malifer! So...close!” I really was close to my orgasm, my body tingling immensely. He grunted and thrust faster, growling through gritted teeth as he fucked me at an animalistic pace.

The scorching power entwined beneath us, burning and dancing with so much intensity as the pleasure within my core shot through me until I was screaming Malifer’s name and was hit with the strongest orgasm I’d ever experienced.

“MALIFER!”

He came with me. His muffled grunt was followed with him sinking as deeply as he could while he screamed my name.

“LEXIANNE!”

The waves of bliss took complete control, leaving me to shudder with the aftershocks that enjoyed riddling through me in waves. My pussy was still clenching Malifer’s hardness, which felt double its usual size inside me, while he let out an inaudible set of words before he collapsed onto me to catch his breath.

It didn't take him long to get off me — his arm hooking around me and turning us in one smooth movement, which managed to keep his cock still snug within me.

“You aren't...gonna pull out?” I panted and trembled in his grasp as my high was finally beginning to come down.

“Not until I fill your very womb with loads of cum, baby,” he muttered into my ear before kissing the side of my neck. “Fuck. I need to fuck you again.”

“No way...are you holding time still.”

His chuckle told me otherwise before he kissed my cheek.

“I'll hold time for all eternity if it means fucking you again and again,” he breathed as he took an inhale and let it out. “The scent of your happiness is far more addicting than your fear.”

“So that means you'll always make me happy, huh?”

“If it means I get to love you like this, I most certainly will,” he reasoned, which made us both chuckle.

“Can we enjoy one more time?” I dared to whisper as I lifted my head enough to peer into his eyes, which twinkled with lust.

“We'll do it as many times as my queen desires,” he responded and sealed my lips with his.

I'll enjoy the fruit of my labor, and then I'll enjoy burning down the empire that wished to destroy us all...with my loved ones and sister at my side.

One Year Later...

“**D**o I need to speak in Russian to be taken seriously?” I hissed through the phone. “If I have to send Gaia or Wallas to deal with this problem and it’s nothing but a time waster, you know you’ll be dead by nightfall. And don’t even try to warn the rest of the recruits for they’ll all be dead, too! You clearly have the target’s location and you’re wasting time calling me for my permission? Are you lads children?!”

My eyes rolled as the stuttering man couldn’t even fathom words.

“You know what, I have a better idea. Why don’t you call my beloved sweet sister that you guys favor more because she has a higher tolerance when it comes to stupidity and explain exactly what you said to me and see what she says. If you guys survive through the end of the night, I’ll gladly take back my words and even treat you and your fleet of men to an all-expenses trip to Dubai. I’m not sure if my husband will let me pay for it but at least I try. to keep my word when it comes to phone agreements like these.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before allowing my thick Russian accent to ease into my final words.

“Get rid of the target, Albert, or I’ll let Malifer get involved,” I threatened, and I could hear the way his heart stopped through the speaker. “He really is in an irritated mood

lately with all the random attacks on our assets because of the recent announcement, so if you and your fellow comrades want to live another day, I suggest you do what is asked and promptly.”

I didn't wait for his reply as my patience had long since departed the conversation.

“I'm officially off in one minute and forty seconds, so any future calls can be given to my sister until her time off. After that, I'm sure the Monarch Empire can survive a few months without us proving how indestructible our empire is, especially with the finalized alliances between Outcast Hollows and Fox Moon Pack,” I reminded him. “Anyways, прощание”.”

I hung up and tossed the phone somewhere. The sound of it exploding only ignited a crowd of cheers.

“VIVIVIVIVIVI!”

“BIBIBIBIBIBI!”

I barely had to look down to see the crowd of at least sixty voodoo dolls cheering while holding their spears and newly created guns that they were clearly enjoying.

I had a strong feeling they stole the weapons from the fleet camp outside in the voodoo doll pack house, but I wasn't going to stop them from being mischievous.

As long as they weren't shooting me, I couldn't care less.

“Don't shoot too much in the office, voodoo children,” I casually voiced as I reached for the last set of documents that needed my signature. “You don't want to make your mama upset.”

“VI!”

“BI!”

The mere mention of Momo had them freezing in place before they stood in order like I'd told all of them to salute.

Pausing in my conquest to tackle the documents at hand, I looked at their adorable swirling eyes and sighed.

"Your work here is done. Go play until it's dinner time," I encouraged.

"VIVIVO!"

"BIBIBO!"

They cheered and jumped in triumph before they were all shaking their hips in a unified dance number. Before they left, they all lined up in single file to give me a kiss on either my cheek, hands, nose, or forehead before they made a line to the door.

The eldest voodoo child, Zasper Jr, was the leader and at the front of the line.

"ViViVo!" he cheered and encouraged the others to reply before they were singing happily and leaving the room. Zasper Jr held the door until the last child was out the door.

With a final wave my way, the door closed shut, which gave me a moment of peace.

"I swear, by the time I pop out a child, Momo and her fleet will have a damn empire of children," I voiced to myself.

"They'll be powerful beings when they're older and know how to shift into human form," Lily offered.

Xiao howled happily in my head before she lay on her side and was lazily waving her tail from side to side.

"You're right," I sighed and lowered my pen to lean back into my seat. "At least they're good at forging my signature. It

made signing all those official documents easier.”

“Did you approve Colton and Lauren’s vacation request?” Lily reminded me.

“I did,” I spoke with pride because I actually remembered for once.

Poor Colton had to ask me a good thirty times before I finally got those documents signed personally.

“Everything is set for their trip to Hawaii. Apparently, Alpha Killian has some connections to getting the diamonds for wedding rings mined and embedded with some of the power of the lagoon from the core of Honolulu. I think Lauren’s going to be absolutely ecstatic.”

“Won’t she be able to predict that Colton’s going to propose?”

“Apparently Colton found a way to block that specific thought from her. How is beyond me, but everything is booked. She won’t know. The best part is they’ll be back for Christmas.”

“Perfect timing,” Lily praised. ***“You should nap. You look tired.”***

“Do I?” I pondered and leaned further back in my chair as I closed my eyes. “A nap would be good. Will you keep an eye on the valley’s entrance? I know Fynn and Felix are there with Momo and Zasper but I’d feel a bit more reassured that you’re present as backup.”

“It’s been a while since I took human form,” Lily noted with an amused tone. ***“I’ll keep them company.”***

“I appreciate it,” I voiced. “Wallas and Gaia are handling Nightshade and Monarch Empires so we don’t need to worry

much about that.”

“What about Pet One and Pet Two?” Lily inquired gleefully.

“Pet Laura is being used as bait to lure out the pack of tainted mutations from Baker’s hidden lab on the outskirts of Hollow City. Apparently, they like her scent. We think it has to do with how Baker was feeding off of her for a year,” I revealed. “As for pet number two, he’s dealing with being persecuted for all the crimes he committed against his pack and the innocents who were sacrificed to the valley. The number of charges on his case is so long, you’d think it’s one of those pharmacy receipts everyone claims can be longer than the bible scriptures.”

“Even if Alpha Shade gets charged, the agreement is he’s spending his eternity down here?” Lily asked for clarification.

“Yup. He’s Malifer’s property now so he’ll remain in the new dungeon he made that’s a few feet from the equator. It’s about 90 feet under and in the middle of the Forest of Infinite souls, so if his flesh isn’t being melted again and again, he can enjoy being taunted by the thousands of dead souls.”

“What a grand punishment,” Lily praised. “I’ll get going then. Try to get some rest. You’ve been working super hard.”

“Thanks for your concern, Lily,” I expressed my gratitude.

She was gone after that, which left me a bit of quiet time as my wolf decided to take this time to catch up on some snooze.

Closing my eyes once more, I allowed myself to relax, the only sound the ticking grandfather clock in the corner of the room.

The gentle touch to my cheek wasn't enough to pull me out of the lull of calm. The feeling that followed left my body feeling like it was floating on a swaying loud.

It was the warmth of something soft that made me stir and snuggle closer to whatever held me so comfortably that made me open my tired eyes to realize I no longer was in the office.

Instead, I was in the arms of my Demon King.

“Didn't I say it's bad to sleep in the chair?” he greeted, knowing I was slightly awake.

“Hmph. Go away.”

He chuckled and simply held me closer against him as the knitted blanket Colton had made me a year ago brought us both comfort as it was draped upon us.

“I know you're not still mad.”

“I am.”

“I didn't know you wanted that specific tub of ice cream.”

“You did. Deep within your soul, you knew I liked that flavor, and you ate it! What kind of husband eats his wife's favorite ice cream of all time?! A demonic villain husband, that's what!”

“So this is where your villain story is going to begin, huh?” he offered in glee as he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “My husband stole the last tub of Rocky Road ice cream. I knew from that moment onward, the world would feel the wrath of my loss.”

“That's exactly how it would go down!” I huffed, and though I was upset with him, my head felt far too heavy to keep up so I rested it against his chest. “I'll get my revenge. Just you wait.”

“I bought you some,” he quietly voiced.

There was a moment of silence before I muttered, “How much is some?”

“Apparently a lifetime supply since I bought the company.”

“Oh...” I answered. Five seconds passed. “What?!” I gasped and managed to open my eyes just so I could look at him in disbelief. “You bought the company?”

“Mhmm,” he replied with a smirk. “They’ll deliver us the flavor you want at any time of day.”

I was already drooling as I stared at him in disbelief. “So...if I want some now?”

“Just say the word, Sweet Lex,” he encouraged. “It’ll be here in less than five minutes.”

“With extra nuts and chocolate syrup?”

“With all the goodness,” he assured me and whispered, “And with the tiny spoons you like.”

I squealed. “Okay. I forgive you.”

“Wow,” he replied and shook his head. “Killian and Wren told me I’d probably die at least fifteen times before you’d forgive me.”

“They don’t believe you have a soft spot in my heart,” I gleefully declared. “I want ice cream!”

“Already on its way,” he assured me. “Guess we should get a mini freezer in this room.”

“Maybe,” I commented and snuggled against him. “I’m sleepy.”

“You can nap.”

“I want ice cream though.”

“Is it you who wants ice cream or our little bundles of chaos?”

I giggled mischievously while I reached out to press my hand on my belly. Malifer’s hand laid on mine the next second, the two of us anticipating the dual kicks our touch ignited.

“Nah, it’s the bundles of chaos,” I assured him. “I just want to sleep for eons and make your men pee their pants for being stupid in my presence.”

“I think they regret thinking their lives would have been easier with you in charge while I take paternity leave,” he commented, and the last part of his comment made me laugh.

“How did you get maternity leave before me?” I asked. “I’m the one carrying TWO babies. What are you doing?!”

“Ensuring my queen gets all the Rocky Road ice cream in the world,” he reasoned, which seemed like a decent excuse.

For now.

“Fine, but I’m officially on mat leave once I finish those last documents on the desk, and then we’ll see!”

“What are you trying to see?” he teased and gently kissed me. “I signed those already. You’re free for a good year.”

“Thank you,” I praised before I shrugged. “I have no clue what I was trying to get at with my previous statement.”

“Should I blame the preggo brain?” he inquired. “That’s what Wren called it.”

“Yes. Blame it,” I huffed but further relaxed now that his hand was gently circling around my belly that carried our

twins. “I have two more months of this waddling, sleeping, peeing, craving madness and then I’ll take over the world for shits and giggles.”

“You don’t wanna share anymore?” he asked as if he knew I was falling asleep, which was why my statement totally wasn’t like me.

“Hmm...maybe you,” I voiced. “And Wren. She is my twin so she gets a share. Oh. And I guess Killian since that’s her man and all...then I need a share for our twins... Hmm. I’ll think about it after ice cream.”

He chuckled and kissed my lips lightly. “Aren’t you sleepy though?”

“No...” I replied and yawned. “The...Queen of...Demon Valley Pack...doesn’t need...sleep.”

“Mhmm,” he replied as he proceeded to rock me back and forth, the motion only further relaxing me. “Well, why doesn’t Mama Lex relax and let Papa Malifer rule a bit so you can get some rest?”

“Sounds...tempting,” I replied. “I’ll...think...about...”

The words were never finished as my mind began to drift, the blanketing sensation of peace only making it easier to relax and enjoy the movement of the rocking chair.

A kiss to my forehead was followed by one to my belly, and I managed to hear Malifer’s words before the comforting arms of darkness embraced me.

“From a lone Demon King in a world of devastation to the Alpha of one of the strongest packs with my pregnant queen in my arms and two loving rulers in the realms of her belly. I never thought it would happen, but I guess I got the

happy ending I always yearned for. Thank you, my Sweet Lex.”

I knew in the depths of my soul that happy endings would ignite new beginnings.

What brought me great tranquility was knowing our children would live in a world that surrounded them with nothing but love.

A valley that embraced the darkness, and allowed the rays of light to warm our lives...and hearts.

THE END.

S TAY CONNECTED:

Did You Enjoy DEMON VALLEY CROWNED?

Please feel free to **leave a review on AMAZON.**

Thought this trilogy is now complete, it still helps me, Avery,
know that you enjoyed this book.

Feel free to join my Facebook group here:

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***Now turn the page for a Sneak Peek of MARKED BY
REJECTION- Outcast Hollows Pack***

Marked By Rejection

~OUTCAST HOLLOWES PACK~

Marked By Rejection

At eighteen, my life should have ended with the last beat of my bleeding heart, but instead, a scorching press of lips ignited a mark that resurrected me into a world of shadows.

Alas, my survival proves to be a curse. I'm thrust into a pack I've never heard of, where arrogant Alphas — with antihero tendencies, dominating, chiseled bodies, and mysterious ranks — wrestle for control. I'm nothing here, and it turns out I beat death only to be rejected.

I'm exiled and abandoned, left to die at the hands of whichever predator discovers me first. Only I'm found by the chief's son, Alpha Killian — a man who carries the exact same mark as I.

I've discovered a loophole, and instead of being slain by this cold, merciless man, he decides I'm a worthy gamble. My flesh is deserving of his tender caress, my lips soft enough for his dominating hunger. My body is strong enough to handle his punishments, while my shattered heart summons my hidden talents.

I'm Killian's secret weapon, but in order to survive, I have to promise him one thing:

I must never be a submissive wolf again.

Prologue: Don't Let Me Burn With Regret

I don't want to die.

The thought rang over and over in my mind as I fought against the ropes holding my wrists captive. I hadn't felt panic like this in a very long time, cold sweat dripping down my body while I struggled to simply breathe.

My eyes darted everywhere in the car, desperate to get a glimpse of any saving grace that would catapult me out of this deadly situation.

Why did this happen? What did I do to land me here?

My way of thinking would be scolded by my therapist, but there had to be more to this than just the wrong place and time. I knew better, and though I was fighting against the tightness in my chest that emphasized the truth of the matter unfolding before me, I couldn't allow myself to accept it.

To admit that, yet again, I've been betrayed by those who should have loved me...protected me.

That was how Kyle died.

Instead of his death motivating me to strive for better, I turned into...this. A helpless woman who took shit from everyone. Not because I was shy or truly weak, but because I was just tired of fighting a battle I'd never win.

I deserved to perish in this world that hated outcasts like me.

“How far out before we reach the woods?”

My eyes darted to the review mirror, hoping to get a picture of who the driver was. The voice was familiar, and they were purposely speaking deeper to disguise their voice.

“Five minutes?”

“Do I really have to wait that long to feast?” I swallowed the lump in my throat as the cloth wrapped around my mouth became more apparent with how desperate I was to speak out.

To scream, be heard, and beg for mercy.

This moment in my life that was surely coming to a dramatic end ignited so many thoughts of regret. I couldn't understand why I couldn't change myself. Why did I have to be such a weak person? No strength, perseverance, drive. I was the biggest pushover, and that was why I sat next to my boyfriend - my apparent kidnapper.

I'd finished my shift like any other person, once again getting cut off on tips because I was “too generous” and couldn't speak up for myself. The long, shitty day was the repeat of my last four years, since I'd volunteered at this cafe before I'd gotten a part-time job at fifteen.

Part-time led to full time, but the pay hadn't changed, and the overtime made me worried about whether I'd ever get paid my fair share versus everyone around me that were doing half the work

I do it to myself.

That was what my boyfriend had said every day for the last two years. We started dating when I was sixteen, and now that

I was inching towards nineteen, I'd come to realize he wasn't the best for me. At first, he was my safe haven.

Someone strong who I hoped not to necessarily rely on, but who could provide me a sense of safety in this small town that was the only option for a girl like me with no money, inheritance, or family members. My parents died in a freak accident that I'd personally come to conclude was a murder.

My little brother, Kyle, was kidnapped by a molester, and they found his body in the woods just before a forest fire attempted to get rid of all the evidence. And my older brother? Well, he vanished after my younger brother's disappearance.

The fact that he wasn't considered a prime suspect was just another circumstance that worked against me, and it left me homeless, with no money, and nothing to work hard towards.

I was just barely surviving in the hollows of this desolate world.

So why was I now heading towards the same path as my little brother?

I never thought my boyfriend would try to sell me. After my shift, he picked me up and offered me a bottle of orange juice after a long day. I paid no mind to it - my ultimate mistake - and now I was here, trying to not have a panic attack with my boyfriend to my left and a driver in black and wearing a mask taking us to the outskirts of our small town called Hollow Country.

I came here to start over because it was the closest town to the big city filled with matte black buildings and hopeful dreams, but more important, Hollow Country was a close-knit community and the forestry around it was a real sight to see.

Why didn't I think it would be too good to be true? Too beautiful to hide the disgusting deeds done by their own townspeople?

The man looked into the rearview mirror, his eyes locking onto my pale blue ones. My eyes were the most unique in the family. I'd taken most of my father's qualities, which included my very odd two-toned hair. Everyone thought it was highlighted to be a vivid orange that shifted into turquoise blue locks, but nope. I was born that way.

That kind of combination is one of a kind.

My look of recognition may have triggered his response as he hastily muttered, "Go ahead, but don't suck her dry. She's gotta look decent enough to sell to the pack."

Sell to the pack? Don't suck me dry?! What do they mean? What's going on?

Fear shot through my senses as my boyfriend chuckled and looked over at me. I was afraid to peer to my left side - to see those eyes that should have shown me compassion be filled with a sort of hunger that wasn't human in the slightest.

His eyes that always gave me the impression of moss green were a striking red that I'd never witnessed before. They surely couldn't be contacts, especially when his eyes were normal just seconds ago. Maybe I was hallucinating - that would maybe make this situation feel more like a dream than my unfolding reality.

"Wren," he sweetly said, like my name was his favorite dessert. It was crazy how he was now using my nickname when the entirety of our relationship he'd called me Gwenivere - *or Gwen when he was harsh and controlling.*

I'd liked Wren because Kyle enjoyed calling me that. He'd learned in school that a wren was a small bird, and I guessed I sometimes felt like that - *a little bird in the vast world*. The only difference was that I'd yet to figure out how to fly.

My wings were clipped together by anyone who wanted to take advantage of the circumstances.

The use of it now made me feel like a helpless ant awaiting the death of being squished with the rest of its home, my body wracked with trembles that only encouraged my boyfriend to smile brilliantly.

"Don't be afraid, babe," he assured me as if he weren't the ultimate culprit of my fright and situation. "It'll all be over soon."

He leaned in as if he were going to kiss me, the tightness in my chest only further growing as dark memories fought to cut through the surface of my frantic mind. I couldn't handle this or I'd suffocate without any outside assistance.

A panic attack now would be a better ending than what these guys were planning for me.

I wished to tell him to get away from me. To stop what he was aiming to do, even with this taut, thick fabric over my mouth. But the words always got stuck in my tight throat - a repetition of forced silence on my own accord versus the outside sources that wished for me to be mute.

No matter the physical suffering plaguing me.

I wasn't expecting the sharp pain that dove into my flesh at the side of my neck, leaving me to whimper as pain rushed through my body like a venomous poison. I tried to jerk away as the pain intensified, making a grunting sound against my

boyfriend's throat as he purposely took his seatbelt off to make sure I stayed still.

His grip was harsh - painful - to the point that I was sure even my tanned, tatted skin would be bruised and the marks of his digging fingertips would be left behind. I had to figure out what was happening, my mind fighting to put one and two together, but as this man sucked, my brain felt like a fog was rolling through it.

My eyes grew weak as the world spun, but my strike of delusion still didn't rub off those familiar eyes in the rearview mirror that watched in disgust. A flash of those orbs told me he disliked what was happening, and yet he continued to drive while his expression went blank.

I tried to plead with him to make this all stop with just my eyes - begging for a change of heart, but my attempt was futile.

His eyes dismissed me like he had the majority of our lives.

I had no doubt in my mind now. The driver was my older brother, Hendrick.

A part of me wished to be in a state of disbelief. That was the normal circumstance, was it not? But then again, as much as the world deemed me a stupid fool, I was done trying to act like my brother was a saint.

Our suffering, Kyle's death, my struggle through the years, and my battles with all the fucked-up shit I dealt with were all thanks to him.

He ruined me when I was but an innocent little girl in a big, dark world, and now he was going to be one of my murderers. He didn't need to place a hand on me to contribute

to the approaching deed, but what hurt more was that I couldn't do anything to stop all of this.

Why am I so pathetic? Even with death knocking on my door?

Wasn't this the moment I had to suddenly become a badass bitch and find a way out? That was what happened in the books I'd come to enjoy. They reflected beings I wished to become.

Strong women. Ones who didn't take bullshit from the men around them who manipulated their situations to benefit themselves in the best way while leaving them victims of "wrong place, wrong time".

Those stories always held a heroine who embodied perseverance, beauty, power at their fingertips, and they knew exactly what to do to dominate the man's world they lived in. I wished for that, begged to be a woman who lifted her head up high and would fuck anyone over sideways if they fought to steal my shine.

But that wasn't me.

No matter how many times I stepped forward to walk down that path I admired so much, something would happen. A situation as simple as a slap to my ass against my will or the worst-case scenario where I have no choice but to remain still as my boyfriend enjoyed this body of mine to please his own needs instead of my own made me freeze up.

No matter the tattoos I got to hide the scars that never really faded away or the massive butterfly tattoo on my chest I used to hide the wound scars of an attack I endured the same night as Kyle's kidnapping, I couldn't run away from being weak.

And it was going to be the end of me.

I could barely move now, my mind on a rollercoaster that just wouldn't stop. My groan was weak, my body suddenly heavy, and I succumbed to exhaustion that was very opposite from the adrenaline I needed to figure out my way out of this trap.

“Enough, Travis!” Hendrick hissed. “You’re going to fucking kill her.”

The piercing pain retracted, but the dizziness still fought at my senses like a plague I had no control over. My body immediately slumped to the side, my seatbelt the only thing saving me from just collapsing onto the floor of the back seat.

“Not my fault she’s so fucking delicious. Jeez. I should have bitten her ages ago. Would have been nice when I fucked her.”

“You two fuck?”

“Well, she lets me do what I want, Hendrick,” Travis announced. “Can’t be my girlfriend if we’re not fucking. She learned that the hard way.”

“You forced yourself on my sister?” he snarled, and the way Travis laughed would haunt me to the grave. It was like he’d gotten some sort of confidence boost after doing whatever he’d done to me over the years.

“You’re literally helping me sell off your sister to get you out of that shithole you fell into with Kolt’s pack, and yet you’re pissed I raped your sister? You sure have some fucked-up priorities.” He laughed and then quietly added, “Funny how you did the exact same. Don’t act like she lost her innocence to me.”

“Shut the fuck up, Travis.”

“You’re a fucking coward, bro,” Travis mocked. “At least between us, I know what a piece of shit I am and proudly accept it. You’re just one of the many cocksuckers who try to act like a saint on the outside, but you’re just as tainted as the rest of those selfish pricks.”

“I’ll run this fucking thing off a cliff if you keep that lip up.”

That didn’t even stop Travis from losing himself in laughter.

“Go ahead. Who are you fucking over? You and I will survive, but your sis is just human and she’ll fucking die.”

“She...” He didn’t continue, which made Travis chuckle quietly.

“Out of your whole damn family, only you took the wolf gene, while your sister and younger bro were useless humans. See the sad irony you brought to the Monarchs? Younger brother killed because of your foolish actions and now your sister is about to face the same fate. No wonder your father said you were a mista-”

“Enough!” Hendrick snapped. I was thankful for my seatbelt because he skidded the car to a dramatic stop that left Travis cursing.

“Fucker! You want me to fly out of the front windshield?”

“I’m not doing this with you,” he hissed.

“We’ve come too far for you to get to this point in the kidnapping stage, idiot,” Travis scoffed. “You fucked up one of the mafia’s biggest deals, and if you don’t bring a woman for him to have his way with and dissect, you might as well go on the run like the criminal they’re dying to label you as.”

“You don’t know shit,” Hendrick snapped.

“You think your pack name is gonna be your saving grace?” Travis retorted back. “Your father’s in fucking hiding for the shit you pulled off. You got your mother murdered or whatever the fuck happened to her that led to your father’s spiral into drugs and pissing off the wrong mafia gangs down in the city. You got your younger brother murdered, and now you’re selling your fucking sister who you have molested for how many years? You’re a damn disease to this entire family name and if your father didn’t go into hiding, I bet you’d get their whole pack killed as well.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” Hendrick hissed.

“I’m immortal, fucker,” Travis gleefully declared. “I can’t be killed, but you certainly can, since you’re a wolf.”

“We’re not doing this.”

The sound of something clicking into place made my rapidly beating heart stop in its tracks while something cold pressed to my temple.

“Listen, Hendrick. Maybe I’m not being threatening enough,” Travis whispered using that voice he always used on me.

The softened voice of a predator hiding their true desires and secrets with the tender tone to lure you right into their web of lies.

Only this time around, I bet my brother knew his intentions weren’t pure - especially when there was clearly a gun pressed against my temple.

“I don’t want to kill your precious little sister, but your mess up fucked me big time and I can’t handle that,” he snarled. “Do you understand how powerful Kolten is?”

Everyone's always afraid of that reject Killian simply because of his murder record, but Kolten runs the city and this town isn't safe from his predatory hands."

He paused to take a moment to deeply inhale and let it out slowly.

"You see this vampire body of mine? It's fucking dying. Blood simply sustains the fucking craziness in my head. And you know how very few of us are left anywhere near this town. My Coven went into hiding with your pack after the bullshit you pulled, and the alliance was run by your father. With him gone, the vamps don't see any need to be around, which means I can't find the answers I need to fix myself," he explained. "But Kolt has the connections to the medicine I need. He has the means to lead me back to the Coven I was exiled from, and with a few string pulls, I can get back to my home. I've worked eons to finally be able to get this far, and I knew your sister would be perfect bait. That's why I dated her."

How had I fallen for all of this?

I knew Travis wasn't the best boyfriend. I knew he was a dangerous person from the vibe he gave off and when he said we had to do the deed or else he'd break up with me and make life hell. Only, my life was already a living hell. But I guessed having a boyfriend made it less lonely. How wrong of a decision I realized it was now.

I should have run away like I'd wished to do so many times. To be the true outcast and abandon everything about the city, the town, everything. If I'd gone to an island or one of those huge cities where millions of people lived, would they have found me?

Regardless if I was pursued by whoever our enemy was, maybe I'd be a whole lot stronger and not a weak victim left to this level of abuse.

“Now that you know my story, you gotta cooperate with me so we can both get out of this shithole. Your sister is pretty useless, but don't act like she didn't take your mother's gift.”

Gift?

“It's dormant,” Hendrick hissed. “She can't even light a candle with her mind. How the fuck is she gonna be like my mom, who burned a fucking city down when she was pregnant?”

“Your mom burned that city to the fucking ground and all that was left was ashes. Nothing survived that, but you know what did? She had her unborn child, which was your baby sis.”

“She doesn't have any powers, Travis! She's fucking useless!”

“You said the same about Kyle, and yet he set half of the forest on fire and killed his captor before they found his body,” Travis countered.

“How the fuck do you know all of this?!”

“Because I do my research, Hendrick. And do you know why Kolt desperately needs your sister?”

“Why?!” Travis snapped.

“She's his mate.”

Pin drop silence.

“You're lying.”

“She has the same skull mark on her chest as him.”

“That-”

“Isn’t a tattoo, so stop trying to convince yourself otherwise,” Travis suggested.

“He’ll ruin her.”

“She’s as good as dead anyway.” Travis was back to laughing, the sound beginning to make my head hurt, but I began to feel something else.

A weird, heavy feeling.

This wasn’t good because the prickling emotion of dread always happened when my life would be turned upside down: when our father disappeared, when Kyle was kidnapped and murdered, when my mother went missing and was assumed dead just like my father, and this morning before I went to my shift.

Each time, I’d ignored the warnings my body fought desperately for me to feel and obey - to cancel whatever I was doing and take the safest route versus what was destined for me. I wanted to listen to its plea for once in my life, but I couldn’t move my frail body.

I felt like I’d gone frozen, my body numb to the point that I wasn’t sure if I was breathing. The pounding of my heart was loud enough to ring in my ears, but something bad was happening to me and I couldn’t decipher it with my whirlwind mind.

“Now, let’s be on our way, shall...”

I waited for the rest of Travis’s words, but instead, a string of curses left his lips.

“Fuck, fuck! Move the car!”

“What?” Hendrick’s question was filled with enough panic to frighten me further, as goosebumps crawled upon my flesh

and I sought every thread of strength within me to try to open my eyes.

“Shit!” Travis cursed, and I heard the door open.

“Fuck! Are you running away? Help us!” Hendrick screamed in haste as it felt like he was fumbling with the ignition to turn it off and on again. But compared to before where he left the car running, the ignition wouldn’t start at all. “Shit, shit, shit! No. I can’t fuck this up...fuck! Why do I have such shitty luck?”

That humming warning within me began to burn stronger, the heat spreading from the core of my chest outward. It moved to my arms, all the way to my fingertips before it began its journey down my waist to my hips, but the warmth was only escalating just how much shit I was about to be in.

I fought to open my eyes, begged for them to cooperate for a single moment, and thankfully, they shot right open - as my body was filled with a bolt of charged adrenaline.

The seatbelt prevented me from jerking forward. My panicked eyes that could barely stay half-open suddenly met those of my older brother.

One look and it felt like the world came to a striking halt.

I thought after years of not seeing him, the pain wouldn’t be as sharp as it was. The memories in the depths of the dark, those chilling eyes viewing me in an imaginative world that only pleased him consumed me.

My muffled cries, my whispered pleas, the realization that no matter how hard I tried, he’d always get his way.

It was all back and shot me right in the chest like a bullet - only that pain would haunt me for days, months, years on end,

and he'd simply continue to live on the run, hiding because of the true deeds he committed out of selfishness.

The deeds that made our family crumble into a lost legacy.

I knew from the click of his seatbelt that he'd be gone from my view, and I'd most likely never see him again. He'd get to, once again, run from his problems and leave them upon my burdened shoulders.

Unless I died right here and now.

There was that voice begging me to say the words that I'd kept within the pit of my chest for years. It begged me to reveal how much pain this individual, who should have been my family member I could lean on, had contributed and changed me to satisfy his own desires and impatient tendencies.

My life, the consequences, the pain I experienced at the expense of his actions, and the continued situations I fell for because I was still traumatized from our tangled past should have been enough to let it all out.

Let the rage inside me reign and deliver the onslaught of pain this man deserved.

But there were those strings that felt like they were wrapping around my neck - invisible strings that were sharp as ever, cutting through my flesh and making it feel like the entire world was caving in on me.

The thoughts of ridicule from my fellow peers, the words of the public that would degrade me because of all the flaws I carried, while the culprit of my agony received sympathy and support from those in power.

The voices that chanted that I should be quiet because I deserved to carry this pain.

For a split second, all of it came to a dramatic silence, and that was my moment.

“I’ll never forgive you.”

His eyes widened to their full capacity, while mine was already the bearer of fresh tears that rolled down my cheeks and into the cloth.

I hadn’t even realized I still wore the thing, and yet the words were so clear to my ears - *and to his*. I couldn’t comprehend the current stuff that was happening to me, and maybe I would if I ever had the opportunity to do so, but he knew from my haunting eyes of sky blue, that surely looked like pools of water thanks to their glassy surface, that my words referred to how he’d fucked my entire life up.

How he’d ruined me. Stole my innocence. Abandoned Kyle and me. And just fucked up my entire childhood and teenage years. He’d ruined it all...and I could truly never forgive him.

The blow of a loud horn startled us both. His head whipped around to see the approaching headlights of a sixteen-wheeler. As my eyes widened, he was already out of the driver’s seat and running in a blur of movement.

The sound of something cracking multiple times was only drowned out by the thunderous horn that sang on in hopes I’d somehow move this car out of the truck’s path, but I knew from the speed it was approaching that I was screwed.

The blinding lights consumed me as my burning body grew rigid, bracing for the moment all of this would come to a dramatic end.

I knew when Death came that I’d have a list worth of regrets, but at least there was one thing I could say to him in confidence.

*I told my perpetrator who destroyed my life that I'd never
forgive them.*

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