



WORLDS
OF PROTHEKA



THE
DEMON PRINCE'S
FAKE BRIDE

CELESTE KING

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OceanofPDF.com

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PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheka” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

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THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



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JUNE

I bat my eyes open, slowly coming to as the rest of my senses awaken with me. Many nights I've spent praying to the gods that this is all some nightmare I'll escape from, that I'll be wrapped up in my own bed, in the arms of my love.

Alas, now I wake up looking forward to that night's slumber, for my dreams are the only place I can escape to now. Sitting up, I twist and stretch a stiff back, courtesy of a flat block of stone covered only by a thin rag.

The usual sights and sounds greet me. Dampened grimy walls caked with mold of a dark green, its reek of piss and shit worsened by years of neglect, and distant ambient sounds of water dripping a few cells down.

I don't dare touch the walls, already knowing how they'd feel. Like dragging your fingers through viscous, granulated clay. Sometimes I think that's what they scrape off the walls to feed us twice a day.

My stomach rumbles, its hunger inducing a slight numbing headache. This isn't any tavern, I know I won't be given a choice between taura stew or grilled daette with roasted burgona and phenson. No, now I eat purely for survival.

Yet it doesn't make the taste of the shit they serve any better. I've already lost count of how many times I've gagged and thrown up from the sustenance they feed us. But it keeps me alive, it keeps me fighting, as well as the rest of the girls who start to awaken right after me.

I nod my head at them. I don't say good morning anymore. Why should I? What reason do I have to lie to myself and others anymore? They rise from their beds, folding back their blankets and coughing from the musty air.

"Hey, June," greets one of them, taking a seat beside me.

"Elise, how did you sleep?" I ask her.

"My back isn't as sore today but I slept on my neck wrong," she tells me. "I can barely turn it to the left." She demonstrates her injury, groaning in pain.

"Turn the back of your neck to me, I'll try and relieve some of the stiffness."

As I rub Elise's neck, my eyes wander over our living space. It has its space but a girl needs her privacy. I've forgotten what it's like to get undressed in peace. Save the embarrassment for the rest of the girls, it's the prying eyes of the damned Zonak guards that bother me the most.

I reminisce on being in a room alone, where it was just myself and my mind's thoughts, being able to listen to my internal self without the voice of another running through my head. That is unless it was him, the love of my life...



"CAREFUL WITH THOSE THORNS. I've nicked myself with tizrets too many times to count."

I cautiously pick up the fruit from his hands, tearing it open at the incision he's made for me. With a spoon, I scoop out a piece of its flesh, its juices dripping down my arm.

"Here, Tyson," I say to him, holding the spoon near his mouth. "You have the first bite."

"Heh, don't mind if I do," he replied with a warm smile. I guide the spoon to his mouth. As he chews it, juices squirt out from his mouth, landing on my cheek.

"Oh no!" he babbles with his mouth still full.

Tyson holds me as I collapse onto his chest, sharing laughter as sweet as the fruit we eat. He grasps my chin, gently bringing my gaze up to meet his. Our eyes lock, brewing a fresh burst of joy within my body.

I wrap my arms around his neck as he pulls me closer, our lips coming together in a kiss that I don't want to part from. We lay down on the grass, staring up at the blue sky peppered with the whispers of clouds.

“What do you think is up there?” Tyson asks.

“I used to dream that I lived there when I was just a kid. I had this big mansion all to myself with loads of servants to bring me anything I desired to eat. Then, whenever I'd get bored, I'd go outside and bounce around from cloud to cloud.”

“Maybe that's what it's actually like.”

I turn, laying my head on his chest.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I feel like if you lived amongst the clouds, you could have anything you've ever wanted.”

“Do you think you can't have that here?”

“I do but I can't help but think that to live up there must carry a whole different type of meaning, a different purpose. Whatever that is, I imagine it to be a million times better than here.”

“Hmm, maybe you should find a way to the clouds then,” I joke.

“Hah, well I wouldn't go anywhere without you,” he replies, planting a quick kiss on my lips.

“And me with you too.”

A sudden explosion almost bursts my eardrums as we scramble to our feet. The village nearby is engulfed in flames with folk running to and fro. Behind them are creatures of some sort that we've never seen before, titans stretching at least fifteen feet.

“Fuck, what’s going on!?” I stutter in terror, watching as one of the invaders jumps over a house with ease, crushing a man on impact.

“Where are they coming from?” asks Tyson.

“Forget about the house, just run!” I scream.

We spin around and start sprinting but are suddenly halted at an advancing group of more soldiers. They aren’t as towering as the ones laying waste to the village but still loom over us.

They wear high-grade armor and brandish weaponry that sends shivers down our spine. The moment they see that we’ve noticed them, a wicked smile spreads across their faces. The leading soldier points directly at me.

“That one there,” he commands in a fiendish voice.

His men stomp toward us as I grab Tyson’s arm.

“What do we do?” I plead, starting to cry.

“You run, get out of here now!” he yells.

“Wait what? What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me, just go!” he screams.

I turn and run, looking back over my shoulder as the soldiers gang up on him. Tyson throws a punch that knocks one back and pushes another away but the numbers game catches him out. Three more soldiers use the blunt ends of their weapons to subdue him.

Visions of what they’ll do to him run through my mind, making me lose control of my body as I turn around in an attempt to save him. Completely ignoring the fact I won’t be able to fight them, I can’t let him suffer for me.

I can barely see his face when he looks up at me coming back for him, his face coated in blood. He starts shaking his head in disbelief, screaming for me not to come back.

“No! June, get out of here, what are you doing?”

One of the soldiers turns around, shouldering me to the ground as I try to tackle him. As they pin me down to the ground, Tyson bursts free from their grip, pouncing on the soldier who hit me. He unleashes a fury of punches on him but the soldier pushes him off.

“Take her away!” he orders.

“No! Tyson!” I yell as they whisk me off the ground and take off running.

“June!”

They continue beating him down, and soon he’s just a speck in the distance.



“THAT CREEP IS STARING at us again,” says one of the other girls as I finish up with Elise.

I turn to look at the bars, seeing the small man-like creature peeking through at the girls. He makes no effort to disguise his perverseness, only sticking out his tongue at us.

“I bet he’s going to mess with our food again, I’m sick of only getting half-portions of food with his spit” hissed the same girl.

“Don’t worry, Hailey. I’ll make sure he doesn’t do any of that shit anymore after today.”

“What are you going to do?” asks Elise.

“He’ll hear a piece of my mind, and feel the weight of my foot.”

“Oh June, you’re as fiery as the color of your hair,” says Hailey, running her fingers through my bright red strands.

“Fucking assholes. You relax girls, just wait for mealtime and I’ll sort things out.”

“Thanks June,” say some of the other girls throughout the cell. “For being there for us.”

I nod back at them as I think of how to tell that piece of shit guard not to fuck with our food. These girls are just like me, having been snatched away from their home without warning. Some, like me, are just trying to survive but others seem to have long lost hope.

Maybe it's my feistiness, my lack of fear with the guards that's made these girls look to me for leadership of some sort. I do my best to be kind to them to the best of my abilities but sometimes I wonder if day by day, I'm losing my own humanity.

A few minutes pass and soon, it's time for us to eat. We hear a door open, and the familiar footsteps of the guard approach. He holds a rare sight, a full portion of our food. Perhaps he's had his fun, having grown bored of being an asshole.

That thought dissipates in an instant when he digs one of his rotten hands into our meal, scraping half of it off the plate and shoving it in his mouth. The sight of its gross texture in between his decaying teeth makes me want to throw up but not as much it makes me want to kick his head in.

He spits in the remaining part of the food and moves to open the metal flap to our cell. He shoves the food in with such force that most of it spills across the ground. Before he can retract his arm, I bring all my bodyweight down with a stomp, pinning his arm in place.

"Agh! You bitch, get the fuck off my arm!" he yells in pain.

The other girls gasp in surprise, running over to hurl insults at the lowly piece of shit.

"You garbage, that's what you deserve!"

"Let go, damn it!" he begs, looking me in the eye.

"I'm going to make something perfectly clear for you, so listen well you fucking punk."

I lean down, pressing more weight onto his arm. His moans of pain etch a smile across our faces.

“What is it for fucks’ sake?”

“You’re no longer to mess with our food. That means no more taking it for yourself, no spitting in it, and no dropping it on the floor!” I scream at him. Adrenaline pumps through me, my voice seething with fury.

“Who are you to make demands you bitch! You’ll suffer for- AGH!”

“Want me to amputate that arm? Us girls will happily take it for ourselves.”

“Alright alright!”

“Promise me,” I order him.

“Why would I promise you anything?”

The look I give him tells the scumbag all he needs to know.

“Alright, I promise!”

I let him go, proud of the wound I’ve inflicted on him. He gets to his feet, fighting back tears as he walks away. The girls gawk at me in astonishment as I walk back to my bed.

“I can’t believe you did that, holy shit,” gushes Hailey.

“June,” says Elise concerningly. “That guard has no reason to keep his promise. He’s a Zonak, his kind are used to being pushed around, that’s how they’ve come to understand this world.”

I know that ultimately she’s right about his empty promise, nodding my head in response.

“Even if it does nothing, I just wanted the satisfaction of seeing him suffer. I feel nothing but hatred for every single... thing that has us trapped in this godsforsaken place. I intend on making their lives as hard as I fucking can.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Being disobedient, disruptive, whatever I can think of. I’ll probably never get back home and it’s all their doing.”

The doors swing open again. Expecting to see the injured Zonak guard, we're alarmed at the sight of a guard twice the size of him. He glares at us through the bars as the girls grab my arms in fear.

“All of you dust yourselves off. We have a royal Prince on his way for an inspection and he likes his girls pretty and presentable.”

He looks directly at me.

“So you'd better not disappoint.”

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LAMIAN

This desk is as disheveled as my mind, unorganized and a mess to examine. Papers and documents of all sorts pile high, some of which are ruined from the ink I spilled just a minute ago. Curse the gods...

This whole office is in shambles but it's the least of my troubles. Everyone must think I have it so easy because I live the life of a Prince. Those lowly peasants below me couldn't possibly be any further from the truth.

There comes such an overwhelming expectation with this life, by no means is it an easy task being the unmarried son of King Asmodeus. I'm unafraid of many things but my father is not one of them. He's a whole other force to deal with and I shan't dare to fail the prospect of success he awaits for me to show as a son of his.

I can think of only one thing that would make all of this so worth it, and that is the throne itself upon which my father sits. Then and only then will I be happy, to rule over Ti'lith and all of Galmoeth as my playground.

But right now, I don't see that future ahead, at least not on the path I currently tread. I see only the same circumstances that bring me this feeling inside me, this crippling knot that twists in my stomach.

I know I'm royally fucked, both literally and figuratively. The throne isn't guaranteed to me for I've nine other sons of Asmodeus to compete with, my wretched brothers. As it stands, the one poised to seize the throne is Rej'thorek.

King Asmodeus wants more grandkids and my brother is in the perfect position to be able to do that for him with that mate of his, Laura.

I must produce some of my own if I hope to stand a chance of being considered by my father, to level me out with my brother on the playing field.

Though I don't know how I can pull it off, mainly due to not wanting to deal with having children. As far as mates go, there are always the matrons for me to consider but I'm not so quick to jump to them as the answer to my problem.

I already know that every demon in this forsaken place seeks them, not that I couldn't compete, but from what I hear they are highly volatile. I remember hearing about a demon not long ago who met his demise at the hands of a matron that he couldn't satisfy.

They'll fuck any and everything like the whores they are but father always seems to have the upper hand with them anyway. Curse Rej'thorek and that human mate of his.

Wait a minute... there's the answer I'm looking for!

That's why our father loves their relationship, because of the expectation that a human mate will produce grandchild after grandchild. If I can replicate that and take it further with a human mate of my own, then that's a surefire way for me to secure his position.

Piper crosses my mind. I may have lost her in the end but my fate is not yet sealed. I still possess the chance to turn things around in my favor, though I shudder at the thought of having to resort to a human...

The last thing I need in my life is for a human to butt in places where she doesn't need to be. Perhaps there's a way I can use her for what I need without needing to go through the formalities of a marriage.

I don't fancy replicating my brother in any other way other than what I have planned. I couldn't possibly care any less if he truly has feelings for Laura. That's not something I want.

I'm a Prince of King Asmodeus, why should I waste my time, energy, and resources investing into a fully fledged marriage with kids of my own? Besides, all I truly require is the facade of plans to have grandchildren with a human mate.

Yes... I know now what I shall do. I take a deep breath, brushing my hair back. The mess on my desk can wait to be sorted, there are more important affairs to attend to.

Now there's the matter of the human who'll be with me. Of course, I highly doubt any one of them will come with me but that hardly presents an obstacle in my plans. Perhaps I can convince one to simply pretend to be my bride, I imagine she'll be much quicker to agree to that than to be a real one.

"Volezimir!"

The door to my office swings open, and in steps my personal servant and trusted friend. He stands to attention.

"Lamian, how can I be of service?" he asks politely.

"I need you to go down to the dungeons. There's a prison cell holding human women, tell them that I shall be visiting very shortly for... let's say an inspection."

"Sir, it's a rare sight for such royalty to personally head to the dungeons. May I suggest selecting a girl to bring up for you?" suggests Volezimir.

He's right, it will be strange for me to go there myself. However, I'm unafraid to do what needs to be done.

"Thank you for the offer but I must do it myself."

"Consider it done," he answers, bowing and heading out the door.

If this plan is to unfold the way I need for it to go then I need to be as hands-on with all of its details, pulling all of the strings in my favor. Then I will take what truly belongs to me.

While I allow the prisoners time to prepare, I shall clean myself up. A Prince must uphold his image in the public eye, even if only for prisoners.

Inspecting myself in the mirror, I brush off spots of dust and lint from my robes. I fix my hair, having come slightly undone in my stress. Using a hair tie from my desk, I bunch up half of it, trying it neatly and securing it in place.

My eyes meet those in my reflection. This face has seen many trials and tribulations, much to no avail. Although I foresee myself sitting on my father's throne, I can't help but wonder where I went wrong in the past.

Again, Piper crosses my mind and for a brief moment in time, I am stricken with sadness and grief. I forget that those eyes I look at are mine, thinking they belong to someone else. Is that how it's always destined to work out?

Will love always be as gray as my skin and hair?

I snap myself back to reality, right reaching the wallowing depths of self-pity. No more of that, from now it's to be nothing but success.

I wait a few more minutes, relishing on the idea of succeeding with my plan. I must remember to take it one step at a time and not get ahead of myself.

Soon, it's time to leave and I depart my office. Taking my time to reach the dungeon, I imagine what my choices are as they await me in their cell. I walk by Zonak guards, greeting me as I pass them.

Just before the stairs to the dungeon, I walk past a room where I see a Zonak guard tending to a wound on his arm. From the looks of it, I guess he pissed off the wrong Gilak on the wrong day. He got off lucky.

I begin the descent to the dungeon, opening the door at the top of a stairwell poorly illuminated by dying candles. With each step, an abhorrent smell became increasingly abundant until it eventually pierced my nostrils.

Part of me almost feels sorry for the swine dwelling down here, but it's truly no concern of mine. They can perish here for all I care. I take the final step, facing the door at the bottom of the stairs. It opens with a grating creek, revealing Volezimir waiting just past the entryway for me.

“The prisoners are ready for your inspection,” he informs me.

“Very well, lead the way.”

Volezimir carries a torch, using its flame to set alight sconces dotted along the walls of this dark tunnel. I grimace at the unsightly conditions around me, almost ashamed this is part of the castle I reside in.

“I’m surprised the prisoners don’t revolt with this place being in the state it is,” I comment.

“This is much more desirable than the holding area, you haven’t seen the worst of it yet.”

We come toward another door.

“It’s just through here,” says Volezimir, opening it for me.

Immediately, I see what he means. The smell is sickening, I’m in disbelief seeing filth caked everywhere. I can’t even dream of a worse place to abandon an enemy to rot.

I don’t know what would cave in first, their mind and spirit or the moldy walls. Nonetheless, I bring my attention to the reason why I’m here, walking forward to a large prison cell.

As I approach, the women inside remind me of animals locked inside a cage, snickering at the thought. My laughter is what catches their attention as they spin around. Their looks of curiosity quickly turns into fear, sending all but one scrambling to the back of the cell where they cling to the walls.

“See anyone you like sir?” asks Volezimir, joining me at my side.

“I shall need a closer look, open up the door for me.”

“Of course,” he replies, whisking the ring of keys from a nearby hook. He inserts the key, twisting it with a satisfying click that makes the girls flinch.

I step inside, sneering at the women huddling together. The one that remains sits on her bedding, crossing her arms and turning her face away from me.

“You there!” I call to her, eliciting no response.

“Prisoner, respond to the Prince when he addresses you.”

She looks at me, her features catching me off guard. Never have I witnessed such beauty from a human, her eyes were as green as the fields on Protheka with small, brown freckles peppered on her cheeks. They strike me like a matchstick igniting the brightest flames, akin to her hair color which simply astounds me.

In her emerald eyes however, I see longing. Not the kind for materialism but for something, or someone. In a split second, it changes to fury, reminding me of an ire storm. She could be a demon for all I know.

“So you’re the Prince?” she asks, not giving me a moment to answer before continuing. “Sure don’t look like much to me.”

The girls gasp, even I am caught off guard by her introduction. Her attitude can do with some work, but as far as looks go for a bride, she certainly fits the bill for being worthy of standing by a Prince’s side.

“This one. I choose her to be my bride.”

I stick my hand out for her but she brushes it aside as she stands up.

“Me as your bride? You’re fucked if you think I will!” she yells, spitting in my face.

JUNE

All I hear is water drops coming from the dungeon's ceiling. Everyone, including me, holds their breath as I stare at the demon. I'm panicking inside, but I try to keep my stare firm to hold my ground.

There were a few gasps from the women when I spit on him, but none spoke up. I understand their fear, but I also know I can't stay back and act like a weakling in the presence of monsters. While they look at me as a puny human, they must know I'm more than that, we are more than that.

His indigo eyes pierce through me. I've always considered myself good at reading people, but I can't tell if he is more furious or shocked by my actions. Maybe because he's a demon, I can't read him, which only scares me more.

I have never spit in someone's face before. I've always been the good girl and wouldn't dare cause a scene like this. If I've been abducted from my life and love, now would be the time to take some risks.

A lowly demon wobbles up to the one I spit on and wipes his cheek. The asshole doesn't break eye contact with me and puts his arms on his hips as he stares me down.

His figure is tall and built, and his light gray hair, half-tied in a bun on his head, only accentuates his height. The horns that sprout from either side of his head could probably spear through me in a second if he head-butted me with them.

The spit was a knee-jerk reaction to the word 'mine.' I wonder what he meant by that. Does he want me to be like the

lowly demon that just wiped his face, a servant? Will he take me for his own and use my body for pleasure? My gut twinges at the thought, and I pray he only wants me as a servant if he doesn't want me dead.

That thought hadn't crossed my mind yet. *If he doesn't want me dead.* I might have just signed my death warrant, and a small part of me wonders if I should have just agreed to be 'his' and go with my new title.

I've never debated dying before. I've always loved my life, but living a life controlled by a vicious brute seems like more of a death sentence than experiencing the afterlife too soon.

If I can't go back to my old life and be with Tyson, I might as well be dead. I've never loved another as I loved him, and it's these monsters' fault that I was ripped away from my happily ever after with the man of my dreams. I would instead find out what the afterlife has in store for me than live the rest of my life in captivity, wondering if he has found someone else.

The demon inches closer, staring at me like I'm some object that needs to be appraised. I remember that there are other women in this dungeon. The silence and intensity of the demon's stare made me briefly forget my surroundings.

I stare him in the eyes, not backing down. I can't be sure how long we've been in this show-down, but I won't surrender. Part of me wishes the other women would stand up and fight with me, if they did, maybe we would have a chance of getting out of here.

"Should we flog her for her disrespect, Lamian?" One of the guards asks the demon.

Lamian. It's hard to believe the brute has a name that beings down here respect. I guess his stature and propensity for capturing human women make him some sort of god in their eyes.

"No," Lamian says in a dark, husky tone as he steps closer to me.

He towers over me, and his face is only inches from mine. I can smell him, the scent of oak, and a roaring fire. I'm ashamed to admit the bonfire scent makes me feel comfortable in his presence. It's a smell that reminds me of home, even though this is the farthest from home I've ever been.

"No flogging for her," Lamian says darkly as he looks at my body.

I feel gross with his eyes on me. I feel like he can see through my clothes, and although it's not my fault that he's staring at me, I still feel guilty.

"I want her spirit intact." He grins and turns from me as he walks down the dungeon hallway. "Take her to my chambers...." He pauses as he turns to look at me. "And make sure she's comfortable."

An evil grin crosses his face, and I look at the guards with wide eyes. I back up into the cell and shake my head.

"No!" I scream. "You're not taking me!"

The guards wrestle with me and grab my arms, one on each side of me. I try to kick them as I continue screaming and trying to resist the guards' grasp. I look at the women in their cells, staring at me as I'm walked down the hallway.

"Don't let them break you," I shout as the guards tighten their grasp. "You have to fight them! Let me go!"

I kick one of the guards and hit him in the shin. He drops his grasp and moves his hands to his leg as he groans. The other guard turns to me and smacks me across the face. I briefly wince and cover the face with my hand before turning back and trying to punch him.

The guard I kicked grabs my arm and wrestles it behind my back. He puts me in a chokehold, and I grasp at his arm as I feel my airway begin to close.

"Cooperate, or Lamian won't be so generous."

Generous, what a crock of shit. Unfortunately, I don't feel like dying today, so I tap his arm and hunch over as I try to

catch my breath. Before I'm able to, they continue to drag me out of the dungeon.

They close the door behind us, and I look up at a gold and red-carpeted staircase. They lead me up, and I take a second to survey my surroundings. We enter a large room with multiple hallways spanning through it. The walls are lined with large portraits of demons in luxurious robes that look similar to Lamian but older.

I look at the tables sitting at the end of each hallway. There are large glass boxes that contain gorgeous sparkling stones. I quickly realize I'm not in the presence of a weak and low-caste demon. These beings are far more formidable and powerful than I thought.

I am carried through a long hallway and see a large red door at the end of it. I struggle with the guards and try to kick them again before one pulls me close to him and leans close to my ear.

“You want another beating?” he growls.

I roll my eyes and purse my lips. I would rather not get backhanded again, and seeing the extensive layout of this castle makes me doubtful that I will find a way out.

The guards open the giant red door and throw me inside before closing it. My body slams the cold, tiled ground, and I hear a locking noise from behind me. I stand up and rush to the door, banging my fists on it.

“Let me out!” I scream as my eyes begin to water. “Please! You don't know what you're doing!”

I continue to plead at the top of my lungs even though I know it's hopeless. After a few minutes, my hands begin to swell, my voice cracks when I scream, and I stop pleading.

Sinking to the floor, I lean against the door and look at the chambers. There is an oversized couch in front of me with two end tables on either side, and books are stacked on them, with titles like “*Demonology Volume 34*” and “*Torture Tactics In Battle.*”

I debate opening the torture book and getting ideas on how to turn my luck around, but I'm curious about what else is here. I stand up and dust my pants off as I walk toward the center of the room.

Before me is a large bedroom with a canopy bed. The sheets and canopy blankets are red, black, and gold, and flaming torches barely illuminate the room. To my left is a luxurious bathroom, and I walk into it and look at myself in the mirror.

My hair is tangled from being thrown around, and the red spot on my face from being hit hides some of my freckles. I cross my arms, noticing the cold temperature of the room as I look at the stainless bathroom, seeing nothing of interest.

I walk back into the main room and look in front of me. There is a giant closet on the other side of the main room. I walk into it and look around at the robes and outfits hanging on the walls. I wonder how much the materials cost as I run my fingers over them.

I smell Lamian on the clothing, close my eyes and wince. When he instructed the guards to take me to his chambers, I could tell that he had one thing on his mind. I know I'm not here to serve him dinner and rub his feet, I'm here as a play toy, and the thought makes me feel disgusting.

I walk around the chambers with my eyes peeled for anything that can help me escape or kill Lamian. There's a slim chance I can get out of here and return to Tyson, but I'm willing to risk that and try. Otherwise, I'll never forgive myself.

Books can't help me, but they seem to be the only things laid out in the room. I was hoping for a secret weapons room hidden in the wall, but I couldn't find any levers to pull or books that lead to a secret passageway.

Curiously, I continue to read the titles lining the tables. He seems to be very invested in wealth, power, and torture. I don't know what I expected from a demon, but it wasn't this.

I walk back to the couch and sit on it, staring at the red door with a scowl. I want him to step in and notice that my spirit hasn't broken, but it's also not alive for him to take. I think of various moves I can use to take him down when he enters as the minutes, or maybe hours, pass by me.

I'm fighting for more than myself. Taking the demon down is also for Tyson. I wonder what he thinks I did or where I went when I was taken. I hope he's alright, and I need to find him and tell him I didn't leave on purpose. I can't let him live the rest of his life thinking I left him willingly.

I hear footsteps approach the door, shoes clattering on the cold tiles. I stand from the couch, uncross my arms, and put my hands on my hips. I want to be ready for anything, even if I can't fight off the beast, and he will get what he wants from me.

The lock clicks on the door, and I brace myself, inhaling deeply as I remember the moves I came up with while sitting in silence. I won't stay here, locked in a castle like a damsel and forced to have sex with a demon. I am much more than that, and Lamian is about to find that out for himself.

LAMIAN

“Are you quite sure you want *that* one?” Volezimir provides a cloth to clean my face from the human’s foul bodily fluids, making a face as though I’ve decided to adopt a particularly unsuitable pet.

I suppose it’s as apt a description as anything else.

“I liked the one towards the back,” he volunteers. “The one with the black hair.” Then, realizing we’re in public, he hastily adds, “My lord.”

I glare at the zonak guarding the cell, daring him to say anything about my taste in servants or human women. He doesn’t take the bait, lowering his eyes to his feet. A pity, as I’d rather been looking forward to a fight.

“Let us prepare for my future bride’s arrival.”

Volezimir sighs. “Yes, my lord.” Then, “Are you quite—”

“I know my own mind,” I snap.

Volezimir follows me upstairs in silence until we’re at my wing of the castle, and I make no move to advance any form of conversation. He’s a good servant, perhaps even a friend, but I can’t overindulge him.

Properly chastened, he waits until my grand doors close upon us in my residence before he finally speaks.

“I apologize,” he says, lips stiff. “I did not mean to imply that you selected the wrong woman.”

“Imply,” I mutter. “You didn’t mean to *imply*. And you may speak plainly. Please. You’re making my ears bleed.”

Much has been said about my servant, Volezimir, but what he lacks in sophistication, he makes up for incompetence. I don’t need a servant who will lick my boots and tell me I’m marvelous—I already know I am.

I need a servant who can scare the rest of my staff into line, and delegate without breathing a word to me. With Volezimir, I have all that and more. He’s no mindless zonak. He’s a volvath, and had he not suffered a grievous injury in his youth, he’d be an able warrior. In order to make up for his lack of service in war, his father offered him to mine as a house servant.

Although I will never tell him this, I’m lucky to have him.

“Bring me the finest repast,” I demand.

“She’ll be happy enough with gruel,” Volezimir counters, but he growls at one of the kitchen servants and he gets to work with a yelp. “They feed them scraps in there.”

“Which is why she’ll be astounded by the selection available to her here.” I’ve already formed a perfect plan for seduction. The vicious gleam in the human’s eye looked pragmatic, so I have no doubt a sumptuous feast will win her stomach over. “And have my clothes pressed and ready in my chambers. I need the black shirt, you know the one. With the pants I like.”

My charms will win the rest of her over, and I plan to display them prominently.

A woman with fiery passion needs to be treated like kindling for a fire. Teased and gently stoked until she reaches the highest flames of desire.

I am good at this, as any matron will attest.

Now, could I beat the shit out of her and gain her compliance? Of course. But then what will I have? A woman with her spirit beaten out of her will be just as useful as a zonak for a head servant. I need someone with fire, someone who my father will believe I can marry.

He knows me too well to think I'll be satisfied with a cowering, simpering creature. No, despite Volezimir's reservations, I have chosen the perfect woman for my scheme.

Satisfied with my plan, I retreat to my chambers where Volezimir has already laid out my clothes. The shirt falls open with a deep, plunging neckline, and my pants fit so tightly I nearly need magic to pull them over the muscles in my thighs.

With satisfaction, I take my time looking myself over and arranging my hair so that it frames my horns and ears just so.

"Dinner is prepared, my lord," Volezimir calls out on the other side of the door. He pauses. "Do you need help with the —"

"No." But I'm pleased that he anticipated the possibility I might need assistance fitting into my clothes. I've been more active lately, and my body is showing the fruits of my labor. Of course, all of these hunts and battles have done little to distract from the sting of Rej'thorek becoming our father's favorite or the humiliating loss of Piper.

The thought of it curls my lips into an involuntary snarl, but I shift my lips into a grin instead. It's time to start celebrating—my plan is in motion. Soon the sting of my father's disapproval will be nothing but a distant memory.

I follow Volezimir down to the formal dining room and give it a casual inspection. It doesn't need more than that—Volezimir has done well, as always. My chefs have produced a meal that would rival a full royal banquet. An assortment of breads, meat, and vegetables fills the table. It's enough to feed a dozen of her kind, probably more.

And the table has been decorated lavishly, with only the finest plates and goblets. Created by magic, they do more than just hold food or drink. They evoke the pleasure of a good meal. Every item on the table hums with the power of the magic that created it, and only the finest soz'garoth are worthy enough to summon items for a royal household.

The human will surely fall over herself to see it. Nothing from the dungeons or even her sad little planet can possibly

compare.

I can envision it now—her gasp of amazement. The slow moan as she savors a tender morsel of roast tenderloin. Her incredulous glance at the generous expanse of my muscular chest—how could she be so lucky, she'll wonder to herself. Why, she'll probably bring herself right to my lap, eager to thank me for saving her from a lifetime of imprisonment.

This is going to be a very fine deal, indeed.

I take my seat at the head of the table. “You may show her in.”

No sooner have I spoken the words than the doors slam open. Wine goblets and fine metal platters shake, and I have to cast magic from both hands in order to keep them from crashing to the floor.

“Let me *go*,” she snarls.

The harried guards, who look like they've just fought the battle of their lives, comply. They practically throw her into the room, where she skids to a stop on her well-worn knees.

With a defiant shake of her head, the woman clears her fiery hair from her delicate face and glowers at me. If this human had a speck of magic in her, she might very well burn me with a look like that.

Just wait until she sees the food.

“You will find I'm a generous master,” I say, gesturing expansively to the magnificent table set before us. “You may eat your fill.”

The woman springs to her feet with grace and makes her way to the table. She stands, clearly in shock at the abundance I've provided her. She's so overwhelmed, she can't even sit.

“Please,” I insist. “Help yourself.”

Her lips twitch into a smile. “You're too kind, sir.”

As she speaks, her hand clutches the knife.

In two steps, she's advanced towards me, knife arcing directly toward my heart. Of course, I easily dodge, but she

isn't the least bit dissuaded from her attack.

I can't help but laugh, delighted. My biggest fear in dealing with humans is that they would be boring, and this scrap of a woman is certainly anything but dull. She thrusts with hate in her eyes so pure it makes my heart thrum.

"You think this is funny?" She aims for my throat. I lightly parry her blow, nudging her elbow with a soft touch and twisting so that I'm behind her. "I hope you're laughing when I cut out your organs and serve them to you."

"How poetic."

She thrusts again, and again I twist. A slight nudge here, some quick footwork there, and soon her chest is heaving with exhaustion. Perhaps I take a moment too long studying her chest and the way it heaves, because she turns one more time towards me and this time I dodge too late.

She doesn't come close to stabbing me, of course. She never had a chance. But my plan to tire her out falls to pieces when I see that she's bleeding.

"That's enough," I order.

My stern voice has been known to make grown demons quiver in fear, but she doesn't so much as blink. Impossibly, she goes to attack me again, heedless of the fact that her hand is raining blood down on a perfectly good soup.

She's going to hurt herself if I don't stop her.

Like I should have done at the start of this, I grab hold of her wrists. She fights, of course, but she soon realizes that all of this has been a game for me. Her kicks might be powerful for her kind, but when she takes a knee to my groin, all I do is shake my head.

"Do you ever listen to what you're told?" Annoyance finally bleeds into my words, but I've every right to be upset. She shouldn't have picked up a knife if she didn't know how to use it. Now she's bleeding all over my fine shirt.

And she's *still* got the knife in a death grip.

Fine.

I walk until we reach the wall and shove her against it. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough that we both feel the wall jolt against her shoulders.

“Let it go before you cut yourself again.”

“I’d rather bleed than spend one more minute with you.”

“Is that so?”

My hands tighten slowly, increasing pressure until she finally gasps and the knife clatters to the floor. Finally, anger flares in my chest. How dare she make me resort to violence? I never wanted this.

Bitterly, I think that I never wanted *any* of this. For a brief moment, I’d held hope that a fake union with a human woman might not be depressingly dull, but it seems this woman has other plans.

Smoothly, as though he’s nothing more than a fixture of the room, Volezimir appears and sweeps away the blade, plucking all other sharp objects from the table.

Fantastic. We’ll both have to tear meat with our teeth. Perhaps that’s how she likes to eat back on her feral, fetid planet.

Her green eyes glare up at me, as furious as they were when I first saw her in the prison. My plan for a smooth seduction seems to have gone awry.

No matter.

If she somehow doesn’t find my form pleasing, it matters little in the grand scheme of things. I can always find someone else to bed, and I’m not eager to house a palace full of grubby, half-human brats.

All I need is a woman who wants to be Queen and is willing to leave me the fuck alone. Compared to prison, I have no doubt she’ll comply. I’m about to offer her the deal of a lifetime. She’ll have to be an utter fool not to accept, and this woman might be half wild, but she’s certainly no fool. In fact, with the haughty arrogance in her stare, she almost looks regal already.

I lean down until our noses almost brush, until I can feel the rapid burst of her breaths against my lips.

“Now are you ready to listen?”

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JUNE

My body hits the wall, and shock races through me. I wasn't expecting him to have this kind of force or intelligence. Aren't demons supposed to be brutish and stupid? His reaction time to my trying to fight him off was incredible, making me worry I might have less chance of escaping him than I thought.

As I breathe heavily and wince from his grasp on my wrists, I realize he overpowers me, not just physically, but on a mental level also. He has no empathy and can do whatever he wants without thinking of values and morals. This might be the first time I have ever thought my humanity could be a weakness.

His nose touches mine, and I want to buck at him and headbutt him. I know that'll do no good with the horns that spring from his head, but I'm trying to think of any way to get out of this.

I look at his legs and try to kick him, but he moves back quickly and laughs as he presses my wrists harder into the wall. Pressing his body weight into me, he pushes my legs apart and stands in between them, where I can't kick him again.

Feeling him this close to me makes me forget I need to fight. The thoughts fade from my mind, and I begin to forget about the blood dripping down my arm. His scent is intoxicating, and I wonder if it's possible to get high off

someone's smell alone or if he spiked me with a drug somehow.

I feel the warmth of his body pressed against mine, and I almost want to be more defiant so that he doesn't stop. Shamefully, I want more, his dark stare and grip on my wrists aren't enough.

No, June, what the fuck? I think as I try to shake the feelings from my mind. He pulls away from my face slightly, and I move my wrists slightly to make him come back. He snarls in my face, and I try to hold back a smirk.

The fear does something to me that I can't explain. It's almost like my body is *enjoying* the rush he's sending through me, which only makes me feel more guilty. I shouldn't like how close he is or that he wants me as his sex doll.

I shove the thoughts down and look back into his eyes intensely. I need to focus on getting out of here, not on how impressively he pinned me against this wall and how hard he's grasping onto my wrists.

"I'm not going to be your sex slave," I tell him firmly.

He quickly moves one of his hands over my wrists and pins them above me. Chuckling, he uses his other hand to brush my hair out of my face lightly. I try to turn my head away, but he places his thumb on my chin and forces me to face him.

"Would you rather be my Queen?" His voice lowers as he caresses my cheek and looks down at my body.

His Queen? I think as I feel shivers run up my spine from his touch. A vision races through my mind of living in this castle with him. I wonder what life would be like as a demon's Queen.

An image of Tyson erases that vision almost immediately. I see his bright blue eyes sparkling as he laughs at one of my dumb jokes or the way he spins me around when we dance in my living room. All the small moments with him that I never thought held much weight flood back to me. I have to get back

to him, and I won't sell out my body for demonic luxury, that's insane.

Then, thoughts of the imperfections at home flutter through me. Having to hang up my clothes to dry when it's windy outside, money troubles taking a toll on my friendships and relationship, and working long hours just to feel underappreciated by a boss who you're terrified you'll become.

I would never have to worry about money again, and I would have power and have to do nothing but hold the title and sleep with this beast to gain it. Faking orgasms isn't that bad, I've done it before, and a sick part of me wonders if I would even have to fake them with him, considering my chaotic evil side is revealing itself.

Then again, with each faked orgasm and piece of money I inherit from the opportunity comes a loss of dignity. I wonder how long I could live superficially until I hate myself.

I'm surprised that I'm even considering his offer. I've never been one to take on roles for selfish and materialistic means, but I guess I'm not as impassive as I thought. In contemplation, I worry that my silence might be mistaken for an agreement.

"You would love that, wouldn't you?" I say as Lamian slowly releases his grip on me with a grin.

As he steps away, I put my arms down and look at my hand. The blood is still running, but it has slowed. He bends down and picks up the dagger on the floor, shaking it at me menacingly before setting it on the table and standing in front of it with his arms crossed.

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," he chuckles. "Is it my *dream* to have a human woman as my Queen or sex object? Absolutely not. Do you know how many matrons roam the noble courts around here that are begging for my attention? They certainly have...." He pauses as he looks at my body. "More appealing features than you do, and their names hold power."

“Then why are you asking me?” I grimace.

“You....” He begins as he walks toward me. “Don’t get to ask the questions here.”

Part of me wants to try to hit him so he’ll corner me again. I don’t know if the fear or the adrenaline is bringing out this insane part of me, but I’m not sure I like it.

“This is a great opportunity, you know.” He smiles as he circles the couch and motions for me to sit on it.

I hold my hand and look at the door, debating making a run for it before I hear him ticking his tongue on the top of his mouth. I look at him, and he grins.

“You’re quite ambitious, aren’t you? Thinking you can really get out of this?”

“I already gave you my answer,” I respond darkly.

“But think of all the opportunities, um....” He waves his hand and looks at me as if he’s asking for my name.

“June,” I say suddenly.

My answer shocks me. Why would I tell him my name? Getting to know this beast and having him learn more about me doesn’t help my escape plans.

“June....” He repeats my statement slowly as he looks at me.

I swear I see something flicker through his eyes. It doesn’t seem like anything predatory, but more awe. I wonder if a human can have power over a monster like this. If it is, I’ll figure out how to use it to my advantage.

He taps the back of the couch again, and I walk over and sit down, keeping my eyes fixated on the door in front of me. I look to my right and see the dagger on top of the stack of books. He picks it up and walks around in front of me, twirling it against his palm lightly.

“Anyway....” He holds his arms out to the sides and smiles. “The opportunities. Not only will you have the chance to live in an immaculate castle like this, but servants will tend

to your every need. You can stay in bed all day if you want to while others run your errands or go out on the town if you'd rather. Anywhere will let you in for free with your new title, and I'm sure the welcoming gifts you get from the store owners will be nothing short of prestigious. Also..." He begins pacing in front of me, shaking the knife as he speaks, and looks at the floor.

"You're quite the looker." He shrugs as he looks at me and continues pacing. "With some fine robes and dresses, I'm sure we could elevate you a notch or two."

I roll my eyes but remain silent. Part of me is listening and picturing the life he's outlining, and the other half is still fixated on my life beyond that door.

"You can have whatever you want to eat cooked for you on demand. We have multiple chefs here, some of the best in the city. You name it, they'll cook it. Even if you can't name it but describe what you want, it will be brought to you on a gold platter."

I scoff. "You think I'd sleep with the likes of *you* for a home cooked meal?"

He stops pacing and looks at me with intensity. Dropping the knife to the floor, he rushes over to me and picks me up again. I try to battle his grasp, but he overpowers me again as he shoves me against the wall.

He places his palm in mine and sinks pressure onto my cut. I gasp and look at it, the wound reopening and blood dripping down my arm again. I try to squirm, but he lifts me off the floor while looking at me with an evil expression.

"Please," I gasp.

"The likes of *me*, darling, are royalty. You're considered a dead animal on the side of the road compared to me. No one would bat an eye if you died, and they certainly wouldn't stop to hold a funeral for you. I suggest you think more before you speak to me."

"Please," I say through heavy breaths as he jams his hand deeper into my cut. "I just want to go back to Protheke."

“That option was cast out when you spit in my face,” he snarls while smiling.

I shake my head and push my weak pleading down within me. I need him to continue to believe I think I’m on the same level as him. Physical intimidation and strategy to escape didn’t work for me, so manipulation is all I have left. I get my fire back and look him dead in the eyes as I smirk.

“You can take my body if you want,” I whisper through my grin. “Fuck me in every position you can think of, you can even convince yourself I like what you do to me if you want, but you’ll never have my mind or spirit that you want so *desperately*.”

His eyes flutter back and forth between each of mine. His grin fades, and he pulls back from me as he lifts his chin. He raises his hands on the wall, and I feel my arms stretch as I’m lifted farther off the ground. His gaze turns cold and evil as he releases my hands, and I hit the ground.

I feel the hard floor smack against my torso as I roll over and groan. It’s difficult to pretend to be strong when being attacked mentally and physically by a supernatural being, but I refuse to let him think I’m weak. That would make this too easy for him. If he is going to take me as his sex doll, or his Queen, I will make it the most challenging thing he’s ever done.

LAMIAN

I stare at her in disbelief, wondering if I heard her wrong. Or, perhaps, she heard me wrong. Does she understand what I just offered her?

She can't really mean it when she says she'd rather return to Protheka, can she? What could be so important or interesting in Protheka, when she could have anything her heart desires here? Ti'lith is far superior to anything Protheka has to offer. And she'd be at my right hand as the Queen!

There must be some mistake, some confusion. She is only a human. Perhaps she's a bit slower in comprehension than I realized.

"What on Protheka is worth giving up all that I offer you?" I ask. "Perhaps they do not have Queens in Protheka. You understand you'd be beside me in a position of great importance? I mean, I'll have the power, of course, but you can use it to your advantage as well. Anything you like, as far as your imagination can stretch."

I watch her face carefully, waiting for the moment where understanding dawns. But it never comes. It seems she understands what I mean. She just, bafflingly, does not care.

"Being your Queen will not give me what I want. What I want is on Protheka," she snaps. "You wouldn't understand, anyway."

"Try me," I offer. "Perhaps we can find a solution that will give you what you seek here."

She shakes her head firmly, not even entertaining the notion. I feel myself heat with anger and barely resist the urge to shake some sense into her.

The only possible explanation I can think of is that she's simply afraid to be here, somewhere new and unfamiliar. Protheka may be trash, but it's the trash she calls home. Is she so unadventurous that she'd turn down a once-in-a-lifetime advancement because she fears change?

It's a possibility. Yet, as she stares at me, her eyes shooting sparks and a hint of a threat on her lips, it's hard to imagine she fears anything. But if that's not the problem, then what else could it be?

A little voice in the back of my head speaks up then, reminding me I could simply pick another female. A more compliant, more agreeable one. There's bound to be one with an ounce of sense who would gladly agree to my plan, without all the headache this female brings.

I entertain the idea for only the briefest moment. Something deep in my gut rejects the notion almost immediately. I don't want to send this one back. I want to win her support. I want to coax her, whatever it takes, into seeing things my way.

A part of me is concerned at the thought. Why am I picking a female who requires extra effort when another would be less challenging? Does she already have too strong of a hold over me, if I'm willing to meet her demands when she was supposed to meet mine? A worry springs up that this already seems to be going off my original plan. Am I being careless if I don't correct course now?

I reflect on it long enough to confidently decide I am making the right choice. She may not be exactly what I envisioned, but she's better. Not because I like this pathetic human or anything. It's a perfectly logical, rational choice, calculated and well-thought out.

Her attitude needs some adjusting, but my father would never believe a more docile woman could win me, anyway. She has a Queenly air that is perfect for my ambitions. I just

need to get a handle on the leash I keep her on – long enough that she doesn't bite, short enough that she stays under my control.

I pour us both a glass of wine while I mull this over. “What if I promise to return you to Protheka? You convince my father that we are a real couple and that you can't wait to bear lots of my children.”

She cuts me off before I can finish the thought. “I don't want to have your children!” she gasps, ears turning red. I should be annoyed by her rudeness, but her spirited rebuttal is almost fascinating to me. It's another reason why my father will love her – she certainly seems to have the vigor to bear lots of hypothetical, healthy children.

“You don't have to actually have them,” I explain calmly, handing her wine glass over. I take a sip from my own before I continue. “I just need him to believe that I'm settling down, ready to fulfill my duties. Once he sees that I have a partner and am preparing for children, I'll be able to win back his favor. Then once I have his approval, I won't need you anymore.”

I'll most likely just tell him that she was infertile and make something up. Tell him I disposed of her since I couldn't keep a mate unable to bear children. He'll be even more convinced of how responsible I am, impressed by how I prioritized the bloodline over my mate.

He doesn't have to know that ‘disposing of her’ means sending her back home to Protheka. And since that's all she really wants, everyone will come out a winner.

She stares into her cup of wine, refusing to meet my gaze. I can tell she's listening, though. Finally, she lifts her face and narrows her eyes skeptically at me.

“So I just tell your father we're planning to have children for a while, and you'll send me back home to Protheka if I do that? That's all?”

“That's all,” I promise her. “Just pretend you're my mate and convince him that I'm settling down and being

responsible.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?” she asks suspiciously.

I sigh patiently. “You have my word.”

She scoffs at the remark. “What use is the word of a demon?” she demands.

At this, I feel my anger boil over again. How dare she insinuate that I am untrustworthy! I am the son of the King, a member of the royal family. “My word is my bond. You have, perhaps, had limited experiences with lesser demons than me in the past. As you are just a human woman, I’ll choose to let your ignorance go for the time being.”

I try hard to keep my voice level, though I hear my irritation spilling over a bit as I speak. It frustrates me to be questioned, but losing my temper surely won’t persuade her of my case.

“Some demons do enjoy exercising their creativity in the deals they make. It can be a challenge of the minds to explore the possible loopholes brought about by wordplay and quibbling over semantics,” I admit.

“That is, however, beneath a demon such as myself,” I continue, looking her firmly in the eye. “Especially when dealing with a human woman, who can’t possibly match my wit anyway. I promise no foolery. I will play straight with you, as long as you promise to play straight with me as well.”

She swirls her glass of wine, looking almost sullen. One would think she would feel better if I admitted I was a liar, for reasons I can’t even begin to understand. Despite her moody expression, there’s a glimmer in her eyes that tells me she is deep in thought.

She is considering it. I feel a strange sensation in my chest, bubbling at the thought. I clear my throat quickly, trying to push the feeling down. Whatever it is, it’s so bizarre it’s almost unpleasant.

“Why is it you want to go back to Protheka, anyway?” I can’t help but ask.

Her eyes flicker up, not quite meeting mine as she looks at a spot over my head. The morose expression on her face slides away, replaced by an almost dreamy one.

“My family is there,” she admits quietly.

I flinch. I hadn't thought about that. Is she saying she already has children of her own? A mate, elsewhere? The idea is extremely distasteful to me, even though I suppose for all intents and purposes it would not matter for my plans.

“Have you already been sullied?” I find myself asking anyway.

Her ears redden again, and her moony gaze drops to glare at me, face scrunching in anger. “Don't be disgusting! Are you really asking me to sleep with you, is that what this is about? You need a pure virgin to deflower?”

“I-I-no,” I return, shocked by my own flustered stuttering. I am never the weak, stammering, ineffectual type. Her question caught me off guard, more than I would have expected. I instantly regret bringing up the subject at all, despite my inescapable desire to know the truth.

“No, it's not...I just wanted to know if you were already married,” I finally conclude. I gulp my glass of wine hurriedly, pouring another glass.

She's silent for a long pause. Then she downs her own glass. Taking a few steps closer, she hands the empty glass to me for a refill.

Our hands brush as I take the glass from her. For a moment, our eyes lock. Then she jerks her arm back, quickly shifting her gaze to avoid mine.

“No,” she says. Her voice is careful and deliberate. “No, I am not married. But I do have people waiting for me on Protheka. I want to go back. I want to be with them.”

I set my own drink on the table to refill hers. Our fingers graze again when I pass the drink back. This time, I close my free hand over top of hers, lightly sandwiching her fingers between mine on the glass.

She does not pull away. Instead, her eyes lift to meet mine. I stare intently into hers, watching as two red spots appear on either cheekbone. She holds her breath, watching me with a mixture of apprehension and interest.

“Do we have a deal?” I ask in a low, urgent voice, my fingers still splayed over hers.

An emotion I do not recognize flickers across her eyes. She opens her lips to answer but no sound comes out.

Or perhaps I just cannot hear her, over the sudden buzzing in my ears.

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JUNE

Lamian awaits an answer with an anxious look across his face. I'm almost convinced that his future really does lay in my compliance. Part of me feels just an ounce of sympathy for him, but it's not much when I remember being taken away from Tyson.

It hurts to think of him being lost without me, not having a clue where I've gone. I'm sure the last place he expects me to be is at a dinner table with a fucking demon Prince.

I give Lamian's offer another consideration but only because I have nothing more to lose. What more do I have right now other than my body? Everything and everyone that I love is all the way back home, on Protheke.

If I say no to him, he'll just toss me back into that cell with everyone else, with no hope of escape. If I say yes to his ridiculous offer, then I may have a chance at getting home.

He could be disguising the truth for all I know but it's the only shot I have at getting out of this forsaken place. I see Tyson's face in my mind as I weigh out my options.

If this ends up to be one massive lie on account of Lamian, then at least I can perish in that prison cell saying I did my best to get back to you Tyson.

My eyes meet Lamian's, seeing them dilate in anticipation of an answer. He leans forward, resting his chin atop his folded hands.

"I'll do it."

He smiles victoriously, standing and making his way over to a drawer where he pulls out another knife. Its handle is curved and encrusted with silver and red jewelry. One side of the blade was serrated, while the tip was so sharp that one could feel themselves being cut by merely looking at it.

“Excellent, I knew the offer was too good for you to pass up,” he smirked. “Now then, let’s make this agreement official.”

He came closer, extending his hand out for me, palm side up. Using the knife, he carves a small incision in the middle. Blood quickly seeps out, covering the entirety of his palm.

Seeing it instantly takes me back to the moment I was ripped away from Tyson, remembering his bloody, outstretched hand reaching toward me as the demons carried me away.

“Need... Do I need to do the same?” I ask Lamian, distracted by my momentary flashback.

“Yes, are you ready?”

I show him my palm.

“Do it,” I tell him.

He takes my hand, stroking it gently. His eyes narrow as his fingers slide over mine. Is he admiring my hands? For a second, I forget he’s a demon, relishing in him studying parts of my body.

There’s a small burst of pain when he makes the cut, quickly dulling down into a numbness. A small drop of blood in the shape of a teardrop runs down my forearm.

“Shake my hand,” commands Lamian. “There, our pact to one another is sealed,” he says after our handshake.

I look at my palm once more, coated in a mix of our blood. In an instant, it dries up and disappears, as well as the incision made from the blade.

Lamian hears my gasp as he walks back to his seat, looking over his shoulder.

“I can only imagine how thrilled you must feel, knowing your human blood is mingling with that of a demon Prince,” he tells me. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel anything watching the corners of his mouth curl up into a smile.

I couldn’t help but agree with him, feeling a warming sensation spread across my face and neck. It was like a hot spring, sultry like him, and wet like...

No, snap out of it. Sure, I think he’s attractive but I had to focus on Tyson and the prospect of getting home to him. After all, he’s what’s going to get me through all of this. Only when we’re reunited will all be right once more.

“Okay then...” I mutter when I’m done marveling at my hand. “How is this whole facade going to work?”

“If this is going to be executed without a flaw, it is vital for you to study the ways of an impeccable demon escort,” he explains.

“Study?” I ask. “I didn’t know there was going to be a final exam of some sort,” I joke.

“I’m glad I amuse you,” he grunted sternly. “But it is essential that you do. King Asmodeus holds nothing but the highest expectations not only of each of his sons, but for the mates they choose.”

The smile off of my face vanishes.

“You can’t afford to fail June, for if you do then it will spell the end of us both,” he affirms.

The thought of having to memorize the ways of being the perfect mate fills me with a mix of dread and boredom but I immediately remind myself who it’s for.

I’ll do it for you Tyson.

As I agree into delving and mastering the methods of an escort, I suddenly think of why it might be that I haven’t mentioned a word about my love to Lamian.

Should I tell him about Tyson? I don’t know... maybe it would only make him react irrationally. Shuddersome at the

thought of being brought back to the cells, I think of why Lamian chose me in the first place.

It has to be my looks, right? I saw the way his eyes wandered hungrily as he looked at me for the first time. Surely he has to find me attractive, if I tell him about Tyson, it might destroy this opportunity I've been given.

I have to stop overthinking this... the sooner this whole ordeal is done, the sooner I'm back home in Tyson's arms where I belong.

"I'll do what needs to be done. I trust you'll be personally overseeing my progress then?"

"No one else knows about this but you and I."

"Okay, so when does our training start?"

He rises, walking to a nearby bookshelf that stretches even taller than him. From the top shelf, he pulls down perhaps the thickest book I have ever seen.

"Right now," he answers, coming over to me. He drops the book in front of me with a loud bang that makes me flinch. Its impact sends a wave of dust traveling through the air.

"What the fuck is this?"

"That right there is a tome, with everything you need to know about demonic court manners, from how to sit to how to eat like a demon would."

"What? I have to remember every detail in that?" I protest.

"Down to the very last letter."

I gape at the tome, pushing it away. It's so heavy that I have to use both hands.

"No, there's no fucking way I'm going to be able to do that."

"Hmm? And why is that?"

"Can you just send me back to the prison cells? I can't do it," I say in frustration.

The idea of memorizing everything in the tome is too much for me to bear. I throw reasoning out the window, letting go of the possibility I can make it back to Protheka. Besides, Lamian will just dispose of me after he gets what he wants from his father, and I'll be left to rot in the cells. I just don't want to give him the satisfaction.

He stands there rubbing his temples.

"Come on June," he sighs. "You're not thinking straight. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't bring you back now that we've agreed on a deal. Do you know how bad and incompetent that would make me look as a Prince?"

"I don't care about you, all I want is to be back on Protheka, not this fucking place where I've been brought to against my will!" I shout.

He looks down at the ground for a moment, then back at me.

"Look, why don't you cool off for a while? I'm sorry but I can't allow you to go back, it's too late for that now."

Exhausted, I choose silence, shaking my head in disbelief.

"I can see you're tired. If you need rest then use my bed, I'm afraid it's where you'll have to stay at night anyway," he informs me, adding oil onto the raging inferno of a headache blazing inside me.

"I hope you're joking," I hiss. Each pulse of blood within my body only accentuates the throbbing pain. I can feel it prohibiting my ability to be able to think clearly.

"For your sake, I wish I was but we need to get our image correct from the very start. That starts with you sleeping with me," he emphasizes.

Before I can reply, a bell tinkles from the direction of the door to his quarters. I turn around, expecting to see a servant of some sort walking in but no one was there.

"What was that?" I ask.

Lamian's face twists into an expression of indignation.

“For fuck’s sake, why now? The nosy bastards...” he mutters to himself.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“You see, as a Prince of King Asmodeus, you have a lot of eyes and ears on you at any given moment. It’s something I’ve come to grow very tired of over the past few years, so recently I had hired a very skilled sorcerer to conjure a spell over my door.”

“A spell?”

“Yes, one that would allow me to know when there’s someone right outside trying to eavesdrop. They can’t hear it of course,” he explains. “After all, shouldn’t everyone be entitled to a bit of privacy in their own quarters?” he asks.

“Heh, that’s quite rich coming from you,” I retort.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. You don’t agree then?” he asks, looking insulted.

“You speak of privacy yet you shove all of us women into one cell.”

“Hmm,” he utters. “I thought you might appreciate the company,” he laughs.

“Who do you think might be outside?”

He ponders for a moment.

“It must be my brothers, they’re constantly pestering me.”

“Your brothers? Why would they be here? Don’t they have royal business of their own to attend to?” I ask, confused.

“Well of course they have responsibilities,” he answers. “Only they conveniently choose to forget all about them when something I do catches their interest.”

“Well, what have you done?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he replied, gesturing to me. “I’ve only gone and brought a human woman in here with me.”

Not expecting that response, I laugh, trying to conceal it so as not to be heard. I look at the door, imagining a bunch of

demon Princes holding a glass cup to the door, fighting over whose turn it is to hold it.

“They can barely leave me alone as is...” growls Lamian.

Seeing him stressed like I was, I can't help but feel pity for him. I gaze back at the door one more time as an idea sprouts into my mind. I stand up and trot over to Lamian's bed.

“Come here.”

“Why? It's not like they're going to go away anytime soon. They're dedicated, trust me on that one.”

“Well, if they're going to stick around then I guess we'd better make some noise.”

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LAMIAN

I cock my head as I stare at her, wondering what she's trying to do. Although she just made a blood pact with me, she is a firecracker, and I wonder if she's trying to trick me somehow. The only thing worse than her escaping from this castle would be her outsmarting me somehow.

I skeptically walk toward her as I fold my hands behind my back. *She just told me she doesn't want to be a sex object for me, I think as I approach carefully. But now she's making herself a sex object?*

The thought makes my gut twinge. Women have been confusing for ages, but human women are a different breed. At least with demon women, they know what they want, and you can always bet they have a trick or two up their sleeve. With humans, honesty and integrity are valued, something I learned about them in school. It's their greatest weakness, but their understanding can also be ours. It's not easy for demons to identify these qualities since we don't experience them ourselves.

She scoots back on the bed and motions for me to come closer with her finger. I wonder what gives her this power over me. It's a feeling I can't shake, like an irresistible pull toward her that I can't help. I continue to walk forward while she leans forward.

I catch a small glimpse of her breasts beneath her shirt before looking back into her eyes. She looks like a seductress, and I grin as I realize I made the right choice in selecting her

from the others. Still, I must be careful how much I admire her.

Not only could she trick me, but I've also heard of demons who have fallen for human women and lost themselves in the bond. They go insane, forgetting their power and stature. Some have even tried to live everyday human lives with the women they courted, leaving their legacy behind.

Rej'thorek never showed that weakness, at least not on the outside, and I have to ensure to do the same. She's not a *real* bride, she's a display—an object to gain standing in my family. I must remember she is nothing more than a ticket to a higher caste for me.

“If someone is eavesdropping,” she whispers as I step closer. “We should probably make it sound like we're having a, um....” She pauses and uses air quotes as she continues. “A good time in here.”

I would love to make her scream like that. Images flash through my mind of pinning her against the bed and sliding my dick inside her. I want to pull on her hair and make her scream my name. I wonder what her moans will sound like if I give it to her slow and sensually and how wild her screams will be when I fuck her hard and fast.

I look at her lips, full and plump, and wonder how soft they would be around my cock. With her feisty nature, she could take my cock deep in her throat without issue. I even imagine her begging to taste my cum.

My dick gets hard at the thought of it all. As I look at her grinning on the bed, I picture her in various positions. Her ass will look fantastic if I hit it from behind, and I bet she would enjoy being spanked, too. I can see her playing with her clit while she rides me. I assume she's not new to seduction, given how she's speaking to me. I want to know how experienced she really is and take her far beyond that once I get her undressed.

I lean over slightly and pause. I've already pushed her beyond her comfort level today, and I don't want to risk giving her ammunition that will make her want to leave more. She's

intelligent, and if she genuinely wants to find a way out of the castle, she will. I can't take the chance of her escaping, not after the fire I've seen in her soul.

Also, when I do take her for myself, I want to have time to ensure I get to savor every moment. I want to remember how her lips taste, the scent of her hair, and how I make her body curl with pleasure. I have a feeling it'll be an experience that shouldn't be rushed.

The way her bright red hair falls over her shoulders and brings out her green eyes makes it hard for me to restrain myself. She looks like a goddess, even in the rags she's wearing. Moreover, her sensual positioning on the bed makes me feel like she is the one who's trying to proposition me.

What is she doing to me? I think as I stop in front of the end of the bed. I feel entranced by her, almost captivated. This never happens, women have never held dominance or influence over me, until now.

I nod, and she stands up from the bed. I watch as she walks around until she's right in front of me, looking into my eyes with fury. I furrow my brow and cock my head, trying to decipher what has made her so angry.

"What are you doing?" She exclaims as she flinches away from me. "Don't you dare put your hands on me!"

I step backward, confused, as I look at her angry expression. *Women are complicated*, I think as I try to decipher her expression. A second passes before I realize she's role-playing with me. I grin and walk toward her, grabbing her arm tightly.

"There's no need to be so defiant," I coo as I run my fingers down her arm. "I just want to make you feel good."

I can feel goosebumps on her arm as my fingertips brush over it. I find joy in knowing that my touch elicits a physical response from her. My brothers can't see how her body reacts to our role-play, but I'm interested to see how it does as we continue.

She looks at me with fear and anger, and I am impressed with her acting ability. A small part of me still has my guard up, I don't want her to use this role-play facade as a trick to catch me off guard.

“What if I don't want to feel good?” Her face turns from angry to entranced as I look down at her.

The way she asks the question sounds innocent and fearful. I love that she knows exactly what she's doing but pretends she doesn't. Her confidence in her ability to convince my brothers and me that she's inexperienced only turns me on more.

I decide to test her limits. I back her toward the wall and shove her against it hard, hoping my brothers hear her body slam. I don't touch her but keep my body only inches away from hers while we speak.

“I could make you feel pain....” I smack my hands together, creating a loud clap. “Instead of pleasure. Is that what you want instead? Or....” I lower my voice but keep it loud enough for my brothers to hear. “Do you want some of both?”

She smiles at me and raises her eyebrows as she looks at my hands. She lifts her chin quickly, motioning for me to do it again. I clap loudly, and she lets out a loud moan as she closes her eyes. I watch her lips form a perfect 'o' shape and feel my dick harden more as she opens her eyes to look at me.

I'm shocked by her sound and even more turned on by it. How she looks at me is exactly how I pictured she would when I fantasized about fucking her. It's a dazed, primal stare that I've only seen in a woman once before.

She lifts the back of her hand to her mouth and mashes her lips into it, making a kissing sound. She lifts her chin and motions to my hands again. I clap them, and she breaks from her hand and moans louder this time. I do it again, and she continues.

“Oh,” she screams. “Don't stop, please....”

Gently pushing me away, she leans from the wall and walks to the bed. She gets on top of it and motions for me to join her as she continues moaning loudly. I look at her with confusion and a smile as I step onto the bed with her.

“Oh yes, yes!” She begins to jump on the bed while screaming.

I try to stifle my laughter as I watch her. She lifts her arms, beckoning for me to join her, but I shake my head with my eyes wide. This woman really *is* insane. She beckons again, and I roll my eyes as I clap my hands again and jump with her.

“You like that?” I yell as I clap my hands.

“Yes, so much,” she moans as she looks at me with a grin. She stops bouncing and stands on her toes to reach my ear. “Grunt,” she whispers. “Make it sound good.”

Her breath on my ear makes me want to take her right here, but I know I can’t. While I think this entire scene is ridiculous, I have to admit I’m enjoying the absurdity.

I begin grunting along with her moans, and she clasps her hands together and squishes air between her palms, timing the clapping sound with our moans. I must admit, if I weren’t jumping on a bed with her, the sounds would convince me.

I look at her as we continue our act and share a smile with her. We lock eyes, and I feel something pass between us, almost a mutual agreement that we’re both enjoying ourselves. She quickly breaks the moment and returns to moaning, and I smack my hands again.

The charade continues until the alarm chimes again, letting me know whoever was at the door eavesdropping has left. I’ve never been more grateful for an invention than I am for that damned alarm.

We continue to jump and carry on for a few moments until she stops and puts her hands on her knees, hunching over in silent laughter. I do the same and have to wipe a tear from my eye from how hard I’ve been laughing. We breathe heavily and share a glance as we settle down from our experience.

I grunt at her, and she breaks down laughing, lying on the bed as she covers her mouth. I laugh along with her and stand on the bed with my hands on my hips, thinking that might be the most fun I've ever had while being rock-hard at the same time.

“So,” I ask her between heavy breaths. “Did you like the pain or the pleasure more?”

“Oh.” She looks at me with bright eyes as her words flow like velvet. “I loved the combination of both.” She laughs.

I laugh, but secretly I hope she means it. I extend my hand to help her stand back on the bed so I can get her off of it. She takes it, and I help her up as she brushes her hair out of her face with a grin.

I stare at her and feel something ignite inside me. This feeling isn't a physical pull like I feel during sex, and it's not the giddiness of conquering a new sexual partner. I can't explain it, but it intrigues me.

I get off the bed and offer her a hand to help her down. She jumps off with me and holds my gaze for a second before pulling her hand away from mine. I enjoy the fact that she held onto me and looked at me for a little too long, and it scares me that I enjoyed it.

JUNE

Lamian escorts me to my room as we snicker about our act. I'm surprised that a demon can have fun and even laugh. When I first saw him, I saw a stoic, woman-hating monster. Now, I see that demons, even the ones that seem the most intimidating, have more underneath their cold exterior.

We arrive at my door in a parallel hallway to his chambers. He opens a gold-encrusted door and shows me where I'll stay.

"Technically," Lamian begins as he opens the door. "This is still my chambers. The castle's west wing belongs to me, so you're free to roam these two hallways when you have free time. Well..." He pauses and grins at me as he waves his hand. The torches lighting my room begin to burn, and my mouth drops in shock. "*If* you have any free time. You're going to be very busy."

I hear what he says, but the view of the room captures me so much I don't respond. Instead, I look around the room and marvel at the beauty. The walls are stone, and Ivy grows on them to the ceiling. There is another giant canopy bed with white curtains and a beige bedspread.

I walk to the bathroom and notice the same luxurious items I saw in Lamian's room. I look at myself in the mirror and adjust my hair as I gulp, feeling slightly embarrassed that Lamian saw my hair so messy.

"For now," I hear him say from the doorway. "Relax and get some rest. It'll be a while before you can have some more

downtime.”

I walk out and meet him by the doorway. I hate to admit it, but part of me doesn't want him to leave. I don't even feel tired after all that rowdiness.

“What if your brothers try to find me? Won't it be weird if I'm in my own room?” I ask, even though I don't care if they find me. I just want to keep him here for a few more minutes.

“There's an alarm system in this room linked to mine. The second they get close, mine will trigger, and I will come to find you. Oh...” He pauses and walks into the bedroom, motioning for me to follow him.

I follow him and look at him with confusion as he places his hand on one of the stones on the wall. He moves it slightly to the left, and part of the wall opens. I look at it in shock. I knew there was a secret passageway somewhere.

“If you need me in an emergency, this leads to my chambers.” He says with a dark tone. “Also, this is one of your first lessons. Nothing is as it seems here.”

His comment makes me nervous, but I try to hide it. He moves the stone again and walks to the door. I try to think of more questions to get him to stay, but I can't think of any. He nods to me, leaves the room, and closes the door behind him.

I undress and continue to admire my new bedroom. It's much nicer than the dungeons, and I feel slightly giddy before guilt settles in. Am I being a sell-out for enjoying all of this?

As I fight with myself, I crawl into the large bed and wrap the covers around me. I try to go to sleep but keep opening my eyes and looking at the stone he pressed on. I keep hoping he'll return to the room until my fatigue takes over, and I drift off to sleep.

The following day, I'm jolted awake by the sound of rocks shifting. I shoot up in bed and look at the wall to see Lamian grinning and stepping out of the doorway.

“Good morning,” he says lowly.

“Gods,” I say as I rub my face. “You scared me.”

He chuckles. "I'm not quite a god, I'm afraid."

I glare at him, and he walks to the closet across from the bathroom. I had forgotten to check it out when admiring the room last night. He pulls out a red corset dress lined with black lace and throws it on the bed, along with a pair of heels. I laugh as I feel the bones on it.

"This looks incredibly uncomfortable," I protest.

"You better get used to it," he says with a smirk. "This is part of your training. If you're going to be a Queen, you must dress like it."

"But I..."

He shakes his finger at me. "Ah ah, do you want to return to the dungeons?"

I glare at him and sigh. "Fine, but can you at least give me a minute to get changed?"

He bows mockingly. "Anything for you, my Queen."

I roll my eyes as he walks back into the passageway and closes the wall behind him. I climb out of bed and look at the dress, realizing it's quite beautiful despite how scratchy it feels. I slide it on and yawn, wondering what he has planned for us today. If the first thing he has me do is this uncomfortable, what's the next thing going to be?

I walk to the bathroom and fix my hair in the mirror. I'm shocked by how much the corset pushes up my breasts, but this is a demon's world. Tucking a lock behind my ear, I wonder why I'm so concerned with how he sees me. I shake the thought off, put the lock back in front of my face, walk to the wall and knock on it.

The door opens, and I see Lamian smirking at me as he looks at my breasts. I roll my eyes and walk into the passageway, the heels digging into the sides of my feet as they clack on the stone.

I walk into his chambers and stand in front of the couch with my arms crossed. He looks at me with a grin, and I lean

on my hip as I lift one of my feet. There's no way I can walk on these all day.

"What's first?" I ask reluctantly.

"Greetings."

"What? A bow and a curtsy?"

"You got it," he says playfully.

I curtsy, and he laughs at me. I glare at him and throw my arms out to the side.

"Well, what am I supposed to do, then?"

"Right foot behind the left, you did right in front of left."

I groan and do it the way he suggests and fall forward. He darts toward me and catches me before I hit the ground. I hear him chuckling at me and scowl.

"I don't need the mockery," I state negatively.

"Hey," he says gently as he looks down at me, still holding me in his arms. "It's okay. You'll get it."

I'm shocked by his gentleness, and his praise makes me want to try again. I do and get it right this time. He sits on the couch and claps as he reaches for a book.

"Now, keep doing that, and I'm going to read these bios about some of our high court members. You need to know this information for socializing with them...." He pauses and looks at me with a smirk. "And there will be a quiz later, so pay attention."

I exhale slowly and continue to practice curtseying as I listen to him drone on about Lords and Ladies of the court. I try to listen closely, but the shoes are digging into my feet so hard I'm worried they might start bleeding.

"Okay, alright," I say after a few minutes of listening to him. "I need to sit down. These shoes are killing me."

"I know," he says as he flips a page of his book. "That's the point."

"What do you mean?" I ask, irritated at him.

“They’re a size too small on purpose,” he says firmly as he looks at me. “You need to be able to concentrate when there are distractions everywhere. A Queen knows where to turn her focus.”

“Can I *focus* on how annoying you are?”

“You...” Lamian exhales and leans forward on the couch. “Tell me who Lord Rozantoth is courting.”

“Lady Harven, because her mate died recently, and he thinks he has a chance.” I sigh and sit next to Lamian on the couch, surprised I remember the information.

“And, uh...” Lamian scoffs and leans back as he rubs the bridge of his nose. “I forgot, who’s the one person I should never talk to about bylaws?”

I pause and look at the floor. I remember Lamian talking about bylaws, and there is one demon in particular who can drone on about them forever, but he *likes* talking about them.

“Oh!” I snap my fingers and look at him. “Count Yarunn. He hates the law, and you’ll be on his shit list, which normally includes teasing by other court members for following the rules. It’s a great way to lose status immediately if they think you succumb completely to demon law.”

Lamian nods his head and stands before me. He curtseys, and I roll my eyes as I smile. He’s funny when he’s not treating me like I’m ten classes lower than him. I feel giddy and hope he asks me another question so I can impress him.

Something inside my mind snaps. Guilt overtakes me. I’m laughing and wanting praise from a demon when the man I love is waiting at home, probably worried about me. I’m in a castle in luxurious gowns and practicing curtseys, not trying to find a way to get back to Tyson. I have to get my mind right, I can’t let Lamian distract me anymore.

“Very good,” he remarks as he sits next to me. I nod thanks and lean back to breathe before his voice startles me. “Ready for the next activity?”

“Activity?” I sigh. “You mean curse?”

Julian laughs. “No. I mean activity. I think you’ll like this one.”

He stands up and opens the door to his bedroom. I look at him, confused. I was sure I wouldn’t leave his wing until I learned everything I needed to know. He motions for me to exit, and I do, wobbling on my heels uncomfortably. I hear him laugh behind me, and I turn to look at him.

He leans toward his closet and pulls out a pair of flat shoes. I look at them like I see water in the middle of a hot desert. I take off the dreaded heels and give them to him as I snatch the flat shoes, glaring at him.

“It’s about time,” I remark as I slide into the comfortable flats.

“You pass a test, you get a reward.” He smirks as he closes the door behind us.

He leads me down the hallway and into the main room where the hallways meet. I glance down the steps to the dungeon and wonder how the other women are doing. I wonder what he wants with them as we continue walking.

As we continue, I try to catch glimpses of the various hallways. I hope to see some side entrance I can use to escape, but the castle is too big to see from the path we’re taking through more narrow hallways.

Food lines the table, covering almost every inch of it. I’ve never seen a display like it, and my stomach growls. He pulls out a chair for me, and I sit down and notice there is a book where my plate should be. It’s titled “*Etiquette and Protocol of the Demonic Court.*” I lean back in the chair but quickly recompose myself, I don’t want to whine too much.

“Read chapter one,” he commands while he serves himself food next to me.

I look at the delicious meats on his plate and grimace with jealousy. I assume this is another ‘the Queen must know where to place her attention’ thing and read the chapter reluctantly.

The demonic court is complicated. When being served by someone of a higher nobility than you, you must bow your

head and place your hands together in your lap. If someone of a lesser status is serving you, you keep your hands on the table and don't nod to retain a position of power.

I notice Julian serving me as I read the book, but I pretend not to notice. The sooner I finish this chapter, the better. I'm halfway through when I sigh, and he takes the book from me.

"You've done enough," he says gently. "Have some food, please."

I put my hands together and nod my head with a mocking expression on my face. He chuckles, and we eat in silence, mostly because I can't stop shoveling food in my face. I haven't eaten since yesterday, and I swear I can eat every dish on this table in one sitting.

Once I'm full, he hands me the etiquette book. I take it reluctantly and flip open to the page about silverware placement. I rest my head on my hand and begin to read before he laughs.

"It's time for a break," he says with a grin as he stands from the table and exhales. "Have you ever been flying?"

"Flying?" I scoff. "On what?"

I hear a crackling and scoot my chair away from him as the sound increases. He inhales deeply, and wings sprout from his back quickly, sending me almost falling to the floor from shock. They are red and glittering in the sunset from the dining room windows. I place my hand over my chest and laugh in amazement as I take him in.

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LAMIAN

I revel in the shocked look on June's face as I flex my wings. I look over my shoulder and admire their glittering in the sunlight. I try to remember the last time I used them, but it's been years.

Part of me is surprised she isn't scared. She's been put through the wringer today and still seems excited and enthusiastic. Standing from her chair, she lowers her hand from her mouth and looks at me in awe.

A rush of power flows through me from her amusement. I don't know why I want her to be impressed by me. She's lower than me, a servant, a false bride, a human who was kidnapped and made a deal, not some striking demon with a fortune and high-status family I'm trying to court.

"Can I..." Her voice trails off as she reaches for my wing.

"You can touch it." I pause and lean toward her. "I don't bite."

She runs her hand down the outside of my wing, and I shiver slightly. Her exquisite touch makes my body vibrate, even if it's an innocent feel of my wing. I wonder what her sensual touches would feel like, how my body could shoot alive during an intimate moment alone with her.

"It's so smooth," she marvels before stepping back and looking at me. "How did you do that?"

"It's a gift of my bloodline," I state as I look at the wing she touched over my shoulder. "My father's father was a gifted

demon, one of the most powerful ones ever known. He possessed the gift of flight, and my brothers and I are lucky enough to have carried on the power.”

“Can your father fly, too?”

I shake my head. “No, unfortunately, it skipped a generation. Since I’ve been so blessed, I try to use them whenever I can.” I pause and think of my father, imagining him giving me his blessing once I’m married to June. I shake the thought off and look at her. “So, how afraid of heights are you?”

“Um...” She laughs and bashfully turns away from me. “Not too afraid, I suppose.”

“Good.” I extend my hand, and she takes it as I lead her out of the dining room. “Follow me.”

As we walk up the grand staircase, I think of how well she did today. She absorbed the information I threw at her like a sponge, making me more confident of my plan. If she keeps this up, she’ll look like a natural quickly.

I look back at her and catch her staring at me. I grin slightly as I lead her along the second-floor hallway to the next staircase.

“This place is huge,” she comments enthusiastically.

“It is. It’s been in the family for generations.”

“Is that why you stay here? I mean, why you don’t have your own place?”

The question irks me slightly, but I don’t lead on to it. I decide she doesn’t have to know any more information than needed.

“It’s like a family heirloom,” I answer cheerfully. “You can say I’m sentimental.”

The truth is, I have everything I need here. There are servants and chefs at my beck and call, and I have no reason to leave the castle yet. Part of getting June to be my bride, although I hate to admit it, is to give me a reason to flee this place and begin life on my own with a partner, fake or not.

I take her up the second staircase and open the door leading to the roof. The warm air hits me, and I breathe in the freshness as I lead June out of the doorway and close it behind her. She walks over to the roof's edge, and I panic slightly but try to hold it in as I stand behind her, ready to catch her if she leans over too far.

"This is incredible," she says in awe as she looks over the island.

She's right, the island is gorgeous from up here. I haven't come to the roof in ages, I'm usually too busy scheming for the throne, brushing up on my torture studies, or ordering a servant to fetch me something from the local market.

We gaze out over the beautiful scenery, and I look at her from the corner of my eye. She is smiling from ear to ear and looks like a child who's just discovered their new favorite toy. I grin myself, happy that the view seems to impress her.

"Hey!" O'rbas' voice calls from behind me.

I close my eyes and exhale in annoyance before turning around to see him and two of my other brothers approaching us. June whips around and looks at me with fear in her eyes. I respond to her with a slight nod, letting her know it's alright that they see us together.

"O'rbas," I say as I nod to him.

"What brings...." He pauses and scoffs as he looks at June. "You two up here?"

"We were about to go for a flight," I state stoically.

"Uh-huh...." O'rbas looks at June and cocks his head. "And why is the red-haired human with you again?"

I try not to show my displeasure with him. O'rbas has always been a petty, foolish member of our family, and I can't trust him with any information. Unfortunately, I've been caught by him this time.

"She is mine now," I state firmly.

I look at June's face from the corner of my eye, notice her flush, and put a hand over her mouth to cover her smile. My

heart flutters when I see her reaction, knowing she is giddy when I say she's mine. I look back at O'rbas and lift my chin, concealing my happiness as I try to remain intimidating toward him.

"Yours?" He asks in a mocking tone before laughing. "Well, Lamian, I never pictured you liking redheads, especially not *human* redheads...." He pauses as he stares at June furiously. "You know how troublesome they can be."

"And what are you doing up here, O'rbas?" I ask, trying to divert the conversation.

"I was taking in the sunshine," he responds sarcastically. "What do you think I was doing up here, Lamian?"

I look behind him and see a blue castle in the distance. O'rbas has been kissing Lord Unzeth's ass for a while now, trying to become one of his warriors in a fight he's about to lead. I imagine he was staring at his castle from the roof, trying to identify his movements to determine when he would be home so he could schmooze with him some more.

"Get lost, O'rbas," I command darkly.

O'rbas throws up his hands and smiles as he walks toward the door. With another scowl at June, he leaves the rooftop and closes the door behind him.

Normally, I would be more irritated with his foolish nature, but I can't help but feel my spirits lift from June's reaction to what I said. I look at her and notice her hair blow across her face in the breeze as she shrugs.

"Did that go well?" she asks cautiously.

"As well as it could have." I sigh and smile at her as I take her hand and walk her over to the other side of the rooftop.

I feel her soft skin in my hand, and electricity rushes through me. I exhale and close my eyes as I remind myself this is all for show. I could never *truly* love a human. While I despise O'rbas, he was right about humans being troublesome. Their kind natures always get in the way of their potential, and that's not something I'm at liberty to lose.

I have her stand in front of me as I spread my wings far and bend down, touching the ground with my forearms and tips of my wings as I flatten them. I look at her with a grin and tip my head toward my wings.

“Climb on,” I say gently.

She looks at me with wide eyes, then out at the view. I chuckle as I notice she’s fiddling with her hands nervously.

“Come on, what have you got to lose?” I ask, hoping she doesn’t back out.

She looks at me and inhales deeply before putting her hand to her forehead and shaking her head with a smile. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she says nervously as she climbs on my back.

“Wrap your arms around me,” I instruct softly.

Her arms pass over my shoulders and down to my chest, and I get turned on by her closeness. I can smell her hair as it breezes over her face and hear her nervous chuckling in my ear. It sounds so sweet, I wish I could listen to it forever.

“What if I fall?” she asks as I stand up.

“You won’t,” I assure her as she wraps her legs around me. “Now,” I point to the castle on the far point of the island. “We’re going to fly down there and then make a big circle and come back, okay?”

I feel her nod on my shoulder and notice her arms are trembling. I place my hand over her arms and turn my head slightly to look back at her.

“Hey,” I say gently. “Don’t be afraid, okay? You won’t fall, and if you do, I’ll catch you.”

She nods again, and I feel proud of her for doing this despite her fear. The first thing that attracted me to her was the bravery that shines through her in the dark moments. I shake the thoughts from my mind, reminding myself I am giving her a flight so she can do better with her studies later to keep up appearances.

I back up a few steps and sprint toward the roof's edge, diving into the air. The wind hits my face, and I breathe it in as I smile and spread my wings. I look down at the landscape far beneath us and shout happily.

I feel June's arms trembling around my neck and look at her over my shoulder. Her face is buried in my chest, and she isn't looking around. I laugh and hold onto her arms with my hand as I soar closer to the island's edge.

"You're missing it, June!"

"No, I'm looking!"

I smile and shake my head. "I can see you hiding!" I shout over the sound of the air whipping past us. "Hey," I look at her again, and she shyly raises her head slightly to lock eyes with me. "I've got you, you're safe."

"How do you know?" she asks skeptically.

"Because we've been airborne for over five minutes, and you haven't fallen yet!" I shout with a smile.

I watch as she raises her head slightly and looks around. The wind blows her hair back over her shoulders, and she looks around at the landscape dreamily. I watch her smile as she raises her head and laughs as she takes in her surroundings.

I smile and turn my attention back to our route. I go out of the way to take her over the ocean far below. Soaring downward slightly, I fly over the clear waters and watch as June points below.

"Look at the sea! Look!" she exclaims joyously.

I look down and notice the waves rippling throughout the water. I had never noticed the way the sea moves from this height before, and I wonder who needed this break more- her or me.

JUNE

I can't believe I'm flying. Seeing the world from this perspective makes me feel like I've entered a new planet entirely. I wonder why he hasn't done this in so long as I inhale the fresh air and feel it whip through my hair.

I look out into the ocean, and the waves rippling from this height only make the water more entrancing. If it was any more transparent, you could see the coral reefs in the deep.

We swoop past castles and mansions as we circle the island. I sit up on Lamian's back a little more and slowly extend my arms. I'm still too scared to brave his more ambitious turns, and grab onto him again. I close my eyes and exhale and try to muster my courage as I try again, stretching my arms out to the sides and feeling the adrenaline and freedom rush through me.

It's amazing what you can see from birds, or flying demons, point of view. Everything looks smaller, even the intimidating castles that look like they touch the sky. Lamian flies lower over the mainland through a clearing.

Being lower to the ground is scarier than being up high as I see we're headed toward a forest. He heads straight for it, and I grab onto him again.

"Lamian! We're going to hit the trees!" I scream, wondering what he's doing.

At the last second, I close my eyes and brace for impact, my heart pounding. Thankfully, I'm already gripping him

tightly as he soars straight up, parallel to the trees as he takes us back into the sky.

I slap him playfully on the shoulder, and he chuckles. “That was mean!” I exclaim with a laugh.

“Just making sure you were awake,” he jokes.

I roll my eyes and look down as we begin to turn around. We are almost flying sideways, and I look down at the ground. I notice pools in the backyards of castles, immaculate gardens of tropical-looking plants around the mansions, and of course, the beautiful nature that has been kept intact. I’m impressed demons care so much about wildlife as I marvel at everything that is managed well on the island.

We fly back over to the other side of the island, and I catch a glimpse of some of the mountains on the Eastern side. They are large and pointed and almost stretch through the clouds. Lamian weaves through them expertly, and I hold on tight, laughing as we have a few close calls. I know he’s doing it on purpose, but I like it. It’s exciting, and I want more of this feeling.

We arrive at the castle, where he lands on the roof and kneels. I jump off his back and laugh as I run my fingers through my tangled hair. He looks at me with a grin, and I shake my head with a grin.

“That was amazing,” I comment as I laugh again.

“I thought you’d like it,” he responds as he closes his eyes and his wings shrink into his back.

“Does that hurt?”

“The wings? No, what does, is when you’re not paying attention and fly head-first into a forest.”

“I hate you for that, you know that, right?” I respond playfully.

“You can hate me all you want if you can tell me why Lady Jazenth hasn’t found a mate in five hundred years.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “Because she cheated on her mate before they could make it official.”

“Very good!” he comments as he adjusts his clothes. “You ready to hit the books again?”

“Sure,” I agree, refreshed from the flight. “Etiquette?”

“You guessed it.”

Lamian leads me back into the mansion, and we return to the dining room. I take my seat and notice a new spread of food on the table. It’s dinner time, and I partially regret stuffing my face earlier before I smell how delicious the new food is.

I pick up the book and flip it open, trying to find the page I left off on. He takes the book from me and places the text on the other side of him. I look at him, confused, and he lifts his chin toward the food.

“Please,” he says calmly.

I look at him skeptically before serving myself one of the dishes. I have a feeling that he’s not telling me just to eat. From the way he looks at me, I can tell this is some sort of test.

After serving myself, I look at how the forks are set up. They’re different than they are back home—they are stacked above the plate instead of on the right side. I don’t remember which one goes to the first course or if whatever I just put on my plate even *is* the first course.

I remember that I have to get home to Protheka. If picking a random fork and going for it speeds up the process, I’m for it. Also, I would rather not open that etiquette book again. Reading one more page about the construction and execution of demonic carved steak knives might kill me from boredom.

I scoop some of the food into my mouth, and he shakes his head. “No,” he says gently. He places his hand over mine that’s holding my fork, stabs some of the meat with it, and lifts the fork slowly to my mouth as I gulp my food nervously. “You stab the food, not scoop it.”

I open my mouth and look at him as he feeds me. He puts the fork in my mouth gently as our eyes maintain their gaze. I

can see a look in his eyes, it's hard to describe, but it seems like a primal stare, like I'm an animal about to be caught.

He feeds me again, and I take the food from the fork, keeping my lips on the fork for a bit longer than needed. I close my eyes and moan as I swallow the food, wanting to turn him on.

"Feel how the fork hits your lips lightly like that?" he asks in a low voice.

"Mm-hmm," I moan as I chew. "It feels good, very smooth," I respond in a smooth tone.

He feeds me again, and I look at him and moan slightly as the food touches my tongue. I feel some of the marinade drip onto my lip and reach for it before he holds my hand in my lap and uses the thumb of his other hand to wipe it off my face.

My heart races faster than when we were flying as he touches me. He takes the fork from my hand and sets it back on the table, looking at me like he can't resist me any longer. He leans in, and his lips touch mine.

I'm shocked and confused, but he tastes so good, and his scent fills my nose. My pussy begins to throb as he wraps his arm around my waist. I kiss him back and slowly stick my tongue into his mouth, turning it around his as he takes me in.

He grasps my waist tightly and places his hand on the back of my head, his fingers intertwining with the locks of my hair. As he pulls me close, I can't help myself. The logic disappears, and I stand up and straddle him in his chair.

He places his hand on my lower back, and I feel him harden beneath me as I kiss him. I put my hands on his shoulders and slightly grind against him, wondering if he's really that big or if it's his belt buckle I'm hitting.

No, he's really that big. He's actually larger than I imagined. I can feel him grow in his pants as I grind on him slowly. He pulls away from the kiss and moves to my neck as I throw my head back. My clit throbs as I grind on him, and when he bites my neck, I moan lightly.

He grabs onto my thighs and lifts me, pushes the dishes onto the floor, and sits me on the table. He presses himself between my legs as he kisses down my neck and shoulder. His kisses are light but passionate, and the little bites he does in between them drive me crazy.

I kiss his neck and press his head back with my hand gently. He leans back, and his hands travel down to my ass, squeezing it lightly as I moan in his ear. He breathes heavily as I suck on his earlobe, making him grab me harder as he presses the outline of his cock against my pussy.

I pull back and look at his pants as I reach for them. His hand moves to my breast, and something inside me makes me freeze.

I know I can't do this. Images of Tyson float through my mind, and I can't help but feel guilt wash over me. *What am I doing? Lamian is a demon, I made a blood pact to be fake married to him, not a prostitute. I can't give him my body, that's insane.*

I let him kiss my neck for a few more seconds as the thoughts fade, and I begin enjoying myself again. I close my eyes and try to relax into it, but the thoughts just come back. When Tyson's handsome face appears in my mind, I push Lamian off me, catching my breath as I hop down from the table.

"I can't..." I say softly before my voice trails off.

I look at him and can't decipher his expression, and I don't want to stick around to find out what it is. I hop off the table, dart out of the dining room, and run back to the West wing. I run down the hallway and enter my room, closing the door quickly behind me.

I sink to the floor with my mouth open, shocked at what I've just done. I'm disgusted with myself, how could I do this to Tyson? Oh shit, how can I do this to *myself*? Making out with a demon willingly? That's one of the most insane things I've ever done.

I cover my face and feel the tears start to wash over me. I think of meeting Tyson at the market and him making me smile when he picked a flower for me in the woods that day. I kept that flower on my center table at home and tried to keep it alive. When it died, I picked more and kept them there as a reminder of the best day of my life, the day I first spoke his name.

I cry and hope Lamian doesn't come to try to find me. I also pray that I haven't angered him by running off, I don't want to discover the consequences of my doing so.

I sift through the memories as I cry silently. I hear footsteps outside and freeze, holding my breath. I don't know why I try to stay silent, he and I both know there's nowhere else for me to go. I can't tell if it's Lamian or someone else, but the steps eventually walk away, and I sigh of relief.

I spend the rest of the night thinking about Tyson and feeling like I just cheated on a man who has done nothing but love me with someone who is, by nature, evil. I drift off to sleep sniffling with tears drying beneath my face on my pillow.

LAMIAN

Like being ripped out so suddenly from the sweetest of dreams, June pushes me away and takes off running out of the room. For a moment, it's as if my body needs to catch up and process her abrupt flight, sitting there in my chair like a dumbfounded zonak.

I snap back to reality, catching the sight of her feet as they zip around the corner of the doorframe. The door closes with a loud boom.

“June! Where are you going? Come back!” I call out to her, though I know better than to expect her to answer.

The pitter-patter of her feet grow quieter until there's no more of them to be heard. In the whole sixty seconds from the parting of her skin from mine to the sudden silence, I haven't moved a muscle.

I peer down at the golden cutlery strewn across her plate, smeared with sauce alongside food that'll be left uneaten. Beside her plate is the tome for being a demon escort. It remains open on the chapter about proper dining etiquette, specifically the page on how to insert a fork into your mouth without leaving a smidge of food on the utensil.

My mind goes blank once more as I try to process what just happened between us two, as if there's some sort of shield in my brain preventing me from connecting one cohesive thought to the other.

June's progress was going so well, digesting each piece of information thoroughly. Even on the tougher tasks, she was

persevering better and quicker than I had anticipated... So why did that happen?

Is it my fault she ran out like that? Feeling as though I've just thrown a spanner in the works, I pound a heavy fist on the table, cursing myself for letting lust get a firm hold of me at that moment. A cup falls over, rolling off of the table.

Taking a deep breath, I try to let the anger go. After all, it's not like any of it matters anyway. By no means am I personally hurt by her running away... but I can't help but find it so peculiar, why did it all go down like that in the first place?

Dismissing the notion of being more than what she and I currently are, I try to think of something, some sort of justification for me going in for the kiss.

Ultimately, it's all part of the act, right? Sooner or later, my father as well as my brothers may expect to see some type of physicality happen between June and I, just a kiss or two. All that was was just practice, training that's not included in the book, nothing more than that.

Fuck me did she look beautiful though, the way a singular strand of her hair curled down over her forehead, the concentration in her green eyes softening when our eyes met each other. Even the most talented artist couldn't have painted, or even imagined, a more magnificent portrait than her face.

Though the thoughts of her send waves of warmth pulsating through my body, I notice a feeling of emptiness inside me too, a desolation that refuses to be a part of the heat. At that realization, a shiver works its way up my body, starting at the base of my spine.

My lips feel hot and moist from her kiss yet the rest of my face and my neck feel stone cold. What is this? In place of a logical answer, I only think of her fiery red hair when I pay attention to the heat she makes me feel.

But when I give focus to the cold, it only makes me think of an icy heart. Could it be hers? No, surely not, she wouldn't

have returned my kiss if that were the case... Perhaps it's mine. Was I cruel to have imparted that kiss upon her lips?

I suddenly notice how alone I feel at the table, without her company present. Only now do I acknowledge how much seeing her run away from me had made me hurt, grunting in frustration.

Never have I ever experienced this level of rejection before. I'm a Prince of King Asmodeus, any woman I desire would gladly jump at the chance of sleeping with me... But even that thought does nothing to comfort me.

Perhaps it has to be this way. At the end of the day, I'm not after her romantically, it's not why I picked her in the first place back in the cells. I may just be playing it all up in my head, it's nothing more than a physical attraction... right?

How does she feel though, I wonder? And where did she escape to? I have to get her back, to hear how she's feeling. Guilt consumes me as I try to think of where she may run off to but I brush it off. Time is of the essence and we must resume our training.

My legs have grown stiff, shaking them out as I stand up. I head to the library first, trying to pay no mind to my anxiety growing each minute I am without her. She's nowhere to be seen, with none of the guards stationed there saying she came by.

There's nowhere else she may have gone except for the bedroom but I was just there moments ago. Perhaps... No, she couldn't have gone back to where I think, could she?

I pick up the pace, hurriedly making my way to the dungeons. Part of my heart aches when I think of seeing her locked up in the cell once more. When I arrive, I'm relieved to see her absence as the guard tells me the same report.

With all those options crossed off, where else in this place could she have gone? I've got to think in between the lines... Where might she feel closest to Protheka?

The gardens!



I PUSH through the heavy doors. They creak loudly as I step through into the gardens, just outside the castle's main building. For a moment, I forget about my troubling situation as all of my senses relish in the beauty around me.

The storm is gentler today, bringing with it a stillness of sound as the air sings softly through the bushes and ledges. Spots of black, gold, and silver jump out everywhere I look, decorating each and every inch of the ground. The air smells clean, contrasting completely to that found in the depths of the dungeon.

Perhaps this is the place I should've been coming to all this time, when I was thinking of how to secure my father's throne. Maybe things would have become clearer to me then.

Alas, I have bigger problems to be worried about right now than those of the past. I take off in search of June, checking around each corner of every bush, through all the greenhouses, and under every spot of shelter from the storm.

Walking around a hedge, I spot June in the distance. She's curled up on a bench, safe from the gentle rain that is caught by a balcony from above. Her head is in her hands, filling me with shame as I can't help but feel responsible.

Cautiously, I walk over to her thinking of how to start what I anticipate will be a tough conversation. She lifts her head, noticing me. A soft yet subtle smile gives me the all-clear to sit beside her as she moves over to make room for me.

June turns and faces me, allowing me to see she'd just finished crying, obvious from the dried tear marks running from her eyes to the base of her neck.

"Are you okay?" I ask, refraining from any physical contact.

"I'm alright now, I've calmed down a little," she tells me, sniffing.

I produce a cloth for her that she accepts, wiping her face and blowing her nose.

“Lamian,” she says sternly. “We shouldn’t have done that- No, you shouldn’t have done that. You didn’t have to make that move on me,” she continues, sounding disappointed.

I keep my mouth closed, letting her speak her mind and empty her anger and frustrations out at me.

“It wasn’t right. You know I don’t belong here and that I’m just trying to get home to Protheka. It was all going so well and... Ugh, just why? Tell me,” she demands.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I shrug. “Something just got the better of me and I did it. I can’t change what happened.”

“Doing something like that puts so much pressure on me, do you have any idea about that?” she gulped.

My only response is to look away, feeling drowned in sorrow and regret, not for what I did but for how it made her feel. She sighs, retiring back into a curl.

“Whatever, I don’t mean to blow up at you,” she whispers through her hands.

A sudden urge to apologize comes over me, sending a new wave of bitter cold through my skin. For a brief moment, ego prevents me from saying anything for I’ve never had to say sorry to anyone in my life.

I slowly bring my hands to June’s face, gauging her reaction as she notices. Her eyes dart back and forth between me and my hands as I gently take hold of her chin, raising her chin up. Her body stiffens so I dare not to take the physicality beyond that.

“June,” I begin, swallowing my ego. “I... apologize.”

Her eyes narrow as if she’s confused.

“What I did was something you clearly weren’t ready for, yet I chose to listen to my own impulses. I shouldn’t have pushed for anything, and for that I’m so sorry. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me.”

Her gaze softens, as does the tension in her body. I let go of her chin.

“I’ll be up in my quarters when, or if you’re willing to forgive me,” I tell her as I go to stand.

She reaches out, grabbing me by the wrist.

“Sit down please, I don’t want to be alone.”

I take my place beside her again with an open ear.

“I’m sorry, too, Lamian,” she tells me, still holding my wrist.

“You, sorry? Why?” I ask.

“Because part of what happened is my fault too. It’s not fair of me to blame you completely. I met you halfway, so I’m sorry for letting you think it was okay,” she explains.

I nod, putting my hands near her knee.

“So, is everything okay between you and I? No hard feelings or resentment?”

“Yeah, all’s well, don’t worry,” she assures me. “But Lamian?”

“Yes?”

“I need to draw a boundary with you,” she declares, standing up.

“What might that be?” I ask, rising with her.

“You’re never to kiss me again, I mean it.”

I hear a strain in her voice, almost as though what she’s saying breaks her heart. Does she really mean it?

“Okay, I agree to never touch you that way, ever.”

“Then it’s settled,” she tells me, her voice breaking.

I hold my hand out for her as she grasps it lightly. We make our way back to the doors leading into the castle. As we enter, I can’t help but think about how she sounded when she told me never to kiss her again.

Am I overthinking it? She could still just be upset at me making that move on her... But what if there's something else she's not letting me see? If there's feelings there that she has for me, is she purposely trying to bury them deep within her?

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JUNE

“No,” Lamian scolds, pushing the strange utensil between my pinkie and my thumb. “This isn’t one of your primitive forks. Let the itsara lead you, not the other way around.”

I let it lead me.

The strange, glass-like noodles spin around the long, delicate, slightly curved utensil. It’s elegant, like a dance.

Then it slams my hand against the table and rolls toward Lamian. Noodles spill everywhere, and Lamian’s hulking servant cleans them up without a word.

“Ah.” He brings up his hand to tug a bit on his horn. His lips purse, and I am absolutely not thinking even a little bit about kissing him again. “You have less magic than I thought.”

“I don’t have *any* magic.”

Does he know anything about humans? We’re at the bottom of the food chain on Protheka for a reason. If I had any magic at all, why would I let myself be kidnapped from my home? From Tyson?

“Every being has magic.”

“I wish.”

Lamian looks at me as if I’m being a particularly difficult child, but he lets it go. “It’s no matter. You can use the licksara instead as long as we aren’t at royal events.” He smirks. “And I am also available to hand feed you, of course.”

Before I can react to that, he's thrust another strange utensil in my hand. It looks something like a spoon, but it's square and it hums in my hand.

"For releasing the nisimta."

"The—"

A strange, white...creature? Napkin? It moves like some sort of insect on Protheka, gracefully but with at least twenty...legs? Appendages?

Lamian arches his eyebrows at me and nods toward it, so I slam the square spoon down and he catches my wrist.

"No! Are you mad? It's the nisimta, not some sort of razorfiend." He extends my hand gently. The nisimta does some sort of bow before it scurries backward. He catches it just before it knocks over a plate, tapping its tail lightly, and the humming spoon and nisimta combine.

Beautiful, haunting music fills the dining room.

"Is this some sort of prayer before a meal?"

Lamian scoffs. "What goddess wants her underlings to simper about food they should be providing themselves?"

"The Gatherer," I say automatically. Lamian's eyes bulge out like I've said something blasphemous, and I remember what he told me during our etiquette lesson. The demons believe in gods, but they don't pray. They think it's the height of arrogance. Here, gods only help themselves.

I take a glass noodle between my fingers and bring it to my mouth, ignoring Lamian's deep sigh. He already thinks I'm a barbarian, I might as well act the part.

The noodle melts on my tongue, and it tastes like a bright summer day where the clouds above build higher and higher. Like a beautiful moment before a storm.

To be honest, I'd rather it tasted like bahru, the thick, delicious stew I took for granted on Protheka. It's no royal meal, to be sure, but I miss tasting flavor instead of feelings.

“Does food here taste the same to everyone?” I point at the noodles. “Like, that tastes like sunshine to me, but...”

A boom of thunder makes my point for me, shaking the goblets on the table. If they have sunshine here, I’ve yet to see it.

“Does food taste the same to everyone on your world?”

“I mean...people have their preferences. But yes, usually everyone agrees that something tastes sweet, or bitter. Salty.”

Lamian’s face is blank.

“During a meal, we’ll compliment the chef. Talk about how good the food tastes, trade recipes—”

“Recipe?” He frowns.

Right, it isn’t likely a royal Prince has ever needed to wonder about how his food is prepared. “The ingredients used, how long—”

“That isn’t done here.” Lamian’s voice is sharp. “Ever. You may compliment the meal, but focus more on the presentation. Never ask for a, a...recipe. The soz’garoth responsible will feel compelled to tell you, as you’re a guest of royalty, and he’ll be put to death for it.”

I push my plate away. I’ve suddenly lost whatever appetite I might have had. “All right, well. Dinner is covered. I know how to greet everyone we might run into—stare at my feet and let you speak. What’s next?”

His mood lightens immediately. “Dancing.”

Demonic music is problematic.

Just like their food, I *feel* it.

Quick steps are easy enough—the music bounces, and so does my mood. Lamian spins me off, and I deftly match the pattern he taught me with my feet. Simple.

It’s when the music slows down that it gets...difficult. The drums build and build, a steady, thrumming beat that goes right between my legs.

Fuck.

Lamian pulls my body against his, molding himself against me. His hand is burning my lower back, and dipping lower...

I trip over my own foot, and he catches me with his lightning fast reflexes. Both of our chests heave—we must have been dancing all evening.

With a flick of his hand, Lamian silences the music.

“Adequate,” he says, straightening me to my feet. “You’re almost ready for court.”

Even with the music gone, my body thrums.

The night of our courtly appearance, his servant leaves a dress in my room. I spend a long time after my bath staring at it before I finally build up enough courage to slither into it.

The cloth is hardly better than wearing nothing at all. Translucent, I can see my nipples through the top, and my bottom is only slightly more covered. The top fits like a bra, at least, providing me with some support. But my stomach is left bare, with only a thin strip of cloth in the back connecting it to the coruscating skirt.

Every step I take is a miracle of light. The dress is ostensibly black, but the lights bring out every color imaginable and some I’m not sure I’ve ever seen before.

A knock jolts me away from the mirror.

“Come in.”

Lamian opens the door and stares. A zonak servant follows him into the room to dress up my hair in some sort of silver clip he’s brought, and when he’s done I hardly recognize myself.

“Do I look okay?”

I look like a stranger. Is this what’s expected at a royal court, or are they going to laugh me back to my room?

There’s a dark heat in Lamian’s eyes as they trail down my body, though, that tells me I might be doing better than I think.

“More than adequate.”

That’s high praise from a man who calls me a barbarian every time we eat together. He extends his arm, and I take it. The shoes I’m wearing are impractical, at best, and I’m glad he’s given me lessons in wearing them already, even if I never do better than ‘acceptable’.

“We have to leave before the first song begins,” he says, shaking himself slightly. “Come.”

I can hear the party before I see it. Thrums of demons whisper and gossip outside the grand hall, and the buzzing and fluttering of wings is constant. A shrill laugh fills the air, followed by wracking sobs.

This court isn’t for the faint of heart. Lamian told me how vicious the matrons can be, and how cutting his father’s advisors are. If I fail this performance, I’ll probably be back below in the dungeons and Lamian will be selecting his new fake potential bride.

A twinge of guilt twists my stomach. It isn’t fair that I’m eating and drinking and dancing so lavishly while the women who have become my friends languish down below on half-eaten scraps. It’s followed by humiliating fear—not that I go back to the dungeon. I can survive there well enough.

What if I play this part too well?

What if I start to like it?

A hush falls over the crowd as we take our first steps down the massive staircase leading into the anteroom. I steal a glance at Lamian, and then quickly bring my eyes back down to my feet. He’s got his game face on—this isn’t the same guy I’ve been learning to walk in high heels with, that’s for sure.

He looks like a Prince. Arrogant.

Powerful.

Fuck.

“Prince Lamian.” A matron with red hooves brushes a long talon across his cheek. “Darling. I see you’re finally done moping over losing your plaything.” Her voice becomes

impossibly playful. “And I see you’re still fond of the color red.”

Her talon twines around my hair, and I don’t care what etiquette says, I’m about three seconds away from stabbing her. With what? My anger will find a way.

“Don’t touch me.” My chin comes up and I look her right in her yellow, serpent-like eyes.

“Oh, she’s fun.” The matron gives a jaunty wave before moving on to her next victims. “Send for me if you want to play sometime.”

I expect Lamian to scold me for looking at her, but he looks...almost proud.

He’s so weird. Sometimes I think he likes me more when I step out of line. Then again, most demons are a bit...off, at least according to human standards of behavior. Maybe not fighting is the real breach of etiquette.

The doors to the grand hall are at least two stories high, framed by the vaulted ceilings above. With an ominous slam, they fly open, revealing a room made out of the same oily black stone that seems to exist everywhere on this floating, storm-ridden island.

“His Highness requests your presence.”

Okay, Lamian walked me through this. His brothers enter first, with their chosen guest walking several paces behind them. There are ten brothers, but a few must be missing, because I only see a few.

King Asmodeus sits on a tall throne at the end of the room. The lights are too dim for me to see anything more than a slight shimmer of his throne. A heavy hood over his head.

The skulls that decorate his belt.

Lamian shouldn’t have felt the need to warn me not to make eye contact. I hurriedly look away to examine the rest of the hall. There’s not much—the banquet will be held in yet another hall later—but then someone touches that strange

nisimta thing with that humming spoon thing, and there's *everything*.

Sweet and seductive, the bass bowls me over effortlessly, but Lamian's already pulling me against him before my knees give out. We move in sync, and it's too easy to imagine this dance as an echo of what we both really want from each other.

The rest of the couples swarm the floor after the Princes, and the crush of the crowd pushes us even closer.

I don't need to think about my next steps. Dancing with him is natural, so natural that I have time to look up at him and grin.

"Is this adequate enough for you?"

"You're..."

The music fades, but Lamian is still looking at me.

I hadn't realized we were so close. His breath stirs my hair, and my hands are still clutching his broad back.

He leans down, and we're so close we're sharing the same air.

He's going to kiss me.

I'm going to let him.

Something sends us sprawling toward each other, and Lamian catches me before I fall on my face. The music's picked up again, and everyone else is dancing around us.

"Have you never danced before?" the demon male snarls.

Lamian waves him away, but he doesn't stop. His words sail over me, no matter how vitriolic. There's nothing he can say about me right now that's worse than what I'm thinking.

What would Tyson think?

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LAMIAN

I glance at June, who seems to share the same thought that I do if her expression is any indication. *Won't this guy just shut up already?*

Waving a dismissive hand at him, I gently nudge June for us to move along. As I turn, the demon's hand clasps around mine, squeezing tight as he berates me further.

"Where do you think you're going? I'm not through talking to you so don't you dare turn your back to me!" he growls, his voice growing irate.

I glare at his hand, feeling June gently squeeze my arm when she feels how tense I am. She's right, I must calm down before doing something irrational. Then again, so must this man.

"Sir," I tell him, meeting his incensed eyes. "You have my deepest apologies, I didn't mean to bump into you and your mate."

"Sorry won't do, look at what you've done to my garment!" he interjects, pointing to his shirt. "It's creased!"

The demon's mate tugs at his elbow, looking worried.

"Hey, Marel, just let it go," she pleads.

He whisks his arm away from her and points in the direction behind her.

"Shut the fuck up bitch, don't tell me what I can and can't do to some dude cramping my style."

She quivers in fear as her mate shouts more insults at her.

“Hey, Marel,” I say, catching his attention. “You ought to listen to your mate.”

“Oh yeah?” he snickers, rolling his eyes at me. “And why is that?”

“Trust me,” I snarl, staring him dead into his soul. “I say that in your best interests.”

His glare narrows, recoiling before trying to lunge at me. His mate catches him by the arm again just in time to stop him advancing.

“Lamian, let’s move away from him,” whispers June.

“No... I’ll stay here and do something about him, you go over there.”

June looks at me worryingly before walking away.

“Stop, Marel, you’re embarrassing us!”

“Didn’t you hear what this asshole just said to me?” he hollers before turning to me. “You want a piece of me?” he shouts.

So, that’s what it’s going to take.

I shoot a quick glance at June, winking at her before turning back to Marel.

“No,” I tell him. “I want the whole damn thing.”

He stops scrambling, looking perplexed.

“Since you’re clearly incapable of solving this diplomatically,” I say, raising my voice as I make my way over to an antique golden sword crest mounted on the wall. “I propose a duel between you and I, first one to draw blood wins. What say you?”

Marel glimpses around him, noticing all of the onlookers we’ve attracted the attention of. He swallows and wipes his forehead before answering. I have my hand on one of the swords, letting him know how serious I was about contesting him.

“Alright, fits better than a meaningless apology,” he agrees.

I smile, glance at June once more and pull out both swords from the crest. A gathering forms behind June and Marel’s mate, some of whom are smiling at the prospect of dinner and a show.

“After I win, you can pay for my new shirt,” blurts Marel as I toss him a sword.

Slyly, I only nod in response, knowing my money is safe from stroking his ego. I motion for the crowd to step back to give us more room. It grows larger, with some servants putting aside their duties to clamber for a good viewing spot.

We stand facing each other and take three steps back each. Raising my sword into combat position, I call out to him.

“Ready to lose?”

“Huh? Son of a bitch!” he yells, raising his sword as he breaks into a sprint.

Here we go.

I wait for him to get close, timing a parry to counter his blow.

“Nice shot,” I tell him. “If you were trying to compete with the combat abilities of a zonak!”

“Argh!”

He comes forward, swinging wildly once again. I’m able to predict his moves with ease in my controlled state of mind. I contemplate putting him down now but a quick glance at the crowd in between parries decides what road I’ll take.

“So, you all want a theatrical performance?” I call out to them, winking at June who blushes and smiles.

The crowd cheer and whistle, further enraging Marel who throws his sword to the ground.

“Care to up the challenge?” he asks, walking to a silver crest that holds a heavier set of swords.

“It never was one for me,” I reply, giving my sword to the nearest servant.

Marel tosses the sword to me. It spins rotationally in the air before I catch it by the hilt, wowing the crowd as they gasp with delight.

“I’m going to make you my bitch,” threatens Marel, walking confidently toward me.

“A whole lot of talk with no result to speak for it, a poor move on your part.”

He swings, this time more controlled as if he was trying to kill me. He’s still too slow, giving me time to dodge to the right before he even brings the blade thrusting down. Surprised, he pivots off his right foot, using the momentum for more power.

I laugh at his mistake, ducking with plenty of time to allow for a kick to his stomach. He tumbles back, almost falling to the floor. Taking a moment to catch his breath, I step forward to him, motioning for him to continue our combat.

Again he swings but an easy swivel to the left renders his attempt useless.

“Stop trying to hit me and just hit me!” I taunt.

He readies his sword for another attack. I chuckle, deciding to take things to the next level. His sword comes at me from my right. I don’t dodge this time, instead opting to bring my blade up to meet his.

Our swords collide with a clang, bursting the crowd into gasps and cheers once more.

“I’m only just getting started,” I whisper to him.

His eyes widen as I introduce his face to my fist. He reels back and glares at me. I move forward to attack him, feigning an attack to his left where he raises his sword in defense.

His face changes to one of surprise as I quickly move my blade to his completely exposed right side. His body tenses up, anticipating a slash. Instead, I use the hilt of my sword to

break his nose. He falls to his knees, grasping at his nose that starts to bleed.

“You seem to have a little something dripping down onto your shirt there,” I say, pointing to his garments becoming stained by his blood. “There, I’ve drawn your blood. Say you submit and this’ll be over with,” I command.

He grabs his sword and attacks with an upward motion that almost slices my torso open right up the middle.

“No!” he screams. “That doesn’t count, it has to be with a blade!”

I grab another identical sword from a set of two, tossing it at him as I take the other in my free hand.

“How about with two then?”

We run at each other. I duck and slide underneath his legs, standing up to bring my swords down on him. Marel brings his swords up just in time to avoid what might have been a beheading. He headbutts me, sending a hot wave of pain through my head.

“That’s what you get for your little theatrics!” he yells.

“Come on then, I’m getting tired of you,” I tell him, shaking off the pain. “Let’s finish this!”

Charging forward at me, I wait for his swing to swivel to his open left side, using one sword to slice along his ribs, while the other blade takes his hand clean off. It collapses to the ground still clutching the sword.

“Agh!” he screams, falling to his knees and trying to grab his amputated hand.

I waste no time advancing on him, sticking the end of a sword against his throat.

“Do you submit?” I demand.

“Yes, yes!” he begs.

The crowd applauds, dispersing as the demon’s mate comes running to him, alongside some servants who aid him up onto his feet. I give the swords to one of them, watching as

they escort him away, receiving a verbal bashing from his mate.

I turn to see June, looking surprised.

“Do you think that went a bit far perhaps?” she asks as I approach.

“I did ask if you wanted a show,” I answer as she chuckles.

“Well, at least I know you can protect me.”

“Come, let’s get a drink.”

I lead her by the hand to a table where a servant pours out wine for us. I give her a glass, toasting as we sip the wine.

“Lamian...” she utters.

“Yes June?” I reply, noticing the worry in her voice and on her face.

“As spectacular as that duel was, it only made me realize that I’m more wary of demons than I thought,” she says concerningly.

“How so?”

“Well, if that guy had come for me and you weren’t there, I’d have been dead meat.”

“Hmm, I don’t think so,” I tell her, trying to ease her fears. “You saw how he fought. You could’ve taken him if you wished.”

“No, I couldn’t have Lamian,” she snaps.

I’m silent for a moment, thinking of my world from her perspective.

“Are you scared of me too?”

“No, I trust you. It’s just these other demons I’m vigilant of, like you saw how agitated that demon got when you just bumped into him, and you’re a big guy who can handle himself. Imagine me, a human with no combat experience.”

“I see...”

“You’ve got your prowess, grace, combat skills but...” she mutters.

“But what?”

“I can’t even defend myself, Lamian. When I was in the prison cells, I sort of became their leader because of my defiance with the guards but my front was practically a bluff. I can’t even defend myself,” she trembles.

“June, we can do something about it.”

“Do you remember when we first met? After you saw me in the prison cell? I came at you swinging with a knife and the only blood I managed to shed was my own. I’m an embarrassment,” says June, shaking her head in shame.

“No you’re not.”

“Let’s face it,” she told me, looking me in the eye. “I am.”

“Well...” I begin, trying to think of a solution. “What would make you more comfortable?”

She ponders in thought for a moment before sighing.

“I just want to be able to rest at night knowing that I wouldn’t be fed to the worgs should I be left alone without you, know what I mean?” she asks, looking at me. “Lamian?”

“Uhm...” I mutter.

“What?” she demands.

“...What the fuck is a worg?” I ask in confusion, igniting that sweet sound of laughter from her.

“Sorry,” she moans after catching her breath. “Sometimes I forget you’re not from Protheka. It’s sort of like that four-legged creature with multiple heads, uhm, what’s it called again?...” she mutters.

“An Urgan.”

“Yeah, that’s the one, Urgan.”

We laugh some more, forgetting about her worries for a moment.

“Look,” I say. “About your concerns, I don’t want you to always be worrying when I’m not around. In fact, I’ve got a solution,” I suggest.

“What, are you going to teach me how to fight or something?” she jokes, still giggling.

The smile on my face says it all, wiping the one from her face.

“I’ll give you something to back up that feisty attitude of yours.”

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JUNE

Lamian says he has something special planned for us today. I think he's been debating my request all night to teach me self-defense. Part of me is nervous, a human battling a demon? That's a sure way to die quickly. Another part of me thinks this might be the best opportunity I'll ever have-learning to fight from a demon is a skill I can take back with me to Protheka: if I get to go back.

I pull on my shirt for the day and look in the bathroom mirror. My mind has raced back and forth between thinking of home and surprisingly enjoying my time here. There have been moments where I've hated myself for enjoying being with Lamian, and there have been others that make me feel like it's not so bad for me to feel this way.

Whichever one is right, I can't be sure. I know I need to clear my head, and whatever Lamian has planned should help, at least, I hope it does.

I put on my shoes and hear the wall in my bedroom move. I whip around and place my hand on my chest as I inhale deeply. Lamian steps forward with a smirk on his face.

"Jumpy today, are we?" he asks cockily.

"Well, I'm not used to the walls of my room moving," I comment with a slight glare as I finish putting on my shoes.

"Those won't do," Lamian remarks as he looks at my shoes.

"What? Do they need to be one size smaller?"

He grins at my statement and pulls a pair of boots out from behind his back. I've seen those before when the men would practice dueling at home in Protheke. I was right, he's teaching me to fight.

I walk toward him and take the boots from him. I look into his eyes momentarily and feel my heart jump. Even though he's evil, and I love Tyson, I can't help but feel pulled toward him. I look away quickly, pretending I didn't remember our make-out session on the dining room table when we locked eyes.

I slide on the boots and catch him looking at me with a smile. I don't respond, but I want him to continue staring at me, so I shift my position and bend over in front of him. I hope my slight teasing will get to him before Tyson flashes into my mind again.

I zip up the boots quickly and turn to him as I brush my hair out of my face. Exhaling, I put my hands on my hips and raise my eyebrows.

"Where to?" I ask as I lock eyes with him again.

"Back to the roof, come on," he responds as he walks past me.

His shoulder brushes my arm, which is enough to weaken my knees. *What is wrong with me?* I think as I roll my eyes and follow him to the rooftop, staring at his gait the whole way. He walks with such power and grace, which only comes naturally to a confident man.

He opens the door to the outside, and I breathe in the fresh, warm air as I look out over the island. I remember flying with him and smiling in a sort of daze before a clanking sound breaks my thoughts. I turn around and see Lamian running at me with a sword in his hand.

"Pick it up!" he yells as I look at the ground.

I pick up the sword and stay crouched as he strikes down at me with his. I block it with mine, the adrenaline and fear almost making me pass out. He grins over top of me and steps back, releasing his sword's pressure from mine.

“Are you insane?” I shout, still crouched on the ground. “You charge at me with a *real* sword out of nowhere?”

“You have to be ready for anything,” he says between heavy breaths with a smile.

“Lamian, I don’t know how to use a sword.” I protest as I stand. “Don’t you think we should use wooden rods or something?”

“Oh, June,” he coos, his low voice sending shivers through my body. “I have more faith in you than that. Now, come here.”

He points next to him, and I walk to his side, liking the tone in his voice when he commands me to do something. I stand next to him, and he walks behind me, brushing my hair back over my shoulders and tying it up.

I close my eyes. The lightness of his touch on my neck makes me hot. I breathe out slowly before I feel him whisper in my ear.

“Someone could pull on your hair if you leave it down,” he teases.

I grin and turn my head over my shoulder, noticing him looking at me with those demonic eyes. He stays behind me and places his arms over mine as we grab onto the sword’s base together.

“If someone comes at you from the right, wielding their sword upwards....” He moves my arms slightly above me to the left, leaving the sword’s tip pointed horizontally to the right. “Block them like this. Same for the left....” He moves my arms to the left, and I try to pay attention, but it’s so hard when his breath is hot on my neck and his body is pressed against mine.

“Turn around,” he says softly as he takes his arms off mine.

I turn and watch as he backs up a few feet from me. He turns around with his back to me, and I try to resist the urge to ask him to come back and teach me those two moves again.

“When turning in a fight....” He looks over his shoulder as he holds his sword in his hand, and I catch him winking at me. “Make sure you’re always ready for someone to strike.” He whips around with both hands on his sword in a blocking position. He smiles. “You never know who might be behind you in battle.”

“Yeah,” I comment as I lean on my hip with a grin. “It could be a demon.”

He laughs and stands before me, motioning for me to lift my sword. “Come on, I’ll go slow on these. Try to block me.”

The last thing I want to do is block him from me. If we could throw down our swords right now, I would let him take me. Before I finish the thought, he lifts his sword and slowly tries to hit me from the left, and I block it, and he does the same from the right. He begins moving faster, going from one to the other until he hits the right side twice. I catch the change-up last minute and block him, but my foot bends at an awkward angle, and I fall to the ground.

He stands over me with his sword pointed at my throat, the tip inches from touching my bare skin. I smile at him and lift my eyebrows.

“Planning to kill me, are you?” I mock.

“No,” he offers a hand and pulls me up. “But someone else might be.”

He keeps me close for a second, and my hand lingers in his before he pulls it away slowly and backs up. I watch as he throws his sword to the ground and takes off his shirt. I marvel at his body, his abs are chiseled perfectly, and the sweat on his chest glimmers in the sun. He tosses his shirt to the side and picks up his sword, locking eyes with me.

“Again,” he commands.

He strikes faster this time and moves from side to side until he hits the left side twice. I block both strikes, but with a flick of his sword, his momentum from his motion turns my back to him. I quickly spin around with my sword in a blocking position and catch his sword on mine. I look down,

kick him in the knee, and push him over, knocking him to the ground.

I stand over him and smile as I point the tip of my sword at his neck. He smiles and nods.

“Good,” he says breathlessly until he knocks me down with a kick of his own.

He rolls me on my back and molds his body on top of mine as he locks eyes with me. He pushes my sword out of the way and places his hand near my neck, pressing hard on my chest.

“But even without my sword,” he whispers between heavy breaths. “I could have still killed you.”

I feel my breasts touch his chest through my shirt as I breathe quickly from the rush. I think he’s going to kiss me, hoping he presses his body more on mine before he stands up and offers me his hand.

“Again.”

I roll my eyes and take his hand. *How many times is he going to make me do this?* I think as I regret asking him to teach me how to defend myself. I stand, and this time I take the initiative, striking as he blocks me.

He gets the upper hand and strikes at me again, and I block it and spin around, hoping my momentum will hit him harder. It does as he blocks my hit, and I think he will go down. He twists his sword, and mine falls out of my hands. I look at him with wide eyes, thinking my cockiness just cost me another ten minutes of dueling.

I rush at him, and he tries to strike, but I duck and swat his sword away from his hands. He spins around and pins me against the wall with his hand on my neck again. We look at each other, and our chests rise and fall quickly. I smirk at him, loving his hand’s pressure on me.

“You’ll have to show me that move,” I comment with a grin.

“I’d like to show you a lot of things,” he responds as he looks at my lips and kisses me.

I feel a twinge of guilt before shoving it entirely out of my mind. I give in and join the kiss, loving the way his tongue explores my mouth. He holds me tightly against him and presses my back hard against the wall.

I wrap my arms around the back of his neck, pressing his head hard against mine. It's like I can't get close enough to him. I want him to take me, I *need* him to have me as his own right now.

He picks me up and keeps me pinned against the wall as I wrap my legs around his hips. His hands move to my ass, and I moan in his mouth as I run my hands down his sweaty chest. His skin is sticky, and the feel of it makes me wetter than I already am.

He kisses my neck and bites it hard. I exhale and close my eyes, loving the rush of a little bit of pain. I run my hands along his contoured abs, tracing my fingertips in the indents of his muscles. He moans in my ear as he bites on my earlobe, and I moan louder.

He laughs softly in my ear. His chuckle makes my pussy throb as he pulls my hair slightly.

“You wanted this, didn't you?” he asks darkly.

“You already knew that,” I respond with a grin as he pulls back and looks at me again.

His eyes travel over my body as he places his thumb on my bottom lip. He watches like an entranced animal as I look at him with desperation. I hate that he knows how badly I want him at this moment, but if it gets him to fuck me, then it's all worth it.

JUNE

I can feel my pussy start dripping in my panties as he looks at me. He cocks his head to the side slowly, studying me as he runs his fingers down my neck. I smile lightly at the touch and begin to close my eyes before his voice startles me.

“Look at me,” he says softly.

I open my eyes and maintain eye contact with him as he watches his hand travel down my shirt, keeping his fingertips on my bare skin. I keep looking at him as I take my arms down from his neck and lift off my shirt, exposing my bra. He grins and leans into my neck.

“How bad do you want this?” he whispers.

“Bad,” I respond as I lean my head back and run my fingers over the contours of his back.

“I don’t know if that’s a good enough answer,” he teases as he presses the outline of his cock into my hips.

I tighten my legs around his hips, wanting him to press into me harder so my clit can feel his cock. He moans as he rubs it against me, and I moan in surprise when I feel how big he is again.

“I want you to fuck me,” I whisper.

He pulls back and holds my ass up with his hand. With the other, he places it by my neck again and grins.

“That’s better,” he responds darkly with a grin.

He sets me down from the wall and spins me around. He takes my hands and places them on the wall as I feel him unclip my bra. I take my hands off the wall, and he slowly slides the straps down my arms before weaving his hands around my waist and cupping my breasts.

I put my hands back on the wall as he presses me against it lightly, his fingers toying with my nipples as he kisses my shoulders lightly. I place my hands over his and push them harder onto me, wanting him to hold nothing back as I poke my ass out and grind against him slightly.

He takes his hands off my breasts and tries to unbutton my pants, and I do it for him as I hear him slide his belt off behind me and step out of his pants. I look behind me and see his cock at full erection. My mouth drops in surprise as I stare at him with wide eyes. He grins as he runs his hands over my bare ass and slaps it lightly.

I continue looking at him over my shoulder as I lean lower on the wall and spread my legs. I want his cock inside me now, but I know he's a tease. All I can do is show him how badly I want it, and at this point, I'll do almost anything.

He reaches his hand down and feels my pussy in between my legs. I place my head against the wall and close my eyes as I moan. His fingers are so smooth, and he moans as he touches my clit.

"You're so wet," he whispers.

"I can't help myself," I respond as I look at him.

"Oh yeah?" He grins as he positions his cock at the opening of my vagina, swirling it in circles as he teases me.

I try to back myself up, so he slides in, but he backs away slightly. I chuckle and stand up, turning to face him as I lean against the wall.

"It's not nice to tease me," I say as he walks toward me.

"I was never known for being nice," he responds.

I smile as he pulls my hair again. I look at his cock and slide down the wall until I squat before him. I reach down and

touch my clit with one hand while I stroke him with the other. He throws his head back and places his hands on the back of his head while he looks at me.

I stick my tongue out and lightly lick the tip of his dick, staring at it and wondering how I will fit it all into my mouth before I place my lips on the tip of it. I slowly take more into my mouth until I think I'm as far as I can get.

I pull back and suck on it as I look at it, using my hand to stroke the parts of him I can't reach. As I move my fingertips in circles around my clit, spreading my wetness all over my pussy, I decide I want to take in more of him.

I push forward slowly, taking his cock deeper into my throat than I thought I could. I hold back from gagging as I hear him moan and feel his hand on the back of my head, pressing on it gently.

I end up gagging, and the sound only turns him on more. I slurp along his dick as I feel him harden between my lips. I moan while sucking him off, feeling the vibrations from my fingers on my clit shoot through my body.

I pull back and gasp for air as I lick around his dick again and look at him. He grins and grabs my arms, pulling me to a standing position as he kisses me. I pull him close, making him press me against the wall again as we kiss.

He pulls back and grins at me as he sticks two of his fingers into his mouth and pulls them out slowly. I take his hand and lick them, too, loving the way I taste on him. I'm so hot right now, he could get me to do anything he wanted me to.

He takes his fingers out of my mouth and places them on my clit, and I moan as he kisses me. I throb, and my nipples get harder as he pushes his fingers deep inside me. I gasp as he moves them upward, hitting my g-spot just right. I grab onto his shoulders and grip them tightly as I moan. He kisses my neck and bites it again as I feel my walls tighten around his fingers.

I reach out and stroke his cock, but he pins my hand against the wall above my head. I grin, knowing he must be almost ready to bust since he has to restrain me. My mind goes blank as he takes me to completion, and I feel myself come all over his hand.

He pulls back from my neck and takes his fingers out of me before licking my cum off of them. I grin, and he picks me up again, looking deeply into my eyes as he kisses me. He pulls back from his embrace, and I expect him to slide into me right away.

Instead, he looks at me and brushes my hair behind my ear. I place my hand on his cheek and feel more than just a physical craving for him. I'm beginning to understand him, and him me. He kisses me lightly and slows down as he carefully slides his dick into me.

I gasp beneath our kiss and frown, surprised at how he feels inside me. His cock curves upwards perfectly in this position, and I wonder how long it will take me to climax. As he slowly thrusts inside me, keeping his forehead pressed against mine and looking into my eyes as he does, I realize it won't take long.

"Oh my gods," I whisper as I moan into his mouth.

"Fuck," he groans. "You feel so good."

"You feel amazing," I respond as I press his head harder against mine. "You're gonna make me come."

"Come for me, June."

His dark voice sends me into oblivion. I scream as I feel myself burst on his dick. He thrusts into me deeper as I do, and I feel my juices drip down my ass as he continues.

He thrusts faster and kisses me deeply. I moan as our tongues swirl in each other's mouths, and he grows bigger inside me. I look into his eyes as he bites and sucks my lower lip. Again, I can't get close enough to him, even though he's as deep inside of me as he can get.

He thrusts faster inside me, and my back rubs against the wall. It hurts, but I don't care. I don't want him to stop. I can

tell I'm ready to come again, and all I need is for him to keep going.

"June...." He whispers as he holds my ass tighter in his hands.

"Do it," I respond as I look at him, knowing I'm about to make him bust. "I want you to come inside of me."

He looks at me with a primal stare and closes his eyes as I feel him pulsate inside me. His pulsing makes me come again, and I dig my fingernails into his back as I scream his name. As I do, he busts inside me, moaning and gripping my ass tightly.

I watch him throw his head back as he groans and opens his eyes to look at me again. After, he slows his motions and pulls back as he looks at me with a grin. I watch as his chest rises and falls as he catches his breath.

"Screaming my name, huh?" he asks as he thrusts into me again.

I gasp as he does, even after he comes he still feels fantastic. "Again...." I open my eyes and stare at him with a smirk. "I couldn't help myself."

He chuckles and lifts his chin as he looks down at me. He brushes my hair out of my face and smiles. I grin back at him, feeling something happen between us. I want to kiss him, but I don't know what having sex with me means to him. Could he feel like I do, that this is starting to feel real? Or is this just a part of the deal I made?

"Guess tying your hair up didn't help," he comments as he touches the locks hanging over my face.

"It's still pullable," I reply as we laugh.

"Is that a word?"

"It is now," I respond as I look at him.

Something flickers through his eyes before he looks down at himself inside me, pulls out slowly, and moans. He gently lowers me onto the ground and wipes his brow as he looks at my naked body.

I exhale and look at the sky as I exhale deeply and look back at him. We both chuckle, and he rubs the back of his head as he looks down at his pants. He reaches down for them and pulls them on before walking over to my clothes and handing them to me with a grin.

I pull them on and look at him from the corner of my eye. I wonder if he felt what I did during that or if it was just sex to him. It couldn't have been, there was more there, but I wonder if I'm just convincing myself of that because I *want* him to feel more toward me.

As I pull on my clothes, I realize I've entirely given in to my desire for him. The guilty voice is much quieter in my head, and I know I'm falling for him as I watch him buckle his pants and look out over the island.

I want to ask what that meant to him, but I know I can't. I'm his *fake* bride, and I need to remember that was the deal we made, as much as I want it to be something more.

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JUNE

Lingering in the air is the mixed aroma of our scents, an aura that helps me ease into Lamian's arms. He wraps them around my waist, pulling me closer until I'm turned to face him, resting a leg over his body. He lays his hand on one of my ass cheeks, covering its entirety.

As I nestle into him, waves of aftershock shake my body, sending vibrations from the base of my spine up through my neck. He kisses me on the forehead, further relaxing me into a serene state.

Just as I can finally start to let go and enjoy the aftermath of our encounter, I am hit by a brick wall of guilt that consumes me whole. Here I am, laying on another man's chest while visions of Tyson run rampant through my mind.

Though as tiring as these thoughts are, they are practically a mainstay in my mind at this point. I'm no longer caught off guard by them anymore after the initial surprise of their suddenness.

Physically, I feel so safe being held like this, Lamian holding my naked body and keeping me warm as I hold his relaxed cock in my hand. Emotionally... to call it a mixed bag would be putting it lightly.

Everything in my mind is such a mess. Why does it feel so wrong yet so right to touch Lamian like this?

If Tyson wasn't constantly making his presence known in my mind then I could really bask in this afterglow with

Lamian forever. After all, he'd never taken care of my sexual needs like that.

No... what am I saying? I deserve to feel this overwhelming guilt. Lamian knows how to pleasure me as if he's known me for years but that doesn't make it right.

"June?" he whispers softly. "Are you still awake?"

"Yes, why?"

"I just wanted to ask if you're feeling alright?"

I want to tell him everything but I bite my tongue. If I was avoiding the topic of Tyson all this time then now certainly wasn't going to be the right moment.

"I'm fine, I just need some sleep," I tell him.

"Do you want me to escort you back through the passageway to your room?" he offers.

"Uhm..." I ponder. "I'll sleep here tonight, if you're okay with it."

"Yeah, that's alright. Goodnight June," he murmurs.

"Goodnight Lamian."

I breathe deeply, easing the tension away from my body as I focus on how good Lamian feels in my hands. The temperature is perfect as we nestle underneath the blanket, lulling into a gentle, deep sleep. The night whisks us away, silencing and fading the world around us into darkness as we submit to slumber.



THE AMBIENT SOUNDS of the rain against the castle walls bring me back to life as I bat my eyes open. The storm sounds easy this morning, though a light onset of thunder and lightning hands in the far distance.

I lay facing the wall for a few minutes with Lamian's arms still wrapped around me. He sleeps soundly as the thunder

booms in the distance. The ensuing lightning casts shadows on the wall in the shape of the window frame.

After some time, I turn to face Lamian. The shifting of my body slowly lifts him from his sleep. His eyes meet mine as he wakes, smiling as he does so. The indigo color of his eyes remind me of the late nights back on Protheka, when the sun would go down earlier in the night, painting the perfect picture for a stargazing date for Tyson and I.

There my mind goes, thinking of Tyson again. I turn away from Lamian, feeling ashamed. He lightly squeezes my shoulder.

“Hey, are you alright?” he asks.

“Well...” I begin, but before I can answer, there comes a knock at the door.

Lamian rises up, throwing on a bath robe as he walks to the door. Opening it slightly, I hear a servant greeting him and delivering a message of some sort. Lamian nods and closes the door, making his way back to the bed. He sits on my side, on the edge of the bed.

“We have plans for this evening,” he informs me.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“It’s my brother, Rej’thorek,” he explains. “He and his mate have invited us to dinner.”

“Are we going then?”

“That depends, usually it’s an instant yes but it depends on how you’re feeling,” he asks concerningly.

“I’m...” I mutter, contemplating what to say. “I’m okay to go. It’d be rude not to.”

“Good, it’s settled then. We’ll dress fitting for the occasion, you’ll also get to meet his mate. She’s a human named Laura.”

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to tell me something by mentioning his brother’s mate is human, but I’m too consumed by my own feelings to delve into it.

“I suppose then it’s time to put my skills to the test,” I say in response.

“June, do you feel like you’re ready?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”



“It’s good to see you again brother,” greets the demon that walks toward us.

With outstretched arms, he wraps Lamian in a hug, patting him in the back and kissing him on the cheek.

“You, too, Rej’thorek. You seem to be in good health.”

“I certainly am, thanks in part to Laura here,” says Rej’thorek, gesturing to the woman beside him.

“Greetings Laura,” says Lamian, curtsying to his brother’s mate who returned the bow. “Let me introduce you to my mate,” he continues, gesturing to me. “Come forward, my love. This is June.”

“Hello, it’s a pleasure to meet you both,” I greet, mimicking the bow they exchanged with one another. “It’s good to see a fellow human being treated well,” I say, smiling at Laura.

“It truly does. I hope for a better future for all of us here on Galmoleth.”

“Alright then ladies,” interjects Rej’thorek. “Shall we sit and eat?” He asks with all of us nodding in response.

Lamian pulls out my seat for me after seeing his brother do the same for Laura. After the demon brothers take their seats across from each other, a servant approaches. He holds a wine decanter, pouring some into empty glasses placed in front of us by other servants.

“Thank you for having us,” I tell our hosts.

“It’s our pleasure,” replies Rej’thorek. “When I heard that my dear brother had found a mate of his own, I felt happy for

him. When I received further word that she was human, I was delighted, sharing the news with Laura.”

“We were eager to meet you,” explains Laura. “And so, here we all are.”

Servants approach the table, holding trays of various foods both hot and cold. It was time to put what I’ve learned to use. Selecting the appropriate fork, I pick up some of the food served onto my plate. I insert it into my mouth the way Lamian taught me, garnering praise from his brother.

“I must say, your etiquette is simply impeccable. It’s as if you’re one of us,” he gushes in amazement. “And your posture is excellent.”

“It’s certainly a whole lot better than Cora’s,” adds Laura.

“Who are they?” I ask her.

“She’s my sister,” she explains. “Perhaps she could learn a thing or two from you in tableside etiquette.”

“Cora is a human I’ve come to consider family. And Natalie,” says Rej’thorek.

“A friend,” Laura explains.

“I’m happy Laura has other humans to turn to.” Rej’thorek continues as he looks at his brother. “Do you?” he asks me.

“Oh, well uhm, no,” I tell him, thinking of Tyson.

“How are the rest of our brothers?” asks Lamian.

“They are well, as far as I know.”

“How many of you are there?” I ask.

“King Asmodeus bore ten sons. I am the fourth,” says Rej’thorek.

“That’s a big family,” I reply in astonishment. “Your father must be so proud of you all.”

The brothers shoot concerning looks at each other.

“Well,” muttered Rej’thorek. “I don’t think any one of the siblings would say that. The birth of our youngest, Akos,

killed the matron who bore him. Our father never forgave him for killing one of the few child-bearing matrons left.”

“Alas, we shan’t talk about Akos,” adds Lamian. “This is an occasion to celebrate.”

“Of course. I’m proud of you brother and I wish you eternal happiness with June.” “You two look great together,” Rej’thorek continues, raising his glass of wine to us.

Laura follows suit as well as us, cheering one another to good health in a toast. As I looked on at Laura and her demon mate throughout the course of the dinner, I couldn’t help but picture myself and Lamian in their places.

They feed each other and share frequent kisses, with Rej’thorek resting his hands on Laura’s knees in between conversations. My mind wanders ahead to a hypothetical future, where Lamian and I’s fake relationship becomes real.

I gaze over at him as he laughs and eats. When he notices me looking at him, he winks and smiles, suddenly making me think that the future I think of could very well be coming true.

When I’m not eating or talking, I continue delving further into my thoughts. Living with Lamian would bring stability and safety, a life without worry, and one that’s lavish in love. Is that what I could be feeling for him?

I can’t deny how passionate he seems as a lover, how good certain parts of me felt both physically and emotionally when he took me like I was his.

No, what the fuck am I saying right now? It’s Tyson that my heart and body belong to, not to some demon! He’s the one I love and I’m his girl... a cheating sinner. That’s who I am.

“June?” asks Laura. “Are you alright?”

“I was asking you about the food, but you seemed... preoccupied,” says Rej’thorek concerningly.

“Hmm? Oh, uhm, I’m fine. Please, don’t worry about me. I think I’ve just had too much to drink,” I say, feigning a laugh.

I glance at Lamian who looks at me in anguish. For the rest of the meal, I’m silent, drowning internally with no one to

save me.



THE MOMENT we enter Lamian's quarters, I collapse onto the bed, anchored down by my remorse.

"June," calls Lamian from behind me, closing the door as he enters. "What happened back there?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why did you go silent near the end of our meal?" he asks.

"Why are you so concerned?" I snap.

"June..."

I sit up, shooting an angry look at him.

"Maybe I just didn't have anything to say, okay?"

He tilts his head, scanning me up and down with his eyes.

"Did Rej'thorek or Laura say something that offended you?" he said softly, coming closer.

I shake my head, thinking only of Tyson. His face is all I see in my mind, specifically the last time I saw him, when he screamed my name. I feel my eyes well up. Without having the strength to hide anything anymore, I bury my face in my hands as tears drip down onto Lamian's floor.

"Is it me?" he continues, sitting beside me.

Again, I shake my head, unable to talk. My sobbing grows worse, emitting sobs and cries of woe every few seconds. Lamian rubs my back but it does little to comfort me, only stuttering in my attempts to answer anymore of his questions.

I've got to calm down. Trying to distract myself, I try to think of something that comforts me, something that makes me feel good. Instantly, the image of me on top of Lamian comes into my mind, recalling how otherworldly he felt inside of me.

But that thought only serves as an oxymoron, reverting back to Tyson's bloodied outstretched hand as he reached for me in my abduction. Only he was on my mind during the entirety of my prison stay, inspiring me to keep fighting for the impossible chance of seeing him again. I know he'd be the same in that situation.

I think of seeing Lamian for the first time, reminded of how much hatred I was filled with when he entered the cell. Now, I can't deny how much my feelings have turned around for him, and how validated he makes me feel in my own pursuits of getting back home.

"June, can you talk to me?" he asks, nudging my elbow.

"I... I..."

"June... How about I take you back to Protheke?"

"Wh- What?" I reply, caught completely off guard by his offer.

"We can go back to Protheke, I can get it organized for today."

I can't tell if I've passed out and started dreaming.

"Are- Are you sure?" I ask in disbelief.

He gently takes my hands into his.

"Yes."

"Okay," I answer, almost incredulously. I take a deep breath in an effort to focus. I must find out if Tyson is okay.

Lamian gets up and starts to get changed. As I look at him, I feel an overwhelming wave of gratefulness and appreciation for him. Between Lamian and Tyson, I feel like a pallas caught in the web of a yillese.

My mind has become so muddled that I no longer know which direction to take, but either way, my past calls to be resolved once and for all before I move on.

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LAMIAN

June, *I never ever meant to make you feel like this.*

I look at her, still sobbing even after my offer to take her back to Prothekeka prematurely. I decide not to prod her any further, wanting her to let it all out before our eventual departure to her homeland.

Shit, I never even meant to make myself feel like this.

My heart breaks as I hear her sob in anguish behind me, with those familiar feelings of responsibility returning. Maybe I got way too ahead of myself with this plan, especially with how sudden I inserted June into the mix.

I can't help but feel I overwhelmed her, that she only agreed to it in the first place because of how much she was pressured into accepting. I mean, I hand-selected her from a fucking prison cell. She must have already been so weak in spirit, and now I've only broken down the last remaining parts of her shell.

Perhaps it's the right move to bring her back to Prothekeka. If it makes her feel even just ever-so-slightly better, then it's worth it.

But why do I feel this type of pain too? This heartache feels so invasive, cutting me deeper than any blade ever could. Looking at June through the reflection of a mirror, she's the only reason I can think of, maybe because I'm falling...

No. I need to remember the plan, that I'm not intentionally trying to court June. She's not my mate... yet I can't deny the

way I feel around her, how I feel so much more than perfect in her company. I see her look up at me as I continue watching her in the mirror.

“Lamian...” she calls out weakly.

Before turning, I grab a cloth that sits on my nightstand.

“Yes, June?” I reply, giving her the cloth.

She takes a moment to wipe her face and breathe.

“Are you serious about taking me back? I know you already said yes but I just didn’t expect for it to be so soon... Can we really do it?” she asks. Her face, even though it carries heavy bags and tear marks, still maintains a glimmer of hope that shines through in her eyes.

“Yes, of course,” I tell her, walking over. I stoop down on my knees, bringing myself to her level.

“June, I would do anything for you,” I add without hesitation.

Wait a minute, what the fuck did I just say?

My answer gives her strength as her eyes perk up with a smile. She reaches out, pulling me in for a hug.

“Thank you so much Lamian, it really means the world to me,” she whispers in my ear. Pulling back, she kisses me on the cheek before standing up. She moves to the window, looking out in the direction of Ti’lith.

“Okay... how are we going to do this?” she inquires, her voice back to sounding more composed.

I join her, looking out through the window where the storm grows heavier over the city. Its downpour is unforgiving, like the guilt that consumes me.

“You need not worry June, I’ve got a contact over in the main city,” tell her, pointing to Ti’lith. “He’s reliable and will be able to get us to Protheke without issues.”

“Alright,” she sighs. “This’ll be my first time in Ti’lith, what’s it like down there?” she asks.

“Everything there either wants to fuck you or rip your guts out. Otherwise, it’s a good spot to get a drink,” I tell her, snickering.

“Sounds enticing,” she chuckles.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask.

“Just give me a few more moments to get changed and gather myself, then we’ll head out.”

“Okay, let me know and we’ll move.”



THIS CITY HAS GROWN MORE DISEASED since the last time I stepped foot within. Towers unappealing to the eye stretch sky-high, smoke clutters the air above us, and a smell of blood and fire linger in the air.

Delinquents roam the streets, filling every corner with their filth. Bars are everywhere to be seen, not a single one of them empty. June grips my arm tight, disguised underneath a hooded cloak to conceal herself from the beady, prying eyes of the sex-starved thugs that followed her.

“How much farther is it?” she asks, looking up at me.

“Not far now, we’re almost there. Keep your head down, the last thing we need is trouble from one of these assholes,” I instruct her.

A lone juvenile across the street catches sight of us walking down the sidewalk. He sniffs us from afar, licking his lips with his eyes pointed at June.

“They can’t tell that you’re human but they know the smell of a woman. I’ll keep you safe but don’t even look at them, they’ll take that as an invitation to come and try to fuck you.”

The lone zonak comes a little closer, stopping in the middle of the street. He sniffs the air again, growling at June. I snap my gaze at him, which puts a swift end to his trouble making.

I stare at him until he disappears around the corner completely. Through June's hand, I can feel the intensity of her heart beating.

"I bet you're glad I taught you some moves yesterday," I say to her upon resuming our journey.

"Yeah but I hope I never have to put them to use," she replies, laughing nervously.

We turn down an alleyway where the smog grows thicker. I look behind us before continuing through it.

"I don't like this Lamian," whimpers June.

"Come on, it's a shortcut," I retort.

"No, I can't, I'm sorry."

"Okay fine, let's turn-"

Suddenly, another zonak jumps out in front of us, brandishing a dagger. As if he doesn't notice me, he makes a beeline straight for June who swivels behind me.

I catch the zonak by his head, lifting him up into the air. He flails about before I fling him into the nearest wall, leaving a trail of blood as his body slides down it.

"See what I mean?" huffs June.

I roll my eyes, grabbing her hand once more as we opt for the longer route to our destination. After another few minutes of scaring off thugs and close calls, we make it to a tower where my contact awaits us.

"Here we are," I tell June upon our approach.

"Is this one the tallest?" she asks, casting her gaze into the sky.

I open the door, allowing her to step inside first. We take a flight of stairs that stretches on for a few minutes, eventually taking a door that leads to a balcony overlooking the entirety of Ti'lith.

"My contact is here, are you ready?" I ask an out-of-breath June.

“Yeah... let’s do this.”

I hold her hand, leading her forward to meet my associate. There stands another demon, also wearing a hooded cloak. He hears our footsteps, turning to greet us with a smile.

He pulls down his hood, revealing a magnificent long braid of white hair lined with gemstones. His eyes were a macaroon yellow, and above the ridge of his brows were small white horns.

“Long time no see, Lamian. You look well,” the demon calls out to me as we approach.

“You haven’t changed a bit, Tolmond,” I reply, hugging him.

“You know this demon personally?” asks June from behind us.

“We have a long history between each other,” I tell her, sharing a laugh with Tolmond. “Allow me to introduce you to June,” I continue.

The two introduce themselves to each other as I look around, expecting a contraption of some sort for getting back to Protheke.

“Lamian said you’ll be able to help me get back home. Do you use some kind of magic?” asks June.

“He’s a soz’garoth of many talents,” I tell her.

“I have skills and knowledge dabbling in both fire and chaos magic,” explains Tolmond. “As well as other types of magic that’s not usually tampered with by demons of any kind.”

“Basically, don’t get on his bad side,” I joke.

“I see... I think I need another moment to get ready,” says June.

“Okay, let me know when you’re ready to go and I’ll show you what to do,” replies Tolmond.

She walks to the edge of the balcony that overlooks the city, giving Tolmond and I a few more moments to catch up.

“How is Piper doing?” I ask.

“She’s doing very well. No grudge held against me?” replies a smirking Tolmond.

I chuckle and shake my head.

“No, not anymore,” I tell him. “Besides, I’m finding out that there’s more to life after being the center of an embarrassing display,” I say, gesturing to June who’s deep in thought.

“Very good. She’ll want me to say hello for her.”

“Return the sentiment for me, and that I wish her the very best.”

June turned around, still thinking as she approached us.

“Alright, I’m ready,” she says confidently.

“So Tolmond, how exactly does this work? I was expecting to see some sort of machine upon our arrival here.”

“You could call it that,” he smirks, handing me a small gray object the size of my palm. “Take this, it’s a beacon that’ll open up a portal for you to travel harmlessly back to Protheka.”

I hold the device out for June and I to inspect.

“How does this work?” I ask.

“See the top part with the darker shade of gray? Slide that back with your thumb. Doing so, the mechanism will slide back to reveal a red button. Pressing that button will open the portal, just step through and you’ll be on Protheka soil.”

“Can I have it?” asks June, taking the device in her hands. “Have you ever traveled there using this?”

“Yes, plenty of times all while underneath The Hooded One’s nose,” he tells us. “Your father has no clue something like this exists,” he says to me.

“Let’s keep it that way,” I reply.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” asks an unsure June.

“My word is my bond, you can trust me.”

She looks to me for approval, easing up when I assure her he's telling the truth.

"I appreciate you doing this, Tolmond," I tell him, patting him on the back.

"You owe me a favor," he replies with a wink. "Now when you guys wish to return, slide that mechanism back and press that button, exactly the same procedure as before. It'll take you back to this very spot. Oh, and be sure to hold onto each other for extra measure."

"Slide the thing, press the button, hold each other, and step through... Okay, I think I got it," says June.

"One more thing, try your best not to hang around for too long down on Protheke. I've got a mate waiting for me at home, and I don't want to be late getting back to her."

"Thank you my friend," I say to Tolmond before turning to June.

She wears a look of both hopefulness and conflict. I pray that I'm making the right move for her.

"Want to open up the portal then?" I ask her.

"Yeah..." she mutters, hitting the button.

A deep blue portal forms in front of us. Through it, we can see the fields of Protheke.

"Take my hand."

June grabs me, sharing one last look of reassurance with me before we take the first step into the portal.

"Here we go..."

JUNE

Rocks bite into my knees, and I blink, disoriented. It takes a bit for my eyes to adjust to the bright light.

How long has it been since I've seen *sunshine*? All I've seen outside the castle windows are constant storms.

"You okay?"

Lamian is at my side before I can even see clearly, helping me up. I blink again, and the last vestiges of spots clear away from my vision.

He looks at me with a look in his eyes that I can't quite place. Maybe he's more disoriented than he's letting on. Demons aren't known for sticking around Protheika after they mete out their death, destruction, and kidnapping.

"I'm fine," I say a bit more breathlessly than I'd like. "Great. Nothing like portaling between worlds. It beats the smell of a hoqin, at least."

Lamian knocks his fist against a tree and watches it suspiciously, like he's trying to figure out if it might attack. A small woodland creature scurries up the branches, and he rests his hand near his waist, like he's about to draw a weapon.

"There are dangerous creatures in these woods," I tell him, because there are. Rather, there are creatures in these woods that are dangerous to me. I don't know if I've met anything in my life more dangerous than Lamian, aside from perhaps his father. "But that's not one of them, unless you're some sort of seed."

“I knew that,” he blusters.

I almost smile before I remember why I’m here.

Who I’m here for.

“That’s my camp.” Through the thick copse of trees, I nod toward the crumbling walls that surround rather pathetic looking tents and poorly constructed wooden homes. It’s not much, I guess, compared to the hulking palace we just came from. But for a long time, it was all I’d ever known.

I was so happy here, not knowing anything else.

Lamian stops his close inspection of the tree and throws his shoulders back like he’s about to head off for war.

“Very well. I suppose we should be on our way,” he says, nodding towards the walls of my camp. The stone wall has been repaired since their attack, but not well. A rock falls from the main wall as we speak, and the guard doesn’t even look up as it clunks down to the dirt floor below.

“No.” I can’t take him. A demon in our camp? I’m not sure what’s worse—them trying to kill him, or him killing everyone in defense. “They’ll freak out, you know that.”

He purses his lips like the spoiled Prince he is, but he doesn’t push me into taking him. He simply says, “Meet me here in three hours. Same spot.”

I nod and take a step backward, hesitating for some reason. I almost warn him to stay safe, but I choke the warning back. He doesn’t need it. If anything, the whole of Protheka needs warning from him.

I feel his eyes on me as I walk into camp, but when I turn to look, I see nothing but the forest. Still, I can’t shake the feeling like I’m being watched.

Maybe it’s wishful thinking. I want to matter to him more than I do, which makes my stomach sink with guilt. How do I explain any of this to Tyson? I can use the excuse that I was kidnapped, but I’ll always know how I really felt.

How I feel.

The guards let me in, stunned. The two women at the well in the center of camp shout, overjoyed, when they see me, and soon the entire camp has gathered around me in a circle.

It shouldn't feel this claustrophobic.

I'm home.

So why do I feel so lost?

“June!”

Tyson's voice breaks through the murmurs of the crowd, and soon his body does, too. He jostles and maneuvers his way through the crowd until the tip of his nose presses against the crown of my head.

“You're alive,” he murmurs. “I thought...”

This is what I wanted. It's familiar, staring up into his face, with his slightly crooked nose and dangerous smile. The thought of being with him again is what sustained me as I fed on scraps in a dungeon.

This is what I wanted, but what do I want? Is it this? Am I sure?

Yes!

I hate myself in this moment. I've wanted this for so long, what right do I have to feel conflicted now? All of my sacrifices have been for this exact moment, and instead of drinking in the sight of the only man I've ever loved, I can't stop thinking about some arrogant asshole with a cocky smile.

I just thought it would feel different. Now that I'm finally here, what felt natural between us before now becomes awkward and stiff. Tyson tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, and instead of feeling warm I almost flinch away.

I don't understand what's wrong with me.

“What happened?” Tyson shakes his head. “One minute, we were together, and the next, it was like the entire sky exploded. I thought the demons had taken you.”

“They did take me.”

The memory of that day makes me shudder. Everything had been so picturesque, so perfect. And it was stolen from me before I could even blink. Even the memory of my head resting on his chest is tainted now.

Is everything tainted? Can I ever think of Tyson without thinking of what followed? The terror and the dungeon and the Prince?

Tyson takes a large step back. The rest of the crowd does the same. Eyes that once looked thrilled to see me have now turned cold. Like I've done something very, very wrong.

I don't understand.

"Demons." His lip curls. "I suppose they sent you here, then? No one comes back, not if they don't allow it."

"Yes, but..." I pause. How can I possibly explain this? Yes, but it's all mostly pretend? Yes, I'm fucking a demon, but I think of you when I do it? It's a lie. When Lamian's lips are on my skin, I can't think about anything else. "Only one demon brought me. I made a deal with him—"

"A deal?" He laughs, but it doesn't sound like he thinks anything is very funny. "And tell me, what did you have to do to get this deal?"

"I—"

"You let him touch you? The one who saw fit to bring you back? Just him, or as many as you could take in a night?" Tyson looks at me like he's never seen me before in his life. "You're disgusting."

Disgusting. The word sears into me like a brand. On the one hand, what choice did I have? I was stolen from him. I only did what I had to in order to survive. To see him one last time. The things I've seen, the things I've *done*. Things I never thought I was capable of before. It would make most grown men weep to live through it.

On the other hand, when Lamian touched me, every bit of me burned. When Lamian touched me, I liked it.

I wanted it. Fuck, I wanted more.

And Tyson stares at me like he knows everything I did while I was gone. My heart hammers in my chest. It's unfair. If he were taken captive and...and bought by some demon woman, I wouldn't blame him for sleeping with her. It would hurt, and I'd be jealous, but most of all, I'd just want him safe.

All I've ever wanted is to be together, and now the future I thought I couldn't live without is burning all around me. This can't be real. It has to be some sort of mistake. Maybe if I explain it better, make him see that I didn't want to leave him, that I wanted to come back...

"Tyson?" I say, voice cracking.

He doesn't hear me, though, because there's another woman calling his name. She's pretty, fresh-faced with dark brown hair and darker eyes. She smiles at Tyson, running one comforting hand over his shoulder and another hand resting on her swollen belly.

I've seen her before. She worked in the kitchens, and she was always so nice to me. Or was she just being nice to Tyson, and I was nearby?

Part of me wonders just how long this has been going on. The other part, the one in denial, thinks that maybe she's just a good friend. Maybe this isn't what I think. I try to catch her eye, to get some hint of the truth, but she keeps gazing up at Tyson.

She doesn't spare me a glance.

"Who is she?" I feel like I'm going to be sick. Like he's just gutted me in front of our entire camp.

He looks like he's bored with this entire conversation. He gives her a soft kiss on her forehead and strokes her cheek with his thumb. It makes me want to puke all over his shabby shoes.

"My wife," he says. "Why? Did you expect me to wait for you forever while you sucked off every demon you could fit a hand around?"

He could have slapped me and it would be less painful. My eyes fill with tears until everything around me is blurry, but I

use every ounce of my willpower to keep them from falling.

“That’s not fair. I didn’t choose this!” I cross my arms over my chest, but the gesture is more self-soothing than defiant. Despite my best efforts, my chin tucks itself toward my chest and my shoulders hunch defensively. “What should I have done? Die?”

“Yes!”

He answers me so swiftly that the words themselves nearly knock me to my knees. And then his hand is grabbing my elbow, and another man matches his movements. They’re dragging me to the camp leader’s tent.

My feet keep slipping and twisting on the ground, one more than once my foot slams against a large rock, but neither of them pause. They throw me into the center of the patchy blue tent, and the camp leaders look up at me in surprise.

“June? You’re alive?”

“And she shouldn’t be.” Tyson speaks before I have a chance. He nods his head towards me while I struggle to my feet. “This demon lover just tried to infiltrate our camp so she can carry secrets back to her new friends.”

“I’m not a spy!” I can’t believe this. “And what secrets? What secrets did I *ever* know about this place? That the taura tack tastes like shit? I’m still just *me*. Tyson, please—”

“Stop saying my name!” he roars. He turns back to the camp leaders. “Who knows what they did to her. They might have...have infected her with something. Something that can spread. Or cursed her so our crops won’t grow. Or planted her to help them take even more women.”

“No. I wouldn’t!”

But I can tell the camp leaders don’t believe me. One woman, who I’ve known my entire life, narrows her eyes in a way that suggests she doesn’t trust the demons any more than Tyson does. Possibly less.

“We need to make an example of her,” he continues. “If we let her go now, others might try to do the same. We need to

burn her at the stake, publicly, so everyone in our camp can see what happens to traitors and spies.”

Burn?

And then they lead me away, outside, where some of the people I've trusted the most pile up enough wood to set me aflame.

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LAMIAN

The whole time... She was in love with someone else?
The whole fucking time?

I launch a heavy fist into the tree beside, leaving a hole in my aggression. Feeling so full of anger, I feel no pain seeing the many splinters left in my arm, pulling them out one by one.

All this time, I thought she might've liked me a little more than as a friend, shit, I even had the notion I might have been the one she was in love with – or at least falling for – the whole time... But I guess not.

Instead, it's that fucking jerk she was having an argument with, the one who wants her dead. Well they can fucking have each other if they want to, I'm done with June.

It was a mistake to think that during the past while I was building something special with her, a friendship I've never experienced to such a degree. What a great lie it all turned out to be.

What a waste of my precious time to have invested so much of my time and effort into this, and my emotional energy... I shouldn't have ever let my vulnerability come out. I only ever get hurt when that happens.

I watch as she's hauled away from the man she's been trying to get back to for so long. Good riddance, maybe I saved him from heartbreak. Look, you're doing us all a favor by having her seized.

I take this as my cue to get out of here, not wanting to actually witness her murder. Turning to leave, I hear her screaming and yelling, shrugging it off as she's no longer mine to worry about. She can get herself out of this one if she wants to.

I pull out the portal beacon, sliding back the mechanism and pressing it. I know Tolmond will ask where June has gone, and I'll tell him the truth. I'll say to him how much of a lying cheat she was, and that leaving her here was the best outcome for us both.

Then, I think I shall go find a matron for me to bed. Tomorrow, I'll go down to the jail and choose another inmate from the cells. The only deal I shall make with them is if they want to live then they must be my wife.

Right now, the only thing I have left to care for is myself. No longer am I ever putting myself in harm's way ever again. It's time to focus on my goal of seizing the throne from King Asmodeus.

I hesitate when I hear another bloodcurdling scream from June, turning back just to see what's going on. The villagers have wasted no time putting together a makeshift stake for her to burn on.

Circling around it, villagers pour oil and are cutting rope to use for constraining her. June headbutts one of the men holding her down, who slaps her across the face in return.

I feel an itch, one that can be scratched by intervening... But no. She deserves all of what's to come her way, for concealing the truth from me and leading me on.

I turn back around, about to take the first step into the portal when I hear her again.

“Lamian!”

Without any further thought, my body takes over. I sprint as fast as I can toward the village, coming to the edge of the hill where I stood upon to watch her. I jump off at the last moment, gliding through the air as I make it over the wall enclosure surrounding the village.

They haven't noticed me yet, as they carry her to the stake and tie her up. I'm almost there when they pour the last of the oil onto the wood that encircles her. The match is struck and I leap for it.

I collide with the man holding the match, sending it hurtling toward the wood. It lands on one of the planks, setting alight the burning ring of fire. I don't have much time before the flames swallow up June.

"It's... It's one of the demons!" yells the one named Tyson.

I lock eyes with him, making a beeline straight for him as I recall the words he sued against June, but the man I landed on grabs my legs. He crawls on top of me trying to stab me with a dagger he brandishes.

I kick him off of me, sending him onto the flames ravenous for flesh. He screams, clambering to his feet as he runs off around a corner. The hard impact of his body sends a wave of momentum through the wickers in the air as the fire draws nearer to June.

Two more men sprint at me. Without weapons, they prove to be nothing more than a pair of pesky yilleses as I put them down with ease. I kick one to the ground while I pick up the other, slamming him down onto his fellow man.

I glance at June, just barely able to see her as she squirms about on the pole. I break into a run, jumping over the flames as they sear the end of my cloak. I land hard on the untouched wood.

"Lamian, I-"

"Shut up while I untie you," I order.

I untie the ropes, trying to maintain my composure as the fire gets closer. With her constraints undone, I grab her by the waist and throw my cloak over us both. As I jump from the stake, the fire spreads onto the cloak, acting as a shield to protect us from harm.

We land with a hard thud on the dirt ground. I push her away from my flaming cloak before I hurl it off in the

direction of Tyson. It momentarily distracts him as I pounce on him.

As I peer down at him, I'm reminded of how June had been trying to get back to this man for so long, realizing how undeserving he'd been to receive her love. My punches rain down on him, painting a bloody portrait of his face.

I'm stopped when June catches my hand.

"Lamian, that's enough."

A bloodied Tyson lays beneath me, gasping for air. I pull out a cloth from my pocket, throwing it onto his face before standing. Creating a fresh portal back to Galmoleth, I turn to June.

"Let's go."

Without another word, she grabs my arm and we step into the portal.



I DIDN'T SAY much to June after we gave the device back to Tolmond and bid our goodbyes to him. During the journey home, she had tried to strike up conversation many times, all going unreturned by me.

Eventually she gave up, accepting the only words I'd be saying was which direction to take and how long until we got back to the castle. Now, we're back in our quarters as we silently think to ourselves.

I'm by the window, overlooking the city of Ti'lith from where we've returned. She sits on the edge of my bed, trying to make sense of what happened back in Protheka. I know because she told me without my asking.

"I just can't believe it, after all this time," she mutters.

I see her looking at me in the faint reflection granted by the window.

“I never expected that kind of reaction when I thought of what’d it be like going back home- I mean, Protheke.”

I try to tune her out. Everytime she speaks, I’m unable to tell if there’s something else she’s trying to hide from me. She calls out my name, which I ignore again, only prompting her to continue calling out to me.

“Lamian, what’s wrong?” she pleads, throwing her hands together. “Please stop ignoring me. Am I going back to prison?”

“What?” I blurt in disbelief. “No, of course not June.”

“Then can you just talk to me?”

“June, not now,” I insist.

“Is it because of Tyson?” she asks.

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head in response.

“Lamian, you asshole,” she shouts, standing up. “That was a trick question, the only way you could’ve known about him is if you were watching me the whole time I was in the village!” she continues, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

“Heh, you fool. Watching you is also the only way I could’ve known to save you. If I hung back by that original spot, you’d be roasted meat by now,” I responded, finally turning to face her.

She scoffs, seemingly knowing I’m right.

“I only wish you’d have told me about this Tyson guy the whole time,” I explain.

“Why does it matter to you?” she demands. “What difference would it have made in your precious plan? Excuse me for not providing you all the details of my personal life you bastard.”

Her words of hate pierce me, aching my already shattered heart.

“It’s nothing to do with knowing what was driving you back to Protheke,” I tell her solemnly.

“Okay, then what was it?”

“I...”

I stare into her eyes, wanting to feel angry but only finding sorrow.

“I thought we trusted each other June.”

Her eyebrows narrow as if she was expecting a different answer. Quickly, they snap back to fit the rest of her antagonistic composure.

“Trust? You hand selected me from a fucking prison cell, there’s no such thing as trust between a victim and her captor!”

I see her fighting back tears, ripping away parts of me that perish beneath her words of fury. Realizing I was the bad guy the whole time, I only nod in acceptance of my faults. Maybe I never deserved anyone like her in the first place.

“I suppose you’re right and I’m wrong,” I agree quietly, turning back to the window.

“No, no, no! You’re not done listening to what I have to say!” she continues, coming to my side.

“I think I am, I’ve heard all that I’ve needed to hear,” I tell her calmly.

“Come on,” she pleads. “What are you fucking talking about right now? Say something, fight back!” she begs, pounding my chest with her fist.

“I just thought I was starting to care about you deeply, like a dear friend of mine that I’ve never had before,” I say as a tear intrudes, falling gracefully down my face.

She stopped talking, looking me up and down like I’m her reflection in the mirror.

“You... care for me?”

“Like I said, I thought I did but I guess not. I shouldn’t have ever offered to take you back to Protheke,” I tell her coldly, walking to the other end of the room. “You hate me now anyway.”

She gasps, cupping her mouth as a well of tears stream down her face.

“Well fine, I don’t care anyway,” she hisses.

I watch as she walks to the wall, hitting the stone to open up the passageway. Before she steps through, she shoots a glare at me in which I see a hint of regret. She snuffles and walks through to her own room, leaving me in my lonesome.



SOME HOURS LATER, it is only a flickering flame and I keeping each other company in my quarters. I look at myself in the mirror with a tired body, all the energy drained from me. I carry exhaustion in my eyes, barely able to stand straight.

I glance over to the paper and quill on my desk where I had attempted to pen a letter of my thoughts, only to find my mind was out of ink.

Climbing into bed, I feel how cold it is without her in it. I try to relax as I lay looking at the flame in the corner of my room. It dances endlessly, restless like my train of thought.

Unable to sleep, I throw on a bathrobe and hit the stone in the wall. I feel the icy air of uncertainty hit me as I step into the passageway. As I make the journey to June’s room, I stumble around in my mind, trying to think of what to say to her.

The wall to her room slides open, and there she is, sitting on the edge of her bed. When she turns to look at me, I expect animosity, but in the time that’s passed since she left my room, a sadness has come over her trembling face.

“You haven’t been able to sleep either?” greet, stepping through the hole in the wall.

“No, I’m guessing you’re the same.”

I nod in response as I sit beside her, somehow not feeling any fear. There is still a tension that lingers in the air but it no longer boils, simmering like a pot of water left over the stove.

“I... just wanted to check on you. Try and get some sleep,” I say, going to stand before she grabs my wrist.

“Can... you sleep here tonight? I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts.

“Yeah, of course.”

I get into bed first, waiting for her as she wipes her face before joining me. I feel the familiar warmth return as her body comes close to mine. As I hold her, my own feelings for her confront me head on, prying my eyes open to their magnitude.

At the same time, she has passed out in my arms just moments after settling in. I can’t keep pulling the veil in front of my own naivety anymore. She feels more like home than any place I’ve ventured to.

How far I’ve fallen for her is an immeasurable distance, a journey I’m no longer resisting and turning back from.

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JUNE

The warmth of my bed gently guides me out of my sleep as I bat my eyes open. Slowly tuning into my senses, the first thing I see is a sleeping Lamian across from me. His arms are still wrapped around my waist, having pulled me closer at some point during our slumber in the night.

He looks as peaceful as the aura in the room, his breaths as gentle and quiet as a feather gliding through the air. He wears no worries across his face, a sight that warms my heart. I almost feel compelled to kiss him and almost go to do so but my brain stops the actions of my heart.

I imagine what it'd be like to stay here forever, pondering why it is that I feel nothing but safety and comfort in his arms. It's almost like he has whisked me away to a place where no one knows who we are, far away from the troubles of the past.

Yesterday was the most painful day of my existence, having been stabbed in the heart, and almost literally burnt to a crisp... Yet in a way, I'm glad to have made the journey back to Protheka regardless, despite the preconceived notions everyone else had of me the moment I mentioned being captured and held by demons.

Tyson... by no means was it a mistake to come back and see him the way that I did. I almost find it funny that he gave me the closure my soul needed for the longest of time.

I think back to when I lived there in the village when we'd see each other everyday. There are memories I can look back

on with a smile but I realize now it was never ever love that we shared.

It was nothing more than a lust between two young lovers, otherwise then how could he have moved on so swiftly to go and impregnate another woman? Seeing what he made of his life without me knocked me back to a reality I'd been dodging for so long, that in fact I had moved on too.

To think I'd been resisting it to the ends of Protheke, oh what a fool I've been. Alas, it's not an easy task to accept such radical change, especially in a new environment where you're of no more importance than a speck in the universe.

With Tyson out of my life for good, I feel a massive weight lifted off of my shoulders. Never did I ever feel with him what I do with Lamian. I knew there had to be a reason I fell for him so quickly, for there always was a small voice that told me I was lying when I tried to deny it.

Seeing him now as he lays so serenely makes me feel comfort I never imagined was possible. Did he see something in me all along that I couldn't?

I smile at the thought of it, imagining him seeing me in that prison cell as a marble block of my feisty attitude and determination, thus choosing to carve me into a more capable version of myself, refined and stronger.

More importantly, he never made me feel like I had to depend on him for my new strength, for he showed me the pathway to be able to tap into it on my own.

Delving deeper into my reflections, I realize that the mistake with my past wasn't the time which I spent with Tyson itself, but rather it was assuming that it was ever going to go anywhere beyond what we were.

It was merely directionless, an excuse to continue wasting my youth away until he grew bored and discarded me when I was no longer exciting.

Now it's a different story, one that I'm in charge of writing for myself. Even if the life I currently lead isn't an authentic one, I feel as though I've developed some type of direction

and that is miles better than anything Tyson could ever give me.

While I admit to myself it is a path that is not yet quite clear, it has already given me so much fulfillment that I'd been missing all my life.

Things aren't the best between Lamian and I right now but I have him to thank for all of that for he saw within me the opportunity to shine and it is what he helped me to do.

His eyes gently open, wearing a subtle smile on his lips, though it is not as warm as the ones I had grown accustomed to.

"Hello," he greets, sitting up in bed and yawning.

I sit up with him, suddenly remembering the things he had said to me yesterday before separating. It serves as a blunt, cold reminder that he doesn't feel the same way about me.

Part of me wants to wrap my arms around him and confess every single thought I've been having about him, all of which I'd been biting my tongue on.

Yet, I know better, for now isn't the ideal time for confessions, especially so soon after a day filled with conversations of a raw and mournful nature.

"Did you sleep okay?" I ask, trying to melt the leftover tension between us.

"Yes," he mutters.

"Thank you for staying the night here with me," I tell him, squeezing his hand. He doesn't squeeze mine back.

"No problem."

I sit there twiddling my thumbs, trying to think of something else to say. Each second passes by like a minute with my anxiety gripping at my heart so ruthlessly.

"Are there any plans that we have for today?" I blurt out.

"Hmm, yes actually. I'll tell you in just a moment."

Lamian throws the blanket off of him and rises to his feet. As he stands, he raises his arms in a stretch where I catch a glimpse of his body that had remained concealed all night underneath his bathrobe.

It suddenly takes me back to the night when he took me, and how good he made me feel, enough to make me forget about all the problems going on. I halt my mind before it wanders too far in its imagination.

I can tell he is still hurt after yesterday and so I mustn't be so ignorant and insensitive of that. Besides, I myself can't let go of what he said to me yesterday, and by no means is he going to get any hints of how I feel about him.

If I ever hope to have a chance with Lamian, it'll take more effort than I've ever exuded with him before. It could be a long time before he's even openly friendly anymore, swallowing my pride as I accept the possibility things may never be the same.

I may not even have the chance to fully reconcile with him by the time our arrangement is wrapped up... Wait! The arrangement! I don't even want to go back to Protheke anymore but... I don't want to let Lamian down either, not again.

"We have an important day ahead of us," he announces as he presses the stone switch on the wall.

"Tell me what it is, I'll be ready."

"Tonight, we have dinner with my father, King Asmodeus," he tells me with a hint of fear in his voice. "All of our training has prepared us for tonight, it will prove to be a fateful evening for the both of us."

"Wait, so soon?" I ask, caught off guard.

"We both knew it was coming sooner rather than later. I should have told you sooner but...other things came up, so forgive me."

Other things like my betrayal.

“I know, it’s just... Now that the day is here, it feels a bit overwhelming. Aren’t you worried?” I ask him.

“Of course I am, my father isn’t an easy man to please. Never have the family had a pleasant dinner that everyone walks away from feeling happy, in fact I don’t think my father even knows what that means.”

“Okay... I’m sorry, I don’t mean to concern you further,” I say remorsefully.

“Fret not June, I know you have no ill intention... But right now, you need to get up and get ready. I arranged to have a few dresses delivered to your closet a few days ago, pick one from it and come to me when you are ready for a final revision of everything.”

“Okay Lamian,” I nod.

He looks at me, carrying sympathy in his eyes.

“I hope you are ready for tonight, June.”

With that, he disappears into the secret passageway. So, the day has finally come for me to prove my worth. I take a deep breath, mentally preparing myself for what will undoubtedly be an eventful night.

I get out of my bed, stomping over to the mirror. In its reflection I see a woman who I’ve nothing but faith in. Tonight will be the ultimate test of all that I’ve learned, more than the dance, and more than dinner with Rej’thorek and Laura.

“Come on,” I say to myself. “You can do this, nothing and no one will stop you.”

Even with self reassurance in my abilities, I feel the pressure of Lamian sitting heavy upon my shoulders. No matter how well he represents himself tonight, I know his success with King Asmodeus rests in my hands.

I pull open the closet next to the mirror, pulling from it a beautiful black dress with red tips at the hem. My anxiety weighs heavy in the air but I refuse to be halted by it.

Despite no longer wishing to return to the land I once called my home, I still have a deal that I must uphold my end

of. I need for Lamian to see that at the very least, I am loyal.

I still want to help him out for his father's good graces in return for all that he's done for me. Maybe part of Lamian expects me to come running through the passageway, to get down on my knees and beg to be bailed out from it.

Yet my mind remains unchanged. I'm not in this for Tyson anymore, I'm in it for Lamian. I'm going to go down there with him and give it my all.

I'll walk right up to King Asmodeus and convince him myself that I'll give birth to as many babies as he wants, just so he can see how wonderful of a son he has in Lamian.

The King needs to see how much Lamian stands out from the rest of his kind. I have a dreaded feeling that perhaps his father isn't a very loving fraternal figure.

That's something I don't think I'll ever be able to change but I'm determined to put things into a better perspective for him to see clearer.

The whole world may have turned against me but I won't fail you Lamian.

LAMIAN

The main hall of the castle has always been a magnificent structure, with an arrangement of six pillars placed symmetrically around us. The stone walls were aged but maintained their strength and were beautifully illuminated by the amber glow of sconces placed evenly across them.

A smell of incense burned lightly in the air, adding to what is a pleasing ambience fitting of an evening meal.

A cloth the color of oxblood stretched across our dining table, upon which lay black candelabras with red candles, silver plates of appetizers both hot and cold, and jugs of water for June and Laura. Hanging overhead was a chandelier carved from wood, decorated with statuettes of many ur'gin.

June and I sit across from Rej'thorek, who has his thick mane of gray hair tied back into double braids. Beside him is Laura who wears a red dress with black tips at the hem, contrasting well with that of June's.

Rej'thorek wears an all black suit that fits him well, similar to the suit I wear of the same color. In place of a black waistcoat, I wear one of a maroon color.

Sitting near the top of the table is Or'bas, who wears a silver shirt and waistcoat to pair with a black suit of his own. He looks judgingly between Rej'thorek and I.

The set of doors at the top of the hall swing open. I nudge June, and us alongside everyone else stand up to greet King Asmodeus as he strides confidently toward the dining table.

Clutched around his arm is a matron whom he sends away as the servants pull out his seat for him at the head of the table. He wore a matte black dress vest with ruffled sleeves, finished with a golden waistcoat.

“Acknowledge your King before we sit and feast,” he announces with a booming voice.

Everyone bows to King Asmodeus, putting a sinister smile across his face as he waves a hand at us all, giving us the cue to take our seats and get comfortable. He snaps his thumb, summoning the servants to fill our empty glasses with wine from decanters.

I pick up my glass, keeping an eye on June to make sure she’s executing all the moves correctly. We raise a glass to our Father and wish him good health before finishing the wine in one mouthful. The servants waste no time in returning to top them all up.

I look to my father and Or’bas, suddenly becoming nervous as it looks as though both of their eyes are surveying June and Laura. I knew they’d get extra attention due to them being the only humans in the room but it didn’t make it any easier.

They look away, relieving my worries for the time being. I remind myself it could just be paranoia.

“Let us feast now,” commands Asmodeus.

The servants bring us trays with our first course. I can feel the tension brewing whenever they get close to my father, as though he’ll snap at any given moment. We wait for the King to take the first bite before we dig in.

I glance at June, my heart dropping when I see her going for the fork that’s used only for the second course. She hesitates, opting for the correct choice. I feel a sense of relief but remain cautious, knowing I won’t be able to step in and make the save for her if she screws up.

Or’bas wears a strange look in his eye as I spot him inspecting June, as if he’s eager to catch a mistake. I hope for her sake, she proves his suspicions wrong.

“I was dealing with a wretched human two days ago,” he says suddenly. “One that I brought up from the prison cells by the name of Elise.”

I hear a gulp come from June, guessing it was a friend of hers.

“Told her all she had to do was get on the bed and satisfy me. Not only did she refuse but she slapped me across my face,” he hisses angrily, before a sick smile comes over his face. “So I had the bitch killed.”

I glance at June, her eyes widened with shock.

“She was wearing this pretty little necklace too. Thought maybe one of her whore friends might want it, and because I’m so kind, I went down there to give it to one of them in exchange for some fun.”

June’s hand grips my leg under the table, I can tell something is wrong.

“This swine named Hailey comes swinging at me when I step into the cell, so I made sure she joined her friend whenever those little fuckers go when they die.”

June’s grip weakens as if she’s suddenly exhausted. As I rub her hand under the table, I glare at Or’bas, who smiles mockingly at me.

“You did well my son,” commends Asmodeus. “If there’s one thing I refuse to ever tolerate on Galmoleth, it is those who cannot do their duty.”

He smiles proudly at Or’bas and turns to the rest of us.

“My Princes, that goes for you too. Follow as Or’bas did and deal with defiers ruthlessly, they deserve no mercy,” he commands coldly. “Now then... any news from the rest of you?” he asks.

I swear I see him glaring at me but it is impossible to tell, so I avoid looking directly at him.

“Rej’thorek?” he calls to my brother.

“Yes, Father, things are going very well for me. Laura and I-”

“Okay,” blurts Asmodeus, interrupting my brother who then shifts awkwardly in his seat. “Let us now begin the second course of this evening’s meal.”

Clicking a thumb, the servants come to clear our tables of all plates and cutlery used for the first course. After replenishing the appetizers on the table, they were out of the way in no more than two minutes.

“So, Father,” I begin after swallowing my first bite. “How’s business with you?”

Asmodeus looks at me like I’m a fool, chuckling and shaking his head. Beside him, Or’bas mimics the same.

“Oh Lamian, don’t bother trying to sweeten me by asking such rudimentary questions. My own matters are of no concern to a Prince. The only ones I discuss important topics with are the Council of Seven, and even they themselves don’t get to hear everything if I don’t consider them important enough.”

Everyone is silent after his words, even Or’bas pokes around at his food.

“Right, well... Rej’thorek?” I say, getting my brother’s attention. “How have things been since our last meal with each other?” I ask him.

“Good, my brother,” he replies with a smile. “You and June look very well together I must say, even better than last time,” he adds.

“Thank you kindly,” I say. “As do you and Laura, of course.”

Us four raise our glasses to each other. June, ever confident in her attitude, turns her glass to my father, who seems perplexed by the invitation to drink with us.

“It is truly an honor to be here in your presence, King Asmodeus. I thank you for your hospitality,” she exclaims.

“Yes, it really is a pleasure,” adds Laura.

Everyone else including me raises our glasses to Asmodeus whose eyes scan each of us. Finally, just as it's starting to become weird, he accepts the toast and returns the sentiment.

“Yes, indeed it certainly is a privilege for members of your kind to have the opportunity to be dining here with me,” he replies with a condescending tone. “I’m glad to see that you both have been taught how to cast aside the scummy behavior of humans and shown how to behave like submissive companions.”

He smiles morbidly as we all drink. Just then, Or’bas leans over to Asmodeus, whispering something into his ear. The rest of us exchange nervous glances amongst each other, wondering what the fuck he could be conspiring.

As Or’bas retracts back into his seat, Asmodeus takes turns glaring between June and Laura.

“So, how many children are you carrying for me?” he asks June directly.

My heart almost bursts out of its chest as I await for what she has to say back.

“Oh, uhm well... No results as of yet I’m afraid,” she tells him.

“Hmm, to be expected.”

June casts her gaze down, looking hurt. Almost instinctively, it ignites anger within me as I snap toward Asmodeus.

“What exactly do you mean?” I demand.

Suddenly, Or’bas shoots up out of his chair, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

“Don’t you dare act oblivious in front of the King! You’re trying to take June as your mate instead of breeding her like the whore that she is!” he screams. “Maybe you should throw her my way, I’ll keep her chained to my bed-”

“You watch your puny mouth or I’ll shut it for you permanently!” I holler back at him. Behind me, June glares a

hole into Or'bas.

"I'm not surprised to hear of this," states Asmodeus. "However, the real culprit responsible for all of this is you!" he yells, catching us all off guard when he points to Rej'thorek.

"What? Me?" he retorts, looking around in surprise.

"All along you have been planting these sickening, useless ideas in everyone's heads, to mate with humans instead of using them for their true purpose!" accuses Asmodeus.

I, alongside everyone else, are too shocked to know how to react.

"That's why Lamian here has embarked on the same road as you, I'm not letting him end up like the pathetic son that you are Rej'thorek! Humans are to be used for one thing only and that is breeding, there is to be none of this mating business to be conducted with them."

Rej'thorek and I stare in fury at our father, suddenly unaware of the fear we once carried in his presence. I want nothing more than to jump across the table and beat him to a bloody pulp like I did with Tyson.

"It is simply impure and directly violates my bloodline, the only mates fitting of my sons are the matrons and that cannot be disputed!" he declares. "Rej'thorek, I may have been able to overlook your treasonous behavior if you had kept it to yourself, but now it has poisoned the minds of your brothers and I will not stand for it!" he shouts, pounding a fist down on the table, almost breaking it.

"Hold it right there!" I yell. "Rej'thorek is not the one you should be angry at..." I say, looking at June and stroking her face before facing Asmodeus again. "It's me. It's true that I've been plotting to marry June but it was only because I wanted to regain your good graces after my failure with Piper."

I look around at everyone as I continue.

"But sitting here tonight and seeing you treat us the way you do has only made me realize that I don't want your stupid throne anymore. Asmodeus, you are the one who's poisoning

us, you've turned Or'bas against his own brothers and even still you are trying to cast Rej'thorek out!"

Rej'thorek looks solemnly at me as does Laura. I feel June grip my arm from behind me.

"The biggest reason why I no longer give a shit about you or your throne is because I've realized I want to marry June for real. Don't you dare utter another word about her in that foul way you were using or you'll regret it!"

"Lamian, you little-"

"Shut the fuck up!" I yell, witnessing a rare sight as Asmodeus looks scared for a moment. "June, a fucking human, knows me better than you know any of your own sons!"

I turn to face her, seeing how shocked she is at the words coming from my mouth. Across from us, Rej'thorek shares the same awe as June but in his eyes is proudness. Or'bas has sunken into his chair, only staring at me with wonder while my father gawks at me lividly, though he is speechless.

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JUNE

I don't have any words to describe what Lamian just did. Is he insane, telling his father and brothers everything that's happened between us? What if they disapprove, and he gets punished, or I get killed?

I look down at my hands and notice my fingers trembling as I gaze up at Lamian's father. His mouth is agape, and it seems he's stammering for the correct words. I'm petrified, and I look up at Lamian standing tall over the table, resting as he thinks of what he's just done.

Laura looks at me, and I catch her gaze. She tips her head toward the entrance to the dining room and pats her face with her napkin. I place mine on the table and stand before his father speaks.

"No one is leaving this table," he shouts as he slams his fists down.

I pause mid-rise and look at Lamian. His gaze is fixed on his father, but he looks at me briefly before looking back at him.

"It's okay, June, you can go," Lamian says firmly.

"I am the...." His father exclaims as he stands up.

"I said she can go!" Lamian yells at his father, who stares back at him in shock. "It's okay," he continues gently as he looks at me. "Go with Laura. Let me handle this."

I avoid eye contact with the King as I stand and follow Laura out of the dining room. We close the doors behind us,

each lean on a side of the wall bordering the door, and listen as my heart races.

Unfortunately, all we hear are murmurs. The doors do their job of keeping the King's privacy, much to my discomfort. I want to know what they're saying and to ensure Lamian stays safe. I close my eyes and lean against the wall as I blow air out slowly through my lips and catch Laura's gaze.

"Don't worry," she says with a wave of her hand.

"Don't worry?" I whisper emphatically. "Are you kidding me? They almost just killed each other in there!"

"That's not unusual for this family, unfortunately." She continues, looking at me with a sympathetic smile. "Hey," she says gently. "Are you alright?"

"No! No, I'm not alright." I turn from the doors and wander down the castle hallways, fidgeting with my nails as I go. Laura catches up to me and walks alongside me, not saying a word as she lets me get everything out of my system. "I was kidnapped by a demon, told I need to marry him, made a blood bond with him, left behind the man I love, or, I mean *loved*, back home, and...."

"Wait." Laura steps in front of me. "Hold on. There's a lot to unpack right there. You were told you *need* to marry Lamian?"

"Well, that's what he told me when we first met. I agreed so I could try to return to Protheke, but...."

"June, if you're being forced to do this, you can tell me." I see the sincerity in her eyes and appreciate it, but I shake my head.

"No," I respond gently. "At first, I was. All I wanted was to get back home, but over time I developed real feelings for Lamian, I mean, I think I..." My words trail off as she grins at me.

"The big word, huh?"

"What?"

"Love?"

I remain silent and keep walking. *I'm in love with him*, I think to myself as I fidget with my hands behind my back. Laura catches up again and steps in front of me with a smile.

“You have to stop walking, or I’m going to lose you in this castle, and we’re not going to find our way back to the dining room,” she chuckles sweetly.

I run my fingers through my hair and look at the ceiling as I shake my head. “I can’t believe it.”

“Being in love with a demon? Yeah, it hits you hard when you first realize it.”

“Did it scare you?” I ask, half of me not wanting to know the answer.

She nods and smiles. “Absolutely, it did. I fought with myself for many reasons because of it, but in the end, I couldn’t deny it. Rej’thorek is my mate, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She looks behind me at the dining room doors. “But the world they live in is a culture shock, especially when we’re taught that demons are evil from a young age.”

“Ugh,” I groan as I look around. I look back at her and catch a skeptical look in her eye. “What?” I ask curiously.

“You said there was a man you loved on Protheka?”

“Oh,” I sigh and look at the floor. “Yes. His name was Tyson. When I first got here, I felt terrible for getting feelings for Lamian, but now....”

“Now what?”

“Now, I know that I only *thought* I loved Tyson. What I feel for Lamian, it’s....” I pause as I smile and look for the words. “It’s pure and exciting and magnetic. It’s like a driving force, I never knew what that meant until I met him. I didn’t want to admit it because I felt I was betraying Tyson, but he’s moved on now, we both have.”

“So, you really want to make this work with Lamian?” She asks me cautiously.

I nod. “I do. Without my past in the way and the agreement that was binding us together, I think we have a real shot at this.

The chemistry is undeniable, the sex is *wild*, and I feel like the most important woman in the world when he looks at me.”

I’m surprised by the words that are coming out of my mouth. The thoughts swirling in my head since the first night I saw Lamian have now been put into a coherent order. I feel my head clear as I nod to myself and look back at Laura.

“I want to be with him, Laura,” I admit with tears in my eyes.

“Honey!” She exclaims as she hugs me. “Why are you crying?”

“Because....” I sniffle into her shoulder. “I thought I knew what love was, and I was so, so wrong. If I hadn’t been brought here and never met Lamian, I wouldn’t know how truly amazing real love could be.”

Laura chuckles as she continues to hold me tightly. “Mates always find their way to each other,” she says gently as she pulls back from our embrace and looks at me. “You were never going to miss him. It was always meant to be.”

“You really think so?” I chuckle as I wipe the tears from my face.

“Well, hey,” she says with a silly grin. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

We laugh, and she pats me on the shoulder, turning me around toward the dining room. “Come on,” she says gently. “Let’s go back in.”

We are almost at the door when Lamian busts out of it, looking around frantically until he sees me. He rushes to us and takes me in his arms. I look around him and watch Laura walk back into the dining room as she smiles at us happily. I grin back and hold Lamian as I breathe in his scent.

“I am so sorry,” he says as he places his chin on the top of my head.

“For what?” I ask as I look up at him.

“Come on,” Lamian says with a grin as he pats my lower back. “Let’s go to my chambers and talk.”

We walk in silence, and I worry that he overheard Laura's and my conversation. I know he said he wants to marry me for real, but is that true? What if he does, but he doesn't fully *love* me yet? My thoughts twirl around each other as we walk back to his room. So much for having a clear head.

We walk into his room and close the doors behind us. I walk into his bedroom and sit on the bed, watching him walk toward me. He kneels on both knees before me and takes my hands in his.

"June, I meant what I said in there," he says sincerely. "I want to marry you, not for any title or any promotion within my family. I want to marry you because of who you are. I have never met someone more beautiful, funny, witty, and kind than you, and I can't stand by while you keep thinking I don't feel this way about you. I don't know if you feel the same, and if you don't, so be it, but I can't go another moment without you knowing how much I love you."

I look at him and watch as he gulps. I shake my head, unsure of what to say, and he looks to the floor, defeated.

"No!" I manage to blurt out as I grab onto his hand. "No, I wasn't shaking my head because I don't feel that way."

He looks up at me, and I see hope in his gaze. "I do love you, Lamian, and I'm so sorry about Tyson, I was so conflicted when I first got here, but then I started falling in love with you. I couldn't help it, whether I thought I had someone back home or not. What I felt with him is *nothing* like what we have. If I hadn't met you, I would think love was something much less than what it is. You showed me that. I love *you*, Lamian, and I want to marry you because...."

My voice trails off as I try to choke back tears. "Because you are the man I always envisioned for myself, and even though you were right in front of me all this time, I only recently figured that out, and I never want to lose you."

Lamian smiles, wiping a tear from my cheek as I cradle my face into his hand and chuckle lightly. He takes my hand and kisses it as he continues to look at me. More tears fall from my eyes, and I look up at the ceiling.

“I’m so sorry, I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“Hey,” Lamian says, shaking his head. “You never have to apologize to me. June...” He pauses as he lowers his head to meet my averted gaze. “You just told me you love me, and you’re apologizing?”

We chuckle, and I shrug. “I guess that’s humans for you, huh?”

“Will always be a mystery to me,” he responds jokingly. “Come on.”

Lamian stands and pulls me up by my hand. He puts his arms around my lower waist, and I wipe my tears before placing my hands on his chest. He leans down and kisses me softly, his lips barely brushing mine, before kneeling on the floor again.

“I’m a bit ill-equipped for this, so I owe you a ring,” he says jokingly as he kneels on one knee and looks up at me while holding my hand.

I laugh. “Lamian, you don’t...”

“I do.” He interrupts as he smiles. “June, the first time I asked you to be with me, it wasn’t much of a question. I want it to be a question this time, and you can answer freely, without any pact, pressure, or threat...” He pauses and exhales before looking up at me. “June, will you marry me?”

I nod, and the tears start flowing again. “Of course, I will, Lamian. A thousand times, yes!”

We laugh, and he stands and kisses me passionately. I wrap my arms around him and sink into him, taking comfort in finally hearing him say he loves me. Now, my mind can clear, and I can be fully present with the man I was always meant to marry.

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JUNE

I giggle and look into Lamian's eyes as he chuckles and kisses me again. I relax in his arms and taste his sweet lips as he holds me close, wrapping his hand around my lower waist. I reach up and place my hands on either side of his face as we kiss.

He slows his kisses and pulls back an inch to look at me. I notice tears welling in his eyes and smile at him sweetly. I reflect on our adventure together, and all the times I've looked into his eyes.

The first time I spit on him, I saw a demon. The next, when we made the bond, I saw a trickster. As the days went on, my perception began to change. He became a free spirit when we flew over the island, a warrior when he taught me to duel, and now, I see all the aspects of him when I look into his eyes.

I realize now that he was never just a demon. He has always been more, it just took me longer to see it. I grin as I lean in to kiss him again, and he takes me in his arms swiftly, sweeping me off my feet and placing me on the bed as he climbs on top of me.

I love the way his weight feels on top of me. Safe, secure, and warm, like a blanket you can't sleep without. I run my hands over his chest as he caresses my arms lightly with his fingertips, sending goosebumps all over my body.

He kisses me, and my muscles relax. I can finally rest easy in his arms, knowing he loves me. That thought is quickly

replaced by the craving I feel for him as he starts to kiss my neck. I smile and crane my neck back, giving him plenty of room to explore with his lips.

He takes the opportunity and licks my neck. He slowly moves downward, licking along my neck and chest until he reaches my shirt. He kneels on the bed, and I sit up and raise my arms as he pulls my shirt over my head, looking at me with loving eyes as he grins.

“You are so beautiful,” he remarks gently.

“You’re the most handsome man I’ve ever seen,” I confess as I lift his shirt up.

He takes it off entirely, and I run my hands over his bare chest as he leans on me, cradling my head in his hand as he kisses me again. His hand moves to my breast, and he grabs it lightly. I’m surprised that his touches are so smooth, but I love how he’s being gentle with me.

He unclips my bra behind my back as he licks around my breasts. Once unbuckled, I slide it off my arms and drop it on the floor. Before it hits the ground, his mouth is on my nipples, flicking his tongue over them as I gasp with a smile. Everything he does to me feels like magic.

I hold his head against my chest as his arm slides under my back, pressing my breasts harder onto his lips. I look at him and catch his gaze while watching him suck on my tits.

I run my hand through his hair and admire him as he kisses down my stomach and trails his lips to my hipbones. He teases me, and I find myself antsy because of it. I love his soft kisses, but I want all of him so badly.

I watch as he takes my pants off and throws them aside. He leaves on my panties, kissing and biting around them as I bite my lip and watch. He slowly pulls my panties aside, revealing my swollen clit, and grins up at me.

“I love you, June,” he whispers as he kisses my clit.

“Ahh...” I moan. “I love you too, Lamian.”

He moans on my clit, and I instinctively grab onto the bedsheets, trying to externalize the shivers he sends through my body. He wraps his arms around my thighs and pulls me toward him on the bed, holding me still as I think the pleasure might almost be too much.

I moan loudly, and he sucks on my clit, moving his lips around it in circles as he presses down hard on it with his tongue. I close my eyes, and my back arches as I relax into his control.

As I begin to relax, he surprises me by sticking two fingers inside me. I look down at him with my mouth open wide, and he returns my gaze with another grin. I throw my head back again as he swirls his fingers and tongue around faster and faster until I can't take it anymore. I scream as my juices run all over his fingers.

He wipes his mouth and climbs back on top of me. I reach down for his belt buckle and undo it slowly as I kick off my panties beneath him. Running his fingers through my hair, he looks at me with his deep indigo eyes, and I can tell he's not just looking *at* me, he's genuinely *seeing* me, maybe for the first time.

I slide his belt off and drop it on the floor as he unbuttons his pants and pulls them down. I try to reach for his dick, but he stops my hand and guides it to my clit instead as he strokes himself. He leans back onto his knees, giving us a perfect view of each other playing with ourselves.

Watching the way he strokes his cock makes me wetter. He reaches for my pussy and parts my lips slightly as he stares at my opening like he's in a trance. Watching him get more turned on from looking at me keeps me going, and my body twitches as I watch him.

I press harder onto my clit, and my back arches. I grab his bicep tightly as I scream and come again, continuing to watch him touch himself.

As I come, he slides into me and holds onto my hips, so I don't move. I gasp as he begins thrusting into me hard and deep and leans his weight onto me as he kisses me. I press my

hands onto his back and pull him down, and he pulls back and leans up as I take my hands off him.

He interlaces his fingers in mine and pins them above my head as he leans on me again. Our lips barely touch as he moves in and out of me, and we share each other's breath like we do our hip movements.

We don't close our eyes. I don't want to miss a second of this. If a look could speak, I know he would say that he loves me, never wants to lose me, and that he doesn't want anyone else in this world. I've never been able to tell all of that from someone's stare before, but I feel like I can read him in a way that I've never been able to with anyone else.

We don't speak. We don't need to. I can feel him, not just his body meshing with mine and the way our fingers intertwine or the way our foreheads press against each other. I can feel his heart as if our bodies are living, beating examples of the emotions we've felt for so long. It's an experience I've never had, and it only makes me want him more.

Lamian withdraws his hands from mine and moves them over my body. I grasp the back of his neck and biceps tightly as I rock my hips with his. He leans up from me and places my ankles by his shoulders before leaning back in, rocking me on my lower back and hitting deeper inside me.

We moan together as I feel him grow more and more with each thrust. I feel my cum drip down the sides of my ass as he holds onto my hips tightly and slides in and out faster.

He moves his hands around to the sides of my hips and digs his fingernails into them. I see his eyes darken, and he almost pulls his hand away before I press it deeper into me. I want him to leave a mark, to remind me and tell everyone else that I'm his.

Before I can tell him how good it feels, I come again and throw my head back in exhilaration. He pulls my head back down and looks deeply into my eyes as I finish coming.

I watch his eyes close halfway as he groans deeply, and I feel him release inside me. He slows his motions as he looks

down at me and opens his eyes wide with an open mouth, looking like he's in shock.

“Oh fuck,” he chuckles.

“What?” I ask with a smile.

“I think I scratched you....” He says gently as he looks at my thigh.

I glance at the scratch and smile. “I like the mix of pain and pleasure, remember?”

We laugh before our faces fall serious and gaze into each other's eyes. He wraps his arms around me, and I place my legs back on the bed as he kisses me softly and shakes his head.

“How did I get so lucky?” he asks as he brushes my hair out of my face.

“A wise person once told me that it was always meant to be....” I pause and smile. “That there's no way we would have missed meeting each other.”

“Well, I knew I had to meet you when I first saw you,” he says with a groan as he rolls over next to me in bed.

I turn and snuggle into him as he wraps his arms around me. I laugh into his chest, and he chuckles and looks down at me.

“What's so funny? I thought I was being sweet,” he says playfully.

“You are,” I chuckle. “But I spit in your face the first time we met.”

He laughs loudly and holds me close as I giggle into his chest. Coming down from the laugh, he looks at me and shakes his head. “Well, to be fair, I deserved it at the time.”

“You absolutely did,” I joke as I interlace my fingers with his. “But seriously....” I continue. “You've taught me so much. Not even just about being a demon's bride....” I pause and look at him as we chuckle. “But about who I am and who I want to be. I had no idea what love was until you came into

my life, even though it was the most unexpected adventure I could have ever thought of....” I look up into his eyes. “Every part was worth it.”

“Even the shoes that were one size too small?” he jokes.

I laugh hard and slap him on the chest playfully. “Except for that part.”

He kisses me on the forehead and chuckles more as I bury my head in his chest. I hear his heartbeat slow as his breath tickles my hair, and he kisses my forehead again. I trace circles on his chest and think about the memories we’ve created this far. As I look up at him and he kisses me softly, I wonder what else is to come.

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LAMIAN

I walk through the castle's main doors, placing the object I'm carrying in my pocket. I grin widely as I enter, excited to show June my first gift for her. Well, my first gift for both of us.

My father has been relentless since the night we all had dinner together. I don't want June to feel unwelcome in the castle or on the island. I want to give her a sense of freedom and peace, and I feel the only way I can do that is to get us out of this castle.

Plus, she's been in my world for far too long now. I saw how she looked at her surroundings when we were on Protheke, and I know she feels more at home there.

I thought of the idea last night while she was asleep in my arms. Tolmond loves gems, and I had a few I had been meaning to sell, anyway. Waking up early this morning, I decided to visit him and trade some of my expensive stones for a replica of his portal.

He assured me it worked as the other one did and that we would have no issues. The only thing I need to do now is to find out where June wants to go in Protheke, and I'll whisk her away for however long she wants.

I creep down the hallways and get to the West wing without waking anyone up. I would rather not see my father and brothers before we go, partially because some of me might feel the pull to stay here, but I also don't want to hear anyone say anything bad about June.

They might not understand why I chose her, but I never had a choice. As June said last night, you can't choose your mate, it's something that is destined to happen, put into motion before you even meet them for the first time.

I open the door to my room and close it gently as I notice June still in bed. As I walk up to her, I see she is still fast asleep. I want to let her rest, but I'm too excited for the surprise.

I crawl into bed next to her and wrap my arm around her. She moans and chuckles as she turns around and cuddles into my chest.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“Mmmm...” She moans as she runs her fingers over my chest with her eyes still closed. “Good morning, handsome.” Her eyes open, and she frowns before she looks at me with confusion, then glances back at my clothes. “Where have you been so early?”

“I decided I wanted to get you a gift.”

“A gift?” She smiles.

I nod and fish the beacon out of my pocket. I hand it to her, and she turns it around before looking at me with wide eyes. She sits up and turns it over in her hands again as she wraps herself in the bedsheets.

“I bought it from Tolmond. He says it's a replica of the one he gave us to use.”

She smiles and covers her mouth with excitement before leaning over and hugging me tightly. “Wait, but Lamian...” She pauses as she pulls back. “Why do you want to leave?”

I look into her eyes and place my hand over hers. “I want you to feel at home when you're with me. This place...” I motion to the room. “Isn't where you feel truly at home, I know that. I also know I don't want anyone coming in between us, especially not my brothers or father, ever again. This way...” I slide the dark gray part of the beacon back to reveal the red button. “You can choose where you want to go, and I'll go with you.”

She smiles and brushes her hair over her shoulder as she looks at the beacon. After pondering, she looks at me with an excited smile and turns to face me on the bed.

“Okay, I have an idea.” I can hear the excitement bursting from her.

“What’s that?” I ask as I look at her and admire her enthusiasm.

“There’s a beach I’ve always wanted to see, near the field we landed in last time we traveled down there.”

“Well, in that case, we better start packing.”

“Really?” She asks joyously.

“Really,” I say with a grin as she hugs me again.

I hold her tightly and then watch her squeal with excitement as she opens the wall to her room and walks down the hallway. I walk to my closet and begin packing my belongings, trying to pack for a Prothekan beach, although I really don’t know the environment.

After we’ve packed, she meets me back in my chambers and kisses me on her tiptoes before placing her heels on the ground. She looks at me with sincerity and concern as she runs her fingertips along the edge of my shirt.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks firmly.

I nod. “If you’re going, I’m going. Plus...” I hold the beacon and flip it in the air before catching it. “If you decide you don’t like it there, we can always come back.”

“What if you don’t like it?”

“You’re going to be there,” I whisper in her ear. “I know I’ll love it.”

“Okay,” she says as she bends down to pick up her bag. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I hit the button, and the blue vortex appears again. I look at my mate, her face illuminated by the blue, spinning colors, and

smile with her as we step through.

The field is warm and vast as it was before. I watch as June covers her eyes from the sun and looks around until she points North. I lean into her and look where she's pointing as she turns to me with a wide grin.

"See that hill?" she asks. "The beach is right down there."

June walks into the field and spins around as the sun shines above her. Her bag flies out to the side as she clutches onto it and turns around, laughing. I look at her and wonder what I have done that's gotten me to such a joyous place with such an inspiring woman.

I follow her and clutch the beacon in my hand. Of course, I wonder what we will do once we get to the beach, and I also worry about what will happen if someone runs into us there. If we're caught, there could be significant consequences, and I can't risk anything happening to June.

I look around suspiciously, checking for anyone that might be around us. Woods border the field, and there's no sign of life but us, but I still feel nervous knowing that something *could* go wrong at any moment.

We reach the hill, and I watch June cheer as she rushes down it toward a beach with white sands and clear waters. I smile as I stand on top of the hill and look at it, noticing a peculiar island sitting far out in the ocean.

"It's real!" June shouts as she points at the island.

"You know that place?" I ask as I make my way down to her.

June laughs excitedly. "I only heard about it in stories, but I didn't know if it was real or not."

"What's so special about it?" I ask as I put my hands on my hips, thinking I should have dressed differently for the hot weather.

"It's an abandoned island," June begins as she looks out over the water with her hand over her eyes. "Apparently, it's overgrown with jungle terrain. I've only heard about it, but

I've always wanted to see it for myself. Someone told me you could see it from Northpoint Beach long ago, but I've never come here before."

I look around, still trying to ensure no one is around us. I don't want to spoil her moment, but as I look back at her, I realize she's caught on to my nervousness.

"That's actually why I wanted to come here," she continues. "It's in the middle of three territories, so it's been unclaimed for years. The war they would have to fight for one of them to claim it wouldn't even be worth it..." She looks at me with a smile. "No one would find us there. We wouldn't ever have to worry about anyone coming between us. We could make it our home."

I smile at her and pull her close as I kiss her deeply. She wraps her arms around my shoulders, and I pick her up and spin her around as we laugh. Putting her down, I look at her with playful suspicion.

"Did you trick me into this?" I ask playfully.

June laughs. "I wasn't trying to! I didn't know if it was real, so I didn't want to make any promises too early."

"Smart woman," I say as I take off my jacket and throw it on the sand.

"What are you doing?"

"Well..." I wince as the wings sprout from my back. "We have to get there somehow, don't we?"

I walk over and pick up our bags before kneeling in the sand. She climbs on my back, and I take off over the water, listening to her laugh through the sound of air rushing through my ears.

I look in either direction and see the territories she mentioned. Each is almost the same distance from the island, and I see no guards or scouts in the water or bordering the island. To ensure the island is vacant, I circle it a few times and look down at it from above.

She was right about the jungle being overgrown. It seems there's no clear path to the center, but what I notice that could be beneficial to us are the tall trees growing in the center of the island. Building a home up high from predators would be practical and wise.

I also see tracks in the dirt and sand of the island as I fly over it lower, checking for any threats. The prints look like animals, meaning we'll have a food supply.

As we round the final turn of the island, I have to turn upwards immediately to avoid flying into a waterfall. June holds on tight and laughs, and I join in as I look at the beautiful untouched nature she chose for us.

I slow my flight and land on a rock at the top of the waterfall that looks out over the ocean to one of the mainlands. I set our bags down and pull her in front of me, turning her to face the mainland as I wrap my arms around her and hold her close.

"Is this what you thought it would be?" I whisper.

"No," she shakes her head before turning around and wrapping her arms around me. "It's much, much more." She sighs and looks at me. "What should we call it?"

"The island?" I ask as I hum, thinking of an answer. "What about Aurelius?"

"Aurelius...." She echoes. "What makes you choose that name?"

I shrug. "I don't know, just came off the tip of my tongue."

"Well, I think it sounds nice."

I kiss her and hear the waterfall sound in the background as I hold her close. I smile beneath the kiss, knowing any pressure I felt back home to 'make it' in my family has been lifted. Here, I have the start of my own future, and the beginning of all of it was choosing June.

I pull back from the kiss and look out over the ocean with her as I feel excitement arise. What we choose to do with our

lives is up to us, and I can't wait to see where we'll be a year from now.

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LAMIAN

I still remember that day at the waterfall and how I tried to imagine where June and I would be a year from that moment. Whatever I tried to conjure in my head regarding future predictions could have never prepared me for this.

I awake and reach over to the other side of the bed, but June isn't there. I rub my eyes and remember it's Wednesday, and she's left early in the morning. Getting out of bed, my feet touch the freshly sanded wooden floor, and I stretch and walk onto our balcony.

Looking over the waterfall beneath our tree house, I wonder how lucky we are. We've been able to craft our dream house with primarily materials from the island, but also Volezimir has significantly helped in our endeavors.

After two weeks of living on our island, I realized we would need more materials than the island could provide. Although hides from the animal residents, wood from the tall trees, and various plants that acted as rope, we still fell short of making our own comfort.

I used the beacon to travel back to the castle and fetch Volezmir, telling him I needed him to keep our secret. He agreed, and I gave him the beacon before sending myself back. Now, he comes to Aurelius with various goods and materials every week, and June and I give him a list of what we'll need next week.

Today is Wednesday, meaning June has gone fishing for a healthy dinner, and Volezmir should be about to leave the

castle. He knows to find us on the beach fishing on Wednesdays, so I pull on my pants and head down to the sands, stepping in the dirt path we've beaten down on the ground.

I hear a rustle in the bushes and turn around, ready to fight whatever animal is about to attack. There is a pack of worgs that patrol the island-they must have arrived here years ago because they have managed to build a lively pack. They usually won't attack and only move at dawn, but I can't let my guard down.

From the nearby bushes appears a young equus. I smile and place my hand on my chest in relief as it runs toward me. June has started feeding the group of equus that roam the island, and this foal is one of her favorites. She hopes to tame it so she can one day teach it to be ridden and take instruction properly.

"Hey, girl," I say gently as I hold out my hand.

The animal flares its four nostrils and flips its mane to the other side of its neck as it shakes its head and approaches slowly. I stay still, as it's spooked from me before. June is the animal whisperer of the two of us, something she's been trying to teach me more about since we moved here.

The animal approaches me and suspiciously taps its nose on my hand before jerking away slightly. I tick my tongue on the roof of my mouth, and it presses its head against my hand again, nuzzling against it as I begin to pet it. I smile and try not to laugh from excitement, not wanting to scare it away.

I hear a whinny come from the edge of the jungle, and the animal looks at the noise before looking back at me and snorting, shaking its head, and running into the trees. I smile and put my hands on my hips, proud of myself for getting closer to the creature before I hear clapping from behind me.

I turn around to see June clapping with a broad smile. The cooler is at her feet, which I'm assuming holds a good amount of fish for dinner. She usually doesn't return this early.

"Very nice," she remarks.

“Well, I have a good teacher,” I respond as I smile at her.

As I’m about to ask her what we should name the foal, a blue vortex appears near the beach. We walk down the hill to meet Volezimir, who is looking around for us with our bag in his hands.

“Good morning,” I shout as we walk down the hill.

“Oh, hello, sir!” He waves at us as he walks toward us with our bag. “So today....” He unpacks the bag and shows us our items, like a merchant trying to sell the last of his goods.

I wonder if he enjoys this day of the week, as it’s probably his only excuse to leave the castle. I would be excited to go, too, it’s been a year since we left, and I’m still reeling from the joy of it.

“We have your bait, my lady,” he says happily as he hands June a box.

“Oh, thank you, Volezimir!” she chirps as she opens the box. “Maybe we can catch a predatory fish now. I’ve always wanted to try one with the large teeth.”

“The Narken?” I ask, surprised at her ambition.

“Well, we have nothing but time,” she comments enthusiastically. “Might as well try.”

“Hey, I’d be up for trying it.” I look at Volezimir as he rummages through the bag.

“For you, sir,” he says as he hands me a hammer and nails. “Have you thought more about where you’ll put the new deck, sir?”

“I think closer to the waterfall,” I inform him as I look at the toolkit. “It would be nice to get closer to it.”

“Excellent, sir,” he says lowly.

He hands me the bag, and I look inside it to see more food and spices. June and I have been on a mission lately to try new meats and vegetables from the island, but we like to put a spin on it with some familiar foods from home. Volezimir has even

made stops at local villages on one of the mainlands here to get June some familiar crackers and cheeses from her home.

“What do you require for next week, sir?” Volezimir asks as he pulls out his notepad.

“Hmmm...” I think to myself as I look at June. “Let’s get a bridle.”

“A bridle?” he asks, surprised.

“Yeah,” I respond as I pull June close. “I think that foal is about ready for some training.”

“That’s so exciting!” Volezimir comments as he jots the note down.

“I think we might need some vitamins,” June says.

I look at her and notice she looks nervous. I begin to worry that something might be wrong.

“Are you feeling sick?” I ask, concerned.

“Well, not exactly...” June says with wide eyes. She glances at Volezimir, who covers his mouth in excitement.

“What?” I ask as I notice their shared stare. “What’s going on?”

June giggles and turns to me, putting her hands on my chest. “Last week, I was suspicious, so I asked Volezimir to come twice. He brought me a pregnancy test, and it came up positive.”

My mouth drops, and I look at both of them as I process her words. I laugh and pick her up, spinning her around before putting her down gently. “You’re pregnant?” I exclaim happily.

June nods with a wide grin. “You’re going to be a father!”

I laugh and pick her up again as I kiss her. Volezimir gets out his notepad and begins jotting down notes. I put June down, and we look at him excitedly.

“We’re going to need vitamins, absolutely,” Volezimir comments as he continues to write. “We’ll also need lots of

healthy food and light spices. You really shouldn't be eating anything that could upset your stomach, my lady. Oh!" He looks to the sky and holds up his hand like he's had a revelation. "Maybe some Barnett root for nausea, that would be useful, I'm sure."

June giggles. "Thank you Volezimir."

"Leave it to me, my lady," Volezimir bows. "I'll get you everything you need."

I laugh excitedly, looking at June again before glancing at Volezimir. "Thank you."

Volezimir bows and smiles widely before opening the portal and stepping through it. I turn to June and kiss her as we grin when our lips touch. Pulling back from the kiss, I take her hand and swing the bag over my shoulder as we walk back up to our home.

When we walk through the front door, I put the bag on the ground and pick June up again after she places the cooler on the counter. I spin her around, and she laughs in my arms as I pull back and look at her.

"I'm going to be a father...." I repeat, trying to make it seem real in my mind.

"Yes, you are!" She chuckles.

"We're going to need a doctor to come and perform health checks on you...." I reach for her belly and feel it lightly. "We have to make sure everything's alright."

"Volezimir is already on it," she comments happily. "There's one coming two weeks from now. He has agreed to keep our secret, don't worry."

I place my hand on my forehead and laugh again as I look at her. I lean down and kiss her deeply, pressing her head close to mine as she wraps her arms around my back. I feel the love bursting through me as I hold her close and sweep her up in my arms as I carry her to the bedroom.

Lying her on the bed, she pulls me in for a kiss, and I rip off my shirt, incapable of stopping myself from expressing my

love for her. I take her shirt off, and she grips me quickly as she kisses me again.

I reach for her breasts and feel the softness of her nipples as they harden in my fingers. I fumble to take off my pants as she slides hers off and pulls me onto her. I sit back, noticing how hard I already am, as I pull her onto me.

She climbs on top of me and kneels on the bed as she wraps her hands around the back of my neck. I feel her wetness as she grinds along my cock, and I get harder for her with every motion. She reaches down and strokes me, making me groan with pleasure as I pull on her hair lightly. She gasps and slides me into her, and I moan as I look into her eyes.

Her tightness surrounds my dick as she moves up and down, her wetness lubricating me. I pull her closer, wrapping my arms around her as she buries her head in my shoulder and moves her hips in circles.

I want to come right now, but I won't stop until she's pleased. I play with her nipples as she reaches down and touches her clit with her fingers. I watch her play with herself as she rides me and moans louder.

"Oh, Lamian...." She moans in my ear.

"June...." I whisper back as I throw my head back and close my eyes.

"I'm gonna come," she squeaks as she rides me faster.

"Come with me," I tell her through heavy breaths.

I can't help myself, her pussy feels too good. I come inside her, blowing my load into her deeply as I feel her pussy contract around me. She grabs my biceps tightly and digs her fingernails into my skin as I guide her hips up and down. She moans loudly, and I feel her cum on me as she slows down.

She looks at me and chuckles, and I laugh with her. I shake my head and look deeply into her eyes as I run my fingertips along her back. She shivers and grins as she laughs again.

"That was amazing," she says softly.

"I wasn't expecting it to be that quick," I chuckle.

“I think I like that position,” she says with a smile.

“I think I do, too.”

We laugh lightly, and I hold her close, feeling her warm skin against mine as our breath slows. I think about how I will be a father, and we will raise our child on this island. They will never have a lack of love or light in their life, and I think about how our first gift to them can be the foal June will train.

My life is beyond my wildest dreams today, and I have June to thank for that. As we continue our journey, I will show her how special she is every day and love her unconditionally for the rest of our lives. Now, all that’s left is our little one entering this world, and I can’t wait to meet them.

THE END.

To read more about Lamian and June join my newsletter here: <https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>

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AMELIE

Amelie

It feels like my birthday.

It's not that I'm excellent at keeping track of the days, from the window of this little room. Hardly a room at all, I have to admit. No, it's a feeling I have in the pit of my stomach, that's growing more sour with every passing day. The tension of my keepers, getting impatient as I come of age. I must be twenty, by now, though the seasons have drifted by like the clouds above. Meaningless.

I lean against the narrow frame of the window, watching the street below. It's my only entertainment here. The lone book they gave me weathered and worn from too many read throughs. I already know it by heart. They don't think humans need much to survive. This place is little more than a cell: a toilet, a bed, a sink... Enough to keep me alive, and little else.

It's not unknown what the dark elves do here, at Club L'amouer. I've heard the screams for years, of pleasure and pain. I was brought here as a child, under the impression that it was safe compared to the rest of the empire.

But that is not the case.

They refuse to tell me why I haven't yet been thrown into the pit with my friends, to be played with by their patrons until I expire. I've heard stories from Honey and have seen the marks. I've waited in this room for years, biding my time until

they decide to drag me out and submit me to their wicked whims.

Every day, I have to wonder, *is this it?*

There is a strict order in their world. The upper caste of dark elves that rule over everyone else, and their appointed talents—from artists to warriors and minor nobles. The lower caste, merchants and laborers and even criminals have a place in their society. Humans and the other species don't even make the rank, existing beneath their feet, entirely at the mercy of their dark magic. We subsist as little more than pets for their amusement.

I am worth only what my master can sell me for.

Swift footsteps sweep past my door, making me cringe. It is not often the dark elves come down this hall, but when they do, it is smart to be afraid. Hopefully, they pass by without a word. I would rather miss a meal than come face to face with a Zagfer—dark elf servants with a heavy chip on their shoulders.

They do the club master's bidding without hesitation, but there's a gleam in their dark eyes as if, without their shackles, they're capable of greater evil than even their master can imagine. I shudder at the very thought of them.

Another set of footsteps closes in, and I brace myself, listening for their passing. But instead, they stop at my door. Again, I have to ask myself, *is this it?* when a heavy knock jars me from my focus.

“Amelie,” comes a deep and grating voice.

I say nothing.

A key scrapes the lock, and the knob turns. It opens to one of *them*, just as I feared. He says nothing as he takes me in, his hard eyes roving over my threadbare clothes concealed by the washed out robe I use to cover myself. I tuck it tighter around my chest as if to hide my frame from him, but it does nothing to deter his hungry gaze.

“What do you want?”

His grin broadens, his massive frame barely fitting in the room as he enters and reaches for me. I'm too frightened to pull away when he grabs me by the arm, jostling me and forcing me to my feet. Even as he drags me out of the room, I try to secure the robe that's slipped around my shoulders.

My voice quivers when I dare speak out against his handling. "What's the meaning of this? Where are you taking me?"

He says nothing, my heavy boots clomping harder than his fine leather soles, though he's easily twice my height and three times my weight. I am not prepared for whatever they have planned, though I've been waiting most of my life to find out. My limbs are weak from years of captivity, and my knees give out on me.

But the dark elf won't let me collapse, his grip too tight around my elbow.

The sounds of couplings are louder here, and the smell of hot flesh and sex is noxious. I can barely breathe as he drags me through their menagerie of rooms, some doors open to reveal the goings on inside.

I catch only glances, but the images sear themselves into my mind.

A woman is shackled from the ceiling, her body strained between heavy manacles that pull her taut as a dark elf patron rails her from behind. Her screams are senseless and batting, and I know she must be in great pain. It's a hard contrast to the gratification blooming over her host's countenance. In another room, several dark elves are crowded around a human who can't even let out a scream, choking on some kind of foul liquid. I can't even tell if they're male or female. All I can see is the surge of their flesh between the naked limbs of their dark elf masters.

Is that what will happen to me?

Of course, not, comes a small voice inside of me, *I am the most expensive pet here. They will reserve me for something far worse, I'm sure.* The thought brings tears to my eyes,

blurring the horrible display as I am dragged toward the front of the building.

A human male nearly bolts from his captor, only to be dragged back in by a heavy dark hand and onto a waiting cock. Even as he struggles, his own cock goes hard against his will, and I understand the gleam of fear in his eyes as he stares right through me.

The space opens to more of the same, and as horrible as the sight is, I can't tear my gaze away. There's a woman, shackled to the bottom of a shallow pool, her head barely above the yellow waters as several dark elves take aim at her face. Hot streams cut off her gasps and make her choke as they laugh at her expense.

Two more sit atop human figures—who strain beneath the weight of them—watching with glee as the woman slowly drowns in their collective fluids. There are people strung from the ceiling here too, unmoving. I can't be sure if they're still alive or not, but no one seems to care. They're finished with those ones, and they'll be dragged away soon enough.

I want to puke.

But showing weakness will only make my punishment more severe, when it finally comes. I have to remain stoic and silent among the worst of it. The hot panting of a dark elf as he mounts one of the unconscious humans echoes in my mind, even as we turn down another hall, away from the gruesome orgy.

I can breathe a little better here, though the air is still thick with the reek of sex.

The Zagfer catches me by the nape of my neck and leads me forward, his grip tightening as we near the master's office. A chill runs up my spine as I tear out of his grasp and turn to face him. He may be doing his master's bidding, but he is not my owner, and I will not be treated like a pet by him. "Get your hands *off* me, Zagfer."

He takes no offense to his title, measuring me up and licking his lips.

Disgust finds me again and I straighten. What is the point of being the most sought after pet if I am subjected to the whims of the master's servants? He wants to sell me to the highest bidder, and for that, I need to be pure before they put me on the auction block.

I bare my teeth at him in the only language they know and grab the handle to the master's door. "It will *never* be your turn," I say with certainty, stealing the smug expression from his face. He glowers at me as I turn the handle and enter.

I am pleased with myself, until that too is stolen from me.

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KRAL ISHIRAYA

The silence of my study is a blessing.

It is free from the fickle emotions of court, and insulated from the whims of my family. Many in my position might have abused the authority of it by now, but I'd rather be studying the royal accounts, hidden away in my private chambers.

My brother, the King, respects my wishes to a point. But he insists that I still make appearances from time to time, so our subjects don't think I've disappeared entirely from proper society. They'll begin to wonder and talk.

It's the talk that I hate most.

Even those I respect are prey to it, where I am immune. It is no wonder why, however. We all know the story of how I was forced to seal away my emotions because they were simply too powerful when tethered to my magical abilities.

It's easier this way.

I prefer it, not having to worry about the subtleties that plague every interaction as the Archduke of my brother's kingdom. They will say one thing and mean something entirely different. They should simply pass around a ledger and sign their names under friend or foe, so that I know which to trust and which to have executed. I don't enjoy parsing through their words like puzzles to be solved.

Numbers make more sense than they.

A soft knock at my door makes my shoulders tense. I say nothing, in hopes that it is a stray Zagfer who will leave if I do not respond. The knock comes again and I sigh, surrendering the pages to my desk. "Go away."

The door opens a crack, and I realize it cannot be a servant. A servant wouldn't dare disobey an order from the Archduke. So, it must be one from among my family, coming to pry at why I have not left my chambers in days.

His presence is subtle but unmistakable. "Cousin," comes his silky voice. "Don't these walls grow tiresome?"

"They suit me quite well, actually," I grumble, lowering my head as if I am engrossed in my work, though I am the furthest thing from it. His very presence raises my hackles. "Don't *you* have some party to attend in the city, Carisu?"

"Not without you, Kral," he says, levering off the wall and making himself at home in my study. He falls into one of my favorite overstuffed chairs and runs his hands up the arms. When I turn to glare at him, a smug look has taken over his dark face, and one leg is draped lazily over the other, his fine shoe wagging impatiently. "Come out with me tonight. I insist."

"Insist all you like," I respond, "I much prefer the company of my books—"

"Which have been balanced and balanced again!" he cries, slamming a fist against the padding of the chair, hardly making a thud. "You have not been seen in public for over a fortnight. Do you even exist anymore, cousin? The other nobles are beginning to question it."

I straighten the pages in front of me and sigh, considering what my brother had told me, not so long ago. *I cannot make you do anything, brother, but please, for the sake of our family, you must uphold our social status.*

An Archduke that doesn't ever socialize is not a proper Archduke at all.

You are an extension of us, and should flaunt our power and influence among the higher caste. There is a city for you

to explore. Explore it!

And carry with you our name in pride.

I scoff under my breath, shaking my head. “Explore, huh?”

“What was that?” Carisu asked, leaning forward in his chair. Out of all our family, he always had the keenest of our sharp elven ears. “You admit it, then? You will come out with me?”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

That smile is back as Carisu flashes his sharp canines. “I have just the place in mind for you, cousin. Maybe it will liven you up a bit and bring a healthy flush to your cheeks in the process.” He stands in a sweep of his finely cut surcoat and offers a hand. “The women will fall at your feet—and mine too—if you make an appearance.”

With the utmost consideration, I return the sheaves to their binder. “I have no interest in seeking out trouble with you on the streets of Vhoig. You have friends who would gladly-

“But they are rats! Son of K’sheng that can’t even vote in parliament! They are nothing in the light of you, oh great Archduke of Vhoig.” He closes the distance between us and grabs my shoulders, nearly shaking me with his frustration. “What can I do to convince you to leave this hovel?”

I push him away. “Go bother someone else. I will hear no more of this nonsense.”

Carisu doesn’t accept my answer, spinning me around by the shoulder. “There is delicious food among the Zagfer that you have never even tried!”

I sweep his hand off my shoulder.

“Great treasures to be bought on the black market,” he insists as I adjourn to my closet. “And women, cousin. Oh, the women!”

“I have no interest in love.”

My cousin scoffs. “Who said anything about love?”

I stall as I reach into my wardrobe. I'd happily leave my study if he were to remain behind. "You speak of the skin market, then. A most deplorable pastime. How many slaves do you own now, Carisu?"

"Ah, but they break so easily. They must be replaced on occasion."

His little value of human life almost makes me disgusted. Almost. "I have no time for your games," I say, donning a sleek black cloak, my last resort to lose this philandering cousin of mine. "If your business is done, I really must ask you to leave."

Carisu troubles himself with fastening the clasp of my cloak like a Zagfer, patting it down until the folds are smoothed out. "Come with me, please. I don't want to go alone, and I will get a better price if you're sitting beside me. It will only be for a little while, and then you can return to your study. The King, long may he reign, will be satisfied with your attendance in public. You need only sit there and watch the proceedings."

I meet his eye and scrutinize his mercurial features. "Who told you?"

He shrugs and withdraws with a dismissive air. "The walls might as well be made of paper, cousin. You should know that by now. And besides, it doesn't matter who told me. We are all family here."

"*We* are hardly family."

"Then, let's change that." He links his arm in mine like a close friend, though he's antagonized me for as long as I can recall. "I want to know what you fancy, and what makes you smile. I've only ever seen that scowl of yours, hiding much emotion, I'm sure."

"You know better than that," I say, though I can feel my will crumbling. I could blast him out of the third story window with just a pulse of my magic, but I don't have it in me. "Why are you so insistent?"

“Because, I fear you are drifting away from us.” He leans in and lowers his voice. “And so does the King. Soon, the whole of the city will suspect it, too, and your position will not be secure. Even the King cannot guarantee your protection. You know that.

“But if you make the occasional appearance, you’ll show them that you are a dark elf to be reckoned with.” He stares hard into my eyes, searching for something that has long since been locked away. “You don’t even need to flaunt your magic,” he continues, adjusting my cloak again. “You need only attend.”

A long sigh escapes me, and my jaw works in consideration. “Just this once.”

Carisu’s features light up instantly. “I’ll take it.”

I chew on my lower lip in true resignation. My cousin certainly has a way of wearing a soul down. “When did you say you wanted to leave?”

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AMELIE

I walk into Rhakis' office with my head bowed. I don't want to show any signs of defiance here. My life may be horrible, but it can always get worse, especially in a place like L'amouer.

"Amelie, it's lovely to see you this evening. How are you faring?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

The look in the manager's eye hints at one of the ways my life could get so much worse. We exchange pleasantries because that's expected of me, but I know what he really wants. As if I needed any more than the lustful stare to tell, he lets his robe fall open, revealing his massive erection.

"Frustrated."

Any other girl called in here would take this as the signal to bring him to bliss. And while his nakedness and lichenous stare make my skin crawl, I know he would never dare to touch me. I'm too valuable, untouched and pure.

I'm one of L'amouer's 'select stocks.' At a young age, with a little bit of divination magic, they select those who will grow up to be the most desirable. We are sequestered away from the rest, and our training is a much different matter. While others are taught how to perform carnal acts, we are trained in dancing, music, singing, and other forms of entertainment to keep our dark elf masters entertained in between whatever debauchery they have planned for us.

The manager gives a sharp whistle, and then another woman comes into the room, crawling on all fours like a dog. I keep my face serene, but my heart aches for her. Honey wasn't selected like I was. I don't know when the training starts for the others, but by the time I met her, she already had the lifeless stare of someone who begs for death, knowing they'll never get it.

I'm also ignorant of exactly what hell she's gone through. I only know of mine. But while the exact nature of our torments is different, we both hate this place and hate men like Rhakis with every fiber of our being. I don't know if mutual, seething hatred of someone is the best basis for a friendship, but it's how our companionship started.

Honey crawls over to Rhakis and starts licking up and down his cock before letting the head pass between her lips. While his sneer never falters, he swallows hard as she manages to take far more of him into her mouth than should be possible. These are the things the girls like Honey are trained to do. For her, this is rote. And while she makes enthusiastic sounds, acting as though his cock in her mouth brings her to ecstasy, I'm sure everyone in the room knows it's an act.

It's something that will be expected of me when I'm sold, but to maintain my purity, my lessons have never been hands-on, so to speak. I've been made to watch it often. I've seen enough blow jobs to know that Honey's technique is flawless, wet, and sloppy, but not excessively so. Her breath control is admirable, something that makes me wonder how well she'd do playing a flute made of wood instead of flesh.

I have trained on illusions, and to be sure that no one is tempted to trick me, most of those I've cast myself. They're minor illusions, but I'm apparently quite adept. At the illusions. I don't know how well I can suck cock. Ephemeral magic constructs don't naturally spasm and twitch as their crown starts to brush the back of your throat.

But the praise for fellating phantasms does little to stop the way my stomach turns at the thought of actually having to do it to a real person, to whichever dark elf happens to purchase me for the express purpose of deflowering me.

But even as expertly as Honey sucks his cock, Rhakis' eyes stay fixed on me. I'd have to be a complete fool not to understand that he's imagining it's me on my knees in front of him.

Honey gags slightly and backs off, but that simply won't do for Rhakis. He grabs her head, forcing it down on his cock further, and from my angle, I can just make out the way his cock makes her throat expand as he pushes more and more into her.

Honey's face is starting to turn blue. Her eyes and nose are running, and I think for a moment that Rhakis is going to actually suffocate her with his cock, either because he's too busy watching me to know that Honey is suffering, or it's the suffering that gets him off. Honey tries feebly to push away, but he just holds her there.

I mustn't move. I want to rush to her. Beat him back, pull her free and give her air, but our lives are not our own. Just as her eyes start to fade, Rhakis pulls out, and while Honey gasps for breath, he sprays his cum on her face and breasts.

But he doesn't even notice her. His eyes are locked on me as he licks his lips in carnal hunger.

"You're now twenty years old. The time has come to serve your purpose. Prepare to be auctioned."

Even though I knew this day was coming, and I was almost certain this was the reason he called me in here, the word auction hits me like a blow to my chest, driving the breath from my lungs, causing me to gasp.

I have to figure out a way to escape. But how? I've been trying to figure out how to leave this damn place since I could form conscious thought, and nothing has ever presented itself to me.

"You must prepare yourself to perform for your audience."

My head snaps up, and I look at him, half-dazed.

"Perform what? How?"

If they want me to sing or dance, even something salacious, that would be preferable to having to display other skills. They certainly wouldn't have me have sex with a real person in front of a gathering of dark elves, but I might be ordered to do something unseemly with an illusion.

Suddenly, Rhakis is on his feet. He moves so fast Honey doesn't have time to move, and he kicks her out of the way. I open my mouth to scream. In anger or in fear, I don't know and don't have the time to even figure that out before he pushes something into my mouth. I feel it burn as it dissolves on my tongue.

The fiery warmth spreads down my throat and into my belly before spreading out to my entire body. The heat starts to pull in places. Around my lips, behind my ears, the insides of my wrists, behind my knees, but most intensely my nipples and between my legs.

"What did you give me?" I ask. But it's an automated response. A question that was formed in my mind and on its way to my burning lips before the warmth had finished spreading. I don't know where it comes from, just that everyone calls it Heat for the sensation and the effect. It could be a plant or maybe just pure, perverted magic distilled.

All we know is that it acts as half sedative, half aphrodisiac. It's used to make human sex slaves more compliant. And that's what I am, a slave here about to be sold at auction to the highest bidder who will do. The Thirteen knows what to me.

And the worst part, now that the Heat has taken hold of me, my mind and body are at war. I want to be revolted by the thought of some dark elf using my body for their pleasure, but my body screams for it.

Rhakis just grins at me and then calls the guards in to take me away. I gasp as their hands seize my sensitized skin. I want to struggle, but my body wants them to touch me more. I hate how much I want it.

KRAL ISHIRAYA

I immediately regret agreeing to go out with this bunch. I linger at the back of Carisu's pack of overly loud friends. They're rough and obscene and vulgar. I wrinkle my nose as one of them jostles into me, looking across their playful punches with a bored expression.

I want nothing more than to go home, but they keep talking about how the place is full tonight and how much fun they are having. They laugh in a way I've never been able to, and for a moment, I just watch them.

People have told me before that it's weird when I do that, but I forget. I lose myself in evaluating them, trying to understand something I have no means to, when Carisu leans over to me.

"You have to stop staring at them like you might murder them," he murmurs.

"I won't. I lack the passion to do something like that. You know this." I raise my eyebrows at him.

"Yeah, that emotionless stare is what freaks people out. Just try to keep your face neutral and not stare at anybody too hard." He slaps me on the back. "Let's get you a drink and loosen up, eh? We're going up to the VIP lounge."

I choose not to tell him that I have no interest in going to the top floor of this building I'm being dragged through. Floor after floor exposes all that the L'amer has to offer.

I swallow back how little I want to push through this building, seeing only reminders of why I had never come here before. In fact, I had always avoided this place because while others see fun, I see a mess that I don't want to touch me.

The L'amouer boasts its abundance of humans to torment or screw, but it makes no sense to me. The hours of rutting don't bring me satisfaction, especially when I can fulfill my needs with a willing elf.

It seems that I am the only one that doesn't derive any pleasure from bullying these humans, and I have to assume it is because of my distance from emotions. No matter what it is, I know that I won't be having any fun tonight.

I make a mental note to bring this up to my brother. It's proof that I'm making an effort, even if everyone gives me a wide berth. I think they can feel how different I am if they don't recognize me first, and I don't mind. It's better than being brushed up against naked bodies that I wish I didn't have to be near.

I recoil from the humans in the halls, many attached to elves using them for the night. I've always avoided the creatures since they came. I have plenty of servants already, and I've found no need to deal with the new race that everyone has exploited.

Don't be mistaken. I don't care what other people do. That's none of my business. I just keep away from them, and until tonight, that's gone fairly well.

My cousin has now thrust me into the throngs of these humans, the L'amouer being full of them. On top of that, the smell of semen, sweat, and urine saturates the air, and while the others comment on the activities available for the night causing these scents, I just feel dizzy.

I don't know how it's not affecting them, but I need fresh air. It's the only thing that keeps me moving up through the floors as the stench grows and the entertainment turns even more twisted.

Relief bursts through me as we arrive at the VIP box. It's on the upper floor, and it's so exclusive that few people are up here. The guys are so excited they don't seem to notice as I hang back.

I let them go into the room while I linger in the hallway. The air out here isn't tainted, and for a moment, I want to cleanse my senses.

It's really been a waste of a night, and I question again why I even bothered to come out. I know my brother would never force me into anything, but I want to appease him.

Honestly, I thought by now I wouldn't be upheld to traditional standards. Having a social life isn't reasonable for someone like me, and I thought that others would have seen that by now. It doesn't appear to be that way, though, so I find myself considering my options, of whether I'll join Carisu and his friends or head home and send him a Zagfer to tell him.

Before I decide, I hear a loud commotion coming from the other end of the hall. My curiosity piques, and I head toward the noise of thrashing and arguing.

As I turn the corner, I spot two dark elves dragging a human woman between them. She flails against them, but her movements seem weak, even for a human. I stand there wondering what they are even doing with her as she doesn't smell disgusting like the others when her eyes lift to me.

Something strikes me deep in my core as I stare at her, and my breath catches in my throat. My chest constricts, and my feet seem rooted into the ground.

Her eyes are a crystal-clear blue, so icy that they nearly look translucent as they watch me. I find myself frozen underneath her gaze, and I swear time itself stops in her presence.

It feels like everything about her engulfs me, and I no longer can hear the roar of the people on the other side of the door or smell the sour scents of the building. No, all I can see or feel or think of is her.

I've never felt something so all-consuming like this, and it's like my soul is being sucked from my body as she passes by me. My body aches to go to her, but I don't move. For a fleeting moment, I swear I don't remember how to.

I would have stayed there all night just staring at her, letting her gaze pin me in place, if it weren't for the dark elves. They drag her around the corner, breaking our eye contact, and it jerks me out of my daze.

Still, I don't move, even as my senses come rushing back in. I can hear and smell everything again, and I even take a few stumbling steps forward.

Her gaze has left my body feeling tingly and off-kilter, which is extremely unusual for me. I am known to be so disciplined now, but the way my heart is pounding and adrenaline is rushing through me proves that something revolutionary has just occurred.

My mind replays the scene over and over as I try to make sense of it. It's been so long since I've felt anything remotely close to that, and I need to understand what happened.

How did this human pull that out of me? What was she?

My body starts to burn with a fire that I don't know how to tame as I think of her, and the only thought that I can process is that I need to go after her. I'm not sure if what I just experienced was pleasant, but it was more than the usual numbness that I have grown used to.

I ache to understand it, to explore it more, but I have waited too long. I pace down the hall, but I have no idea where they have taken the girl.

It seems that my questions are answered as the room below roars to life, announcers shouting. Normally, I would ignore such a commotion, but with my body heightened and my head in such a weird place, I find myself rushing toward the VIP door.

I'm not sure why, but I thought that maybe all that noise could actually solve something for me.

TO BE CONTINUED. To read more click [here!](#)

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