



Feral

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Description: I thought my life was finished when I was taken from my home with chains shackled around my ankles and dragged into the depths of the Dark Realm Monster Market.

I was a human woman, alone, terrified, and surrounded by fanged monsters with hungry, gleaming eyes.

I was also prey, a fragile little thing to be bought and sold.

I knew my life was over, but then an unlikely savior took me as his.

Blaylock. Ruler of the kingdom of the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale.

He was a hulking beast with gray skin, thick, curling horns, and eyes as black as the void.

I should have been afraid of him. I should have recoiled from his very visage.

But his glare—although fiercely terrifying—was filled with possessive heat whenever he looked at me.

He didn't save me because he was good.

He saved me because I was his.

And when he whisked me to his kingdom, when he showed me not all beasts were monsters I was to fear, the more I felt myself warming and softening to him.

And the longer I stayed with him, the more I realized I didn't want to leave.

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KATRINA

The air in Shadow Vale always hung thick with the scent of damp earth and rot. It didn't help being in the middle of the woods with decaying swamps lining my shack of a family home.

The mist curled around everything it touched like skeleton fingers twisting trunks of the blackened trees that surrounded my debilitated cottage. Every time I stepped outside, I could taste the earth and depression on my tongue.

Even now, I could feel the dampness of living next to the swamp seeping into my bones as I trudged back from the well, the wooden buckets I held in each hand swinging heavily from my constantly bruised fingers.

The path beneath my feet was soft earth covered in muck and moss. I gritted my teeth and pushed past the discomfort in my arms and shoulders, pain having become as familiar to me as my father's constant abuse in this nonexistent life I lived.

The sun was sinking behind the crooked trees and jagged mountains, barely peeking over the dense forest. The sky was shifting from oranges and pinks to blues and grays. I quickened my pace, not wanting to be outside after sunset but especially knowing the price of being late, which that was a tongue-lashing from my father.

I had dreams, so many that they flooded my mind. But the most pressing reality was

escaping my father's tight control and making my own way.

And that took time and money, both of which I didn't have, no matter how much I saved.

My father's temper was as unpredictable as the storms that often swept through Shadow Vale, leaving the fields flooded that were right on the outskirts of the forest and wreaking havoc on crops so everything was nothing but a drowned, mucky mess.

It made living hard.

I picked up my pace and saw the cottage right through the break in the tree-line, my childhood home looking aged and weathered and moments away from crumbling to the ground.

It was repaired in multiple spots with a moss-covered roof and windows that were broken and foggy. I pushed the front door open with my shoulder, careful not to spill the buckets of water I had spent an hour pulling from the stubborn depths of the well.

The hinges creaked, the sound grating against my already frayed nerves. The air inside was no better than the chill outside. But I was used to the smell of smoke from the fireplace and the mold that I could never find from where it came, both mixed with whatever I had been cooking all day.

"About time, girl," my father's voice snarled from the corner near the fireplace, where he sat hunched on his rickety wooden chair, a half-empty bottle of moonshine he'd brewed up last week sitting on the floor by his foot as he stared into the flames.

I didn't respond, and he looked at me, his eyes red-rimmed and swollen from the years of his homemade booze. He glared at me as I set the buckets down in the tiny kitchen and immediately scurried to finish preparing dinner.

I added a few sticks to the dying embers in the stove, stoked it, and placed the pot of stew back on the cast iron grate. My fingers were numb, the cold seeping into my bones, but I ignored the ache as I kept busy.

I reached for the handful of root vegetables and cut them, adding them to the pot, trying to “fatten” the stew up since we had minimal dried meat to spare.

The water bubbled, a thin line of steam rising from the pot as the vegetables softened. It smelled good—earthy with a hint of a savory meat aroma mingling in. I stirred the thin stew, the handle of the wooden spoon warm against my chilled fingers, heating me quickly. It was the only comfort I found in that moment.

I glanced over my shoulder to see my father still watching the fire, but he now had the bottle pressed to his lips. He had a permanent sneer on his face, his knuckles white as he clutched the neck of the bottle and tossed the liquor back.

Once the meal was served, I tore off a couple pieces of stale bread, placed everything on the table, and let my father know dinner was ready. When he was at the table, he still wore that sneer as he stared at his bowl of stew.

“Is this it?” he spat, leaning forward, the firelight casting his gaunt face in sharp, menacing shadows. “Where’s the meat, girl? Or are you too useless to even catch a rabbit?”

I swallowed, my throat dry as I sat across from him, able to smell the booze on his breath, and knew he’d been drinking all day. I had become calloused to his abuse at this point, knowing nothing ever made him happy. I could have given him the best cut of fresh meat, and he’d still complain about it.

I kept my gaze on the stew, watching the thin broth swirl around the chunks of vegetables. “You know the traps were empty this morning. The storms have

everything scattering away from the swamps.” I knew I’d messed up responding by how the air shifted around me.

My father was out of his chair and in front of me before I could take another breath, his heavy palm crashing against the side of my face, the crack of his hand against my skin sudden. The taste of blood instantly filled my mouth, tangy and metallic.

My lip throbbed, and I felt a wet line cutting down my chin from my split lip. But I bit my tongue, refusing to cry out. I would not give him the satisfaction.

“Smartass, useless wretch of a daughter,” he snarled, his breath reeking of alcohol and rotten teeth. “Can’t even feed your own father properly. Worthless. I should have left you in the swamp after your mother died and saved me the trouble of having to care for you.”

I slowly rose, feeling something in me churn as I stared at my father. “Then you should have made dinner yourself,” I said low, slow, and without a hint of emotion laced in my words. I didn’t know why or even how I spoke the words, but they hung between us like a heavy, evil entity.

The look of utter shock covered his face for only a second before pure rage replaced it. He took a stumbling step toward me, his teeth bared in a twisted, yellowed snarl, his hand already raising for another strike.

Something in me snapped.

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The fear that had kept me silent, that had kept me cowering and obedient for so many years, shattered. The terror that had wrapped itself around me since I knew what it was burned away in an instant. And in its place was a cold, sharp fury that surged through my blood.

I reached for the knife on the table, my fingers trembling as I wrapped them around the rough, splintered wooden handle. The blade was still wet with the juice of the root vegetables I had chopped for the stew. The dull edge caught the firelight, the pitted metal shining briefly as I brought it up. I hated that I shook, my fear and nerves controlling me.

But I reined in my control and calmed myself.

And then I was moving on instinct, driven by a survival rage that drowned out everything else.

For a second, he just stood there and stared at me. And then he lunged, his eyes wild, his teeth bared. When he was almost on me, I plunged the blade into his chest, the resistance intense before it made way like I was cutting into a slab of meat. There was a wet, sickening crunch, and the metal slipped between his ribs and sank deep into his body.

I felt the thickness of muscle and the hardness of bone, felt the vibration of the knife handle in my grip as I twisted the blade and screamed, tears streaming down my cheeks, completely raw and filled with pain. My breath came in short, shallow gasps, my heart hammering in my chest.

His eyes bulged wide as he looked down at where the handle stuck out of him. When he looked at me again, his mouth fell open, a choking gurgle coming out. He tried to speak as he stumbled back, his knees buckling, his dirty fingers gripping at the handle of the knife still buried in his chest.

I watched in this almost haze, mesmerized as my own breath froze. And when he collapsed to the floor, his body hitting the wood with a dull, final thud, I found it beautiful as the firelight cast his form in a long, twisted shadow against the cracked and smoke-stained stone walls.

For a few seconds, I just stood staring down at my dead father, my pulse a slow, heavy drumbeat in my ears. His eyes, wide and glassy... lifeless, stared up at the ceiling, his mouth slack, his lips flecked with blood. I looked down at my fingers, the warmth of his blood clinging to my skin.

Before I thought too much about it, I moved closer to my father until I smelled the coppery scent of his death in my nose. I stood over him, my hands clenched at my sides, my legs trembling, my knees threatening to buckle. The world felt distant, the air around me thick and muffled like I'd been dropped in the middle of a pool of water and was sinking to the bottom.

My mind was empty, an echoing cavern, as I stared down at the man who had been my enemy from day one. He thought he'd broken me, and maybe parts of me he had. But like a weed—a misplaced flower—I continued to grow.

I watched in awe as his blood stained the planks of the wooden floor.

I waited for the fear to settle in, the panic and horror that I'd just killed someone... my father. But there was no crushing weight of guilt. All I felt was a strange numbness, a cold, empty void where my fear had once lived. My heart slowed, my pulse steadying, and my breaths came in even intervals as I crouched and got a closer

look of my father.

I didn't realize I was doing it until I had the handle in my hand and was pulling the blade out. It was harder than I thought it would be, and as soon as the metal was out, blood seeped out of the wound like an open line.

When I released the knife, the blade clattered against the floor. I stepped back, the blood starting to make a slow trek toward my bare feet.

Slowly, methodically, I wiped the blood from my fingers on the edge of my clothing. And then I turned, my steps slow and deliberate, the world around me moving in a strange, detached blur as I started to clean up. I grabbed a threadbare blanket off his chair, and without thinking, I draped the material over my father's body as if that would conceal what I'd done.

With my mind still blurred and distant, I crossed the room, my bare feet whispering against the floor as I cleaned up, washing away any proof of what I'd just done. And then I sank onto my thin, straw pallet, the rough fur my only barrier, scratchy against my skin.

I lay down, my eyes staring up at the beams above, my heartbeat slow and calm, and my mind clearing the longer I lay there.

And when I finally closed my eyes, I realized—for the first time in my life—I felt... peace.

2

KATRINA

I didn't know what woke me, but as I tried to wake, knowing it was still late and the

sunrise was hours away, I knew something felt... off.

And then I heard it. Someone was on the other side of the closed bedroom door. The wood floors creaked under their weight. The splintering groan that cut through the room seemed so loud in the still quietness of the cabin, but it sounded louder than anything I'd ever heard.

My blood rushed in my ears and panic strangled in my throat. I hadn't killed my father. He was up and coming to hurt me, to make me pay for what I'd done.

I pushed myself up on my straw mattress, the fur blanket slipping from my shoulders as the door suddenly crashed inward, the hinges screeching in protest as it was ripped from its frame.

I screamed and stood, scrambling back against the wall and trying to grab anything I could use as a weapon. My heart raced so hard it hurt in my chest, and all I saw was darkness.

Shadows flooded the small, cramped space, massive forms flooding into the room and blotting out the slight, pale moonlight that filtered through the thin material that covered the lone window.

They weren't humans. They couldn't be given their sheer size and distorted body parts, monstrous shapes with twisted, gnarled limbs, and eyes that glowed like the stars that dotted the inky sky stared right at me.

One of them hissed, and the longer I stared, the more my vision adjusted to the shadows. I made out jagged, yellowed fangs and skin that was rough, scarred, and an eerie shade of green. It stood just mere feet in front of me.

I tried to scream again, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out. All was

silent. Instead, what I heard next was a strangled growl as a massive body charged forward, and a scaled hand closed around my arm, its claws digging into my flesh. I did find my voice then.

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The creature's skin was cold and rough, and I thought the scales would be smooth. Instead, they were rough, almost sharp against my skin as the beast yanked me forward, my leg tangling in the fur I'd been sleeping with. I fell forward, my bare knees hitting the hard, wooden floor with a bone-jarring thud.

I choked on a sob as monstrous hands tightened around both of my arms now, lifting me as if I weighed nothing. I cried out, trying to scratch, bite, and fight for my life. My bare feet slid against the floor as I was dragged out of the bedroom and toward the front door now hanging by its hinges.

On the floor, still hidden under the blankets I threw over him, was my father's corpse. Still unmoving and lifeless thanks to me.

Once outside, the chilly night air hit me like a slap to my battered body. The creature pinned me tightly to his side, guiding me quickly through the dense, marshy forest. I felt his scales and claws digging into my flesh, tearing at me like I was made of paper. My nightdress offered little protection against the cold wind that swept through the trees and slammed into me. The swampy mist curled around my legs, clinging to my skin like the devil's fingers.

The creature hauled me across the uneven ground, his claws and scales digging further into me with every step he made paired with scrapes and lashes of tree branches of the swamp vegetation hitting me as we moved. The other creatures followed behind, chittering in what sounded like laughter.

We walked a short distance. I was thrown into the back of a cart and locked in a steel cage that smelled of old blood and rot. The monsters spoke to each other in a strange,

garbled language as they climbed upon the cart, took the reins of their horses, and ushered me away from the only home—horror house—I'd ever known.

The iron bars were cold and unforgiving as they pressed against my back, the cage so small that, although the air whipped through the bars, I felt claustrophobic inside.

I shifted, now on my knees as I gripped the bars, the metal bottom digging into my legs, but the pain was welcome because it reminded me I was alive. The cart lurched forward, the wheels grinding against the earth, the wood creaking beneath the weight of my captors and the cage.

The cart, for as large as it was, made easy work moving through the woods of Shadow Vale. The twisted, blackened trees loomed overhead like the bones of a skeleton forest, the moon was big and full, the silvery light brighter than it had been in so long. The air grew colder, the mist thicker, swirling around the cart until I tasted the water in the air.

I clutched the bars of my cage harder, trying to keep myself stabilized, my breath coming in sharp, panicked gasps, my heart beating frantically.

“Where are you taking me?” I yelled out. They ignored me, still talking in their strange language. “Let me go,” I screamed louder. One of the monsters looked over his shoulder and smiled, a row of sharp, discolored fangs flashing in the bright moonlight.

I screamed and cried and begged, but after long minutes of doing this, and my throat now raw, I shifted again and sat down, exhausted and feeling dead inside. That's when I heard it. Blood-curdling screams and cries of dozens of women and a mix of laughter and conversations spoken in a foreign language. It all swirled around me in a dizzy, unbelievable haze.

I glanced to the side, dark shadows approaching closer until I could make out what I was looking at. Other monsters carting off women in cages looking as terrified as I probably did. They were all wide-eyed, their faces twisted in expressions of raw, unfiltered terror.

Time seemed to blur as we were taken deeper into the woods. I fell asleep a few times but was woken up abruptly by crying, screaming, or the cage rattling from the uneven ground. The cart bounced, the impact violently jarring me, sending sharp pain throughout my entire body.

My fingers were numb with cold, my nails digging into the rusted iron of the cart.

Hours passed, the cold seeping into my bones, my teeth chattering as we descended, the forest disappearing as we entered a cave. It was pitch-black, and even with time, my vision didn't adjust.

As we descended into the depths of the cave, the colder it got. Suddenly, like a crack of lightning, this blinding light and confusing orientation took over me. I couldn't see anything but white. I couldn't hear anything but a hum. I couldn't feel anything but the surrounding cold.

I was disoriented and confused, and before I knew it, I pressed my face to the bars and threw up.

My eyes were closed when I felt everything start to right itself. It was after a long minute of waiting until my stomach settled that I opened my eyes. For a second, I didn't know what I was looking at. No longer was I in a cave. I was now outside in another forest, the trees all around me black like onyx and polished so the blue moon above glistened off them.

In front of us stood a massive, gated entrance, its spires reaching into the pitch-black

sky. The air here was thicker, oppressive. The very stones seemed to pulse with a dark, twisted life.

The gates towered above us, their iron spikes deadly and glistening with malice. It made my stomach turn.

Before I could catch my breath, the cart was moving forward again just as the gates opened. We stopped right inside, the gates creaking shut and sealing us in. The cage door was wrenched open, a gnarled, clawed hand gripping my arm and yanking me to the ground. I stumbled, my bare feet scraping against the dirt as I was shoved toward where the other women now stood.

Chains and shackles were put around our hands and ankles, and we were ushered into another building off to the side. For long minutes, we walked until finally I heard loud voices becoming even louder. A large, double-studded, wooden door was up ahead, and as if it knew we were here, it opened.

There, just feet from the entrance, was a raised platform. An auction block. Many of the women screamed and pulled at their chains, which caused the rest of us to sway and some to fall since we were linked together. The monsters barked words at us, sounds we didn't understand as we were shoved toward the platform.

I stood on that platform in a line with the other human women and stared into a sea of...hell.

The crowd around me howled and roared, their twisted, monstrous faces contorted with hunger and madness, their glowing eyes fixed on the captives that would soon be sold off. That would soon be theirs.

I felt my knees give out but not from fear but because we were pushed down. The crowd surged closer, their voices a chaotic, bloodthirsty roar as their excitement

grew.

I was going to hell, and it was the devil's minions who were taking me there.

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KATRINA

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The air around me was thick with the stench of sweat, blood, and fear. The platform beneath my knees was slick with pungent grime, the old and scarred wood digging into my flesh.

My wrists throbbed, the shackles clanking together because none of the women could be still, not when they shook from pure terror.

My head swam, my pulse a frantic, erratic drumbeat in my ears. The roar of the monstrous crowd surrounded me in a deafening, chaotic wave.

I tried to steady my breath, but my chest heaved as I forced myself to look out over the sea of twisted, snarling and grotesque faces. Eyes glowing, their fixed gazes on us filled with a hunger I'd never seen before.

It was horrifying.

My heart raced even harder, and my body trembled. My thin nightgown offered little protection against the cold, damp air that hung around me like an oppression.

One by one, the women prisoners were hauled up and pushed forward, presented before the crowd. I couldn't understand the language, but the way the females were touched and mauled, stripped bare to show their nudity, it was clear we were pieces of meat being displayed for a buyer.

The screams echoed off the jagged stone walls. The chains rattled, and pleas for help fell on deaf, twisted ears.

A few younger human men were brought in and had the same fate as the human woman.

I watched as a young man was yanked forward, his pale, gaunt face twisted in terror as a hulking, green fur-covered beast with beady black eyes and gnarled, twisted horns claimed him.

They did this repeatedly, and all I could do was kneel and wait. I swallowed, my throat dry, the bitter taste of fear coating my tongue. My turn was coming, the line shrinking as each human was sold off, their fates sealed by the exchange of money.

Finally, I felt rough, clawed hands close around my upper arms, yanking me up to my feet. I stumbled forward, the chains clanging together, my heartbeat drowning out everything else as it pounded in my ears.

My knees felt weak, my bare feet raw and sore from walking on the rough terrain. I was all but dragged onto the center of the platform and pushed forward, my toes touching the edge.

Sweat and dirt covered my face, and my hair stuck to my temples. I forced my head up, hating that I probably looked like a wild, terrified animal about to get slaughtered.

Twisted faces leered up at me, sharp teeth glinting, glowing eyes ravenous, and bodies so huge and beastly that I couldn't have imagined them if I tried. The slave auctioneer started speaking in those strange, garbled words as he lifted my arms, tore at my gown, and displayed me like a piece of meat.

And then a hush fell over the crowd. A hulking figure stepped forward, its massive form hunched, a disgusting and dirty pelt covering its shoulders. I held my breath as I stared into its small, beady eyes—those twin orbs... soulless.

And when it grinned, twisted, yellowed teeth flashed in double rows on the top and bottom. I felt instantly sickened as it came forward and eyed me up and down.

My heart stuttered in my chest, my breath catching as the heavy, oppressive weight of what was happening to me finally sunk in and strangled me. The yellow-fanged beast said something to the auctioneer and nodded toward me. I was jerked backward, my gown hanging from me in tatters as I was ushered down the steps and toward the towering monster.

The creature reached for me, its long, gnarled fingers curling around my arms and pulling me forward. He smelled like death.

“No,” I finally said, feeling my voice for the first time since being thrust on that auction block. I jerked back, my arms straining against his iron hold, his claws digging into my skin and tearing it easily. But nothing was as painful as the pure, unadulterated terror that ran through my veins.

The creature’s jaw cracked open, its teeth snapping together mere inches from me, its breath a noxious plume blown across my face. It leaned in closer, its claws tightening around my arms until I cried out.

“Little human, I’ll have fun breaking you and putting you back together.” He hauled me through the crowd, but something shifted suddenly.

The air became hotter and thicker, and everything and everyone fell silent. The monster still held me, but his hold loosened. I looked into its grotesque face only to see fear as he scanned the crowd.

Whatever—or whoever—was here was something even darker and more terrifying than the monsters in this room.

I felt it and heard it before I saw it—a deep, rumbling growl that vibrated through the stone beneath my feet. The sound echoed off the walls, and I swore it rattled the iron chains that bound me as a prisoner.

The crowd around us fell silent, their bodies tensing, their glowing eyes flicking nervously toward the door I'd entered from. And then, I felt this pressure right before the door splintered inward, the force throwing me backward until I hit the hard ground, the wind knocked out of me.

I heard roars and screams, the vibration all around me a stampede. Survival instinct told me to get up or I'd get crushed. I rose and quickly moved toward the wall. There were too many bodies trying to flee in all directions that there was no way I could try and get out of here safely.

That's when I saw a massive figure step forward, his shadow stretching long and intimidating, his presence sucking the air from the room.

My heart hammered painfully against my ribs as the beast stepped fully into view, the torchlight illuminating his ashen-colored skin. His massive, muscular form towered over every other creature, his very presence making everyone stand still.

They feared him.

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I pressed fully against the wall, feeling smaller than I ever had. And then his black eyes locked onto mine, unblinking and intense, and there was this darkness that swirled in their depths.

A primal, instinctual fear claimed me, and I felt a cold shiver slide down my spine.

Everything else around me seemed to vanish as I took in his appearance. He had thick, curved horns that jutted from his head, their sharp, wicked points catching the torchlight as he kept a stoic expression.

One of the creatures made a move to leave, and he snapped his head in its direction, baring his fangs, the long, sharp teeth glistening with a thin sheen of saliva as his lips curled back in a snarling challenge.

“Do it,” he said to the beast in a gruff voice, his words accented as he spoke my language.

His massive hands were curled into fists, the thick, powerful muscles of his forearms flexing as he stepped closer to the creature who tried to leave.

“Try and get past me and see what I do to your body.” The beast was smart enough to take a step back from this male who clearly held uncontested power and authority.

The humans who’d been taken stood off to the side, pressed against the far wall, their tear-streaked faces looking just as terrified as mine surely did.

“Who sanctioned this illegal auction in my kingdom?” His voice boomed, and

everyone shrunk back. When no one answered, he smiled and lifted his arms. “If no one wants to claim this, then all of you will be held accountable.”

A rush of heavily armored monsters swarmed into the room and to either side of what I assumed was the king, seeing as he said this was his kingdom.

Everything was a blur of shapes and shadows and roars and screams. I smelled blood, felt it splash on my partially nude body.

It all happened in a matter of seconds, and when I opened my eyes—not realizing I’d squeezed them shut—all that was in front of me were corpses, blood, and trafficked humans who looked shell-shocked.

For a heartbeat, everything and everyone was silent. Then, the ragged, panicked gasps of the other captives and the soft, wet drip of blood filled my head.

“Take the humans back to where they came from,” the monster king said, and I snapped my head to look at him.

He watched me.

His gaze slid from my head to my toes, and I clutched my arms to my body, shielding my nudity. I don’t want to stay here, but I don’t want to go back home. I thought I’d said those words in my head, but when his brow furrowed and a low sound left him, I realized I’d said them out loud.

The king beast swiftly moved in front of me. He reached out, his massive, clawed hand wrapping around my wrist, his rough skin gently scraping against my bare flesh as he pulled me to his chest.

I couldn’t scream even though I was terrified and knew I should.

“It’s okay, little one. You don’t want to go home.” The way he said that made it seem like he knew I faced horrors at home. “And I won’t leave you here.” He used a claw to tip my head back. “You’ll come with me. I’ll keep you safe, and we’ll figure out what to do next.”

He lifted me easily into his arms, my voice still frozen in my throat as I let him carry me out of that room and into the waiting darkness.

His deep, gravelly voice rumbled in a language I didn’t understand as his men parted for us, their twisted, beastly heads bowing with respect.

The flickering torchlight faded behind us as the massive, gray-skinned king took me into the shadows and deeper into the heart of his Dark Realm.

4

KATRINA

I remembered little after we left the auction.

I certainly didn’t remember falling asleep.

One moment, I was being carried by a monster king, his enormous body radiating heat and strength, and the next, I was lying in a bed far too large for any human.

I didn’t move as I just gathered my thoughts and took an inventory of my surroundings.

The furs beneath me were soft, and the air was warm given the fact a roaring fire burned brightly in a huge hearth off to the side. I rubbed my eyes and stared up at the ceiling, one carved from black, shining stone that seemed veined with sparkling

gems.

Those beautiful, strange lines pulsed slowly, almost like they were alive.

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When I finally sat up, the discomfort in my body made itself known tenfold. Pain flared in my arms and shoulders and pounded in my feet in time with my pulse. My wrists felt raw from the shackles, and when I looked down, I saw they were horribly bruised.

My face ached something terrible, and I knew that had been from when my father hit me right before I was taken. A shiver took root in me, and I grabbed a thick fur and draped it over me, shifting on the bed until my feet hung from the edge.

When I stood, my bare feet were met with hard, cold stone. I winced, knowing my soles were torn up, but despite the discomfort, I walked, gritting my teeth, and roamed the room.

The chamber I was in was enormous and beautiful. There were odd, ancient carvings on the walls designed with the gem veins that glowed brighter with each passing second.

As I slowly inspected the room and noted everything I saw, the more the air seemed to thicken with each breath I took.

A pair of massive wooden doors stood shut across from me, and I assumed them to be locked, keeping me prisoner inside. Bolted from the outside. No handle. No keyhole. No escape.

Panic rose in my throat like bile, and I shuffled over to the doors, reaching for one handle, fully expecting it to be locked. But when it turned and I could pull the massive and far too heavy door open, shock filled me.

Not a prisoner. At least not in this room.

When I heard movement, that shock changed to panic, and I scuttled back until I stood on the other side of the bed, the stone and wooden frame a barrier that I knew wouldn't protect me.

I stared at the doors, hearing heavy footfall coming closer. And closer. And then, the doors groaned open, and the monster king entered.

My body reacted on instinct, and I tensed as he entered. His horns were huge and thick, his shoulders wide, and his muscles thick beneath the black leather and armor strapped across his chest. His arms were bare of leather, his skin a deep gray color that was unworldly and extremely mesmerizing.

His black eyes found me immediately, locking on me as if there were some unseen force keeping us in this silent war. He watched me like he was... searching for something.

I clutched the fur tighter, my heart hammering, the pain in my body taking a back seat as uncertainty of my future rose up.

He said nothing. Just... stared.

A part of me expected him to lunge, to pin me to the ground and claim me like a war prize, growling that I belonged to him because he saved me.

“Are you hungry?”

As if those words triggered my body to respond, my belly growled, my mouth grew dry, and my throat tightened with thirst.

My lips parted but no words left. He nodded. Just once, as if he knew my thoughts. He left, the doors shutting behind him. I flinched at the sound, and I didn't know why.

What the hell was going on?

I let out a breath, wrapping the fur tighter as I stayed where I was and waited for him to return. And while I waited silently, I looked at the tapestries that hung above the bone and skull mantel.

The scenes stitched into them seemed to be from long ago, depictions of warring factions embroiled in brutal battles. There were monsters with numerous limbs, snarling beasts with glowing red eyes, creatures with spikes lining their back and two sets of fangs in their gaping mouths.

They clashed with each other, axes and claws and teeth being used as their weapons against each other.

And the longer I stared at these images, the more I swore the scenes moved as if alive. And then, the footsteps came again, and when the doors opened and the king stepped inside, I didn't run. I didn't cower in fear. I tipped my chin and stared at him in defiance.

A smaller creature shrouded in a black robe came in behind the king, a massive tray in hand as it walked to the small table and set it down. And then, the beast servant left.

I tore my gaze away from the tray and stared at the king, my heart racing in my chest.

"I'm Blaylock, King of the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale. And you're under my protection." There was nothing else he said before he turned and left me alone.

I stood there staring at those double doors, then at the tray, before my gaze finally landed on a mirror in the far corner. It was tall and carved from white stone with little bits of bone and onyx sparkling gems embedded within it.

I approached it slowly, and the moment I saw my reflection, I felt my brow furrow at the woman staring back at me. I didn't... recognize myself.

My eyes were wild, my skin too pale. My hair was a tangled mess of blonde strands around my dirty face. One eye was slightly swollen and bruised, and my lip was split.

I'd been abused my entire life only to be taken away and almost sold off as a slave. I was terrified of this world and this situation. I didn't know what Blaylock planned to do to me. I didn't know if I was truly safe. But what I did know was that he could have killed me many times over already. Instead, he saved me, fed me, and offered me his protection.

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I turned and went over to the table, stared at the tray, and knew I needed my strength for whatever may come.

I sat and ate and wondered if staying in the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale was a far worse destiny than what awaited me back at the only place I knew as home.

5

KATRINA

I finished dinner, and the food wasn't as strange as I assumed it would be. It had been delicious, and not because I had been so hungry. I ate a bowl of delicious, hearty stew and a piece of thick, dense bread that had a hint of sweetness to it.

When the tray was empty and my belly full, I rested back in the plush, massive chair, adjusting the fur around me and staring into the fire. I didn't know how long I sat there, but sleep started to take over, my eyes weighed heavy with exhaustion, and the warmth from the fire—and my full belly—pulled me under into pure contentment.

But the moment of comfort didn't last.

The doors opened again with a low groan, and I straightened and stared at Blaylock, who stood in the threshold. "How was your meal?"

I cleared my throat and nodded, knowing that killing him with sweetness was better than fighting a situation I had no control over. "It was good, thank you. I'm grateful."

He tipped his head to the side and watched me before nodding and rumbling low. Then he said in a gruff, deep voice, “Come.” His voice was like a roll of thunder in the vast room. He held his hand out, his palm huge, his claws black and sharp. “Come, little one.”

I hesitated, every instinct screaming at me to stay rooted to the spot, but something about the way he watched me—waiting patiently—told me that I was safe with this monster.

So, I stood, my body still so sore and aching, the discomfort increasing as I walked toward him. He waited patiently until I stood before him, and then he turned and started making his way down the grand hallway.

I followed him through the dim halls, sconces lining the stone walls, the fire within them bright and blue and wholly unearthly in appearance.

The silence between us was heavy but not awkward. Yet... it was confusing to me why I didn't feel bone-deep fear with this monster king.

I took in his massive body and how broad his shoulders were, how thickly muscled his arms were. He was shirtless, and every step he took revealed the rippling of muscle that lay under his flesh.

His pants molded to his frame, his power was as intense as he was.

We descended a long flight of stairs, his booted feet almost soft and silent on the black stone flooring. When we entered what could only be called the throne room, I sucked in a breath. It was enormous, so vast and almost cavernous but held this expensive detailing that showed immense wealth and power.

I stood frozen right in the entrance, just gazing around at how grand it all was. Jagged

stone columns lined the walls, rising into the rocky ceiling above that showcased black crystal stalactites. Everything else held nothing but this darkness that seemed never-ending.

Torches burned in sconces between the columns, their bright blue flames intense and cold. Eerie shadows danced across everything they touched in an ominous hue.

I could see a balcony just at the far end of the room, and although the distance between me and the double doors was great, I could see nothing but sky, the occasional flying creature soaring by and rocky mountain tops in the distance.

Blaylock watched me. Ifeltit, but I was too transfixed by my surroundings to look at him. A throne sat at the far end of the chamber, carved from black stone, bone, and the same sparkling black crystals. It sat on a bone dais, the steps to it puzzled together with the rib cages of beastly beings.

I finally glanced at Blaylock. He stood tall and terrifying in the cold blue light. His all-black gaze pinned mine with this inquisitive expression.

“You are not my prisoner. You are not a slave,” he said, his voice deep and rumbling. “You are free to do what you wish.” Although he said the words, there was this strange tone in his voice that told me he didn’t mean it, not wholly.

I blinked, unsure how to respond. This seemed too... easy. “That’s not true, is it?” I whispered, thinking I said the words to myself, but when he stepped closer, I knew I’d said them out loud.

“You are mine,” he said, bobbing his massive head side to side, like he was weighing two equal options.

For a second, I didn't think I heard him right. And then his words slammed into me

like a blow, and I took a step back. My heart stuttered. “W-What do you mean I’m yours?”

He didn’t smile. Didn’t blink or speak. His expression didn’t even soften. Faster than I could inhale my next breath, Blaylock was in front of me, his big, clawed hand wrapped gently around my waist as he pulled me closer. I was frozen in place as I cocked my head back to look into his face.

“Claimed, sweet little one. You are marked as mine. Protected at all costs.” He tightened his hold on my waist and gripped my face with his other hand. “I want you as mine, beautiful human. My queen to rule the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale. And I’ll wait for however long it takes.”

My mouth opened and closed, but I was speechless.

“Use your words, sweetling. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

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I squeezed my eyes shut, breathed in and out slowly, and just said what needed to be said. “You can’t...” The words caught in my throat, but I forced them out. “You can’t just say things like that and expect me to believe I’m not a prisoner.” Fear twisted in my gut, and I started trembling. “I won’t belong to anyone ever again.”

The sound that left him was low and guttural—a growl that reverberated through the throne room. The air seemed to vibrate with its intensity, and out of my peripheral vision, I saw the blue firelight swaying from an unseen wind.

My body tightened, and I felt like prey caught in a snare, strung up right in front of a predator about to devour me whole.

“I want you as my equal. A slave isn’t what I desire nor need, little one.” This electrical charge moved over my arms and legs, and I shivered. “You are safe here, Katrina. But you mesmerize me. You intrigue me. I need to know all about you. I need to learn every facet and detail that makes you... you.”

It was strange hearing these things come from a male who wasn’t human. Who looked like he was plucked out of a terrifying dream and brought to life. But when he looked at me, his gaze touching me with this gentleness, it startled me. It... warmed me.

“I just... want you.”

I stared at him, my chest rising and falling rapidly. His words shouldn't have made my stomach flip, but they did. I shouldn't have felt anything but fear and panic. But instead, I felt heat rising in my body, and a tingling flush was stealing along my neck

and face.

Confusion filled me, but there was something primal and needy moving through my veins and settling right between my legs. I'd never felt anything like this—a warmth that felt forbidden.

“I won't hurt you,” he said, his voice softer now but still very much animalistic. “But my mercy and gentleness ends with you, sweetness.” His brows furrowed as if the very idea of being sweet and soft was foreign. And I realized he'd never shown compassion or empathy to another living being.

I watched him in silence, trying to decide what frightened me more—his power, his appearance, or that a part of me, a secret, shameful part, wanted everything he offered.

I was no longer in the world I knew. And a part of me realized I'd longed for that my entire life.

6

KATRINA

I could still feel the heat of Blaylock's hand on my waist and the weight of his black-eyed gaze locked on me even though he'd long since pulled away. A part of me assumed he'd press for more.

To claim me right in the throne room. To make me his in every irrevocable way.

But instead, he'd released me slowly, as if he'd been reluctant to let go. And I couldn't deny that I longed for his touch again, to feel that huge hand on me, and to know that his strength was more powerful than anything I'd ever experienced.

I stood where I had stopped when first entering the room and watched Blaylock ascend the bone and crystal stone dais, his massive form turning to face me at the same time he sat on the throne. The look in his eyes as he stared at me was unreadable.

Not cold.

Not cruel. But something that made me crave and yearn for whatever he had to give me.

For long seconds, we just stayed like that, both silent as we stared at each other. He didn't order me to do anything, and I felt an independence and power in that fact. Before I could do anything, several cloaked beasts entered, speaking that strange language, but the tone told me whatever they said was important.

"Little one," Blaylock said, addressing me. "I have some matters to tend to, but I encourage you to explore the castle. This is just as much your home as it is mine."

That made my chest fill with comforting warmth. I backed away slowly, cautiously, keeping a wide berth from the cloaked figures until I reached the massive doors. I slipped through them but not before looking at Blaylock once more.

He leaned forward, his black gaze on me, this slow smirk curving his mouth and making my core instantly heat and wetness pool at the top of my thighs. Before I could contemplate my bodily reactions to Blaylock, I quickly passed through the doors.

Once out of the throne room, the cool air in the hallway felt like a slap to my flushed skin. I wasn't afraid of this strange, ghastly place but was unsure of what I would find. What I did know was I wasn't returning to my room.

The halls were silent and empty as I wandered. The flickering, blue torches gave this

beautiful, eerie glow to the dark walls and flooring. The castle was massive, and the numerous hallways made me feel like I was in a labyrinth.

The deeper I ventured, the more I realized this place—Blaylock's domain—was not just a fortress. It was alive in an ominous and ethereal way, and that was evident by the glowing, pulsing light coming from the veins of crystal that ran through the structure.

The few castle staff I passed were cloaked, their visages hidden, which I found myself thankful for. The last thing I needed was more fear to settle in at seeing living, breathing monsters again.

I'd seen enough at the slave auction to last me a lifetime.

Despite the cloaks hiding their forms, I made out horns and claws, scales and glowing eyes hidden within the darkness.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself and continued my exploration until I found a chamber with the large wooden door open. I stopped and stared at the stone statues lining either side of the entryway.

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A gust of chilled air came from inside the darkened room, and I hesitated at the threshold.

Pushing my unease aside, I stepped in, candlelight flaring to life upon my entrance as if I'd beckoned it. The room was a grand hall—enormous in size with an arched and curved ceiling that opened up to the peaceful night sky above. And of course, the same glowing crystals veined the walls and floor.

I stood in awe, shaking my head to clear my thoughts from the beauty of it all. The room was filled with massive, monstrous statues, each seeming larger than life. They stood like sentries, beasts frozen in violent poses, as if ready to attack.

A shiver rippled down my spine and intensified when I realized I wasn't alone.

“Fearsome, aren't they?”

I jumped and spun around, heart leaping into my throat. Blaylock stood in the doorway, framed in the glow of the blue torchlight.

In the time it took for me to explore, Blaylock changed into a pair of dark trousers that clung to his thick, powerful legs, his chest still bare of any covering. But nothing could hide the raw, brutal strength of his body.

His horns curled back from his brow, gleaming faintly like onyx in the low light, matching his short dark hair that had this windswept appearance to it.

“Yes,” I answered honestly, my voice small in the vastness of the hall. “I didn't

mean?—”

He moved toward me, slow, controlled, but there was an edge to his stride. His very aura had the rest of my words stuck in my throat.

“I told you that you were free within these walls,” he said, voice low and sounding deep like thunder. “This place can be terrifying, I’m sure, but you’re safer here than anywhere else.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, not sure why I trusted him. Not sure why his words made me feel like this was where I should have been all my life.

His black gaze scanned the room. “This room is frightening for you. I have no doubt. But this is a place of memory. Of battles won.”

I glanced at the nearest statue, at the way the creature’s stone wings loomed behind it—high and intimidating.

“No one will bother you. You’re under my protection. But my subjects will stare?—”

“Because I’m human?”

“Because you’re different,” he said, his gruff voice gentler. He was only a breath away from me now, and the scent of him was so intoxicating that I actually swayed slightly.

“I smell your fear. I smell your confusion.” He reached out and cupped my cheek. “You’re so fragile.” He inhaled deeply. “You’re so beautiful and perfect that I want to destroy anything that even thinks of taking you from me.”

I sucked in a sharp breath at his words... and what they did to me. I felt heat, the kind

of warmth that settled between my thighs and made me tingle in places that certainly had never felt that before.

I shook my head, closed my eyes, and gathered my composure. “You keep saying that I’m yours.” I bit my bottom lip and felt a flush cover my cheeks and neck. “Why me?”

Blaylock stared at me, his expression unreadable again. But there was something softer there now, something cracked open behind his onyx eyes.

“Because when I saw you,” he said, his voice low and distant, as if he were replaying that moment when he saved me. And he had. He’d saved me from far more than he’d ever know. “I felt this fire inside of me. One I’d never experienced before. It made me feel alive, my little one.” He stroked his claw over my cheek. “You’ve seen things in your life and experienced pain. You’ve been frightened for far too long, but you didn’t break. I knew then you were destined to be mine and mine alone.”

His words sank into me like the claws he had pressed to my skin, tugging at something I didn’t know had been buried deep.

“I’m not strong,” I whispered, not sure why I’d said the words. “I’ve been slowly breaking my entire life.”

“Maybe,” he murmured, his gaze locked on my mouth. “But despite it all, you survived.”

I couldn’t speak. The lump in my throat was too thick. I didn’t know if I wanted to cry, scream, or fall into his arms and tell him I never wanted to go. That this felt... right.

But I stayed where I was. I didn’t move or speak or even breathe. His presence

wrapped around me until I was cocooned in everything that was Blaylock.

“You mesmerize me, my perfect, little human... in ways that make no sense to a beast like me. You are mine, Katrina. Not as a prize. Not as a prisoner?—”

“As yours,” I whispered, finishing his sentence.

He leaned down, his voice just above a whisper along my lips. I closed my eyes and shivered. “As my queen.”

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I wanted to deny him. To push him away. But I couldn't. I didn't want to.

Whatever he had to offer, in that moment, I knew I wanted it all.

7

KATRINA

Days passed. Or maybe it had been weeks. Time felt like it moved differently in the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale.

Each morning, I woke in the same grand room, wrapped in heavy furs, the scent of smoke from the ever-burning fire in the hearth filling the chamber, and the intoxicating scent of Blaylock all around me.

I dreamed of him nightly. Or maybe he'd been coming to see me, watching me sleep and adding another fur atop my body to keep me warm?

The bruises on my body faded to yellow, and the ache and wounds on my feet healed. Although I was still unsure of my situation, fear no longer consumed me.

Blaylock hadn't locked me in. He never chained me and never forced anything. He let me have free rein, even walking with me as I explored, like my silent sentry.

He watched me.

Not just with those onyx, endless eyes but with an unreadable desire, a tension that I

knew was passion. He never spoke of wanting me, but he didn't need to. I felt it surround him. I knew I stirred something in him that he didn't understand.

And I felt the same way in my desire toward him because I watched him right back.

His massive, terrifying, masculine body. The way the ground seemed to vibrate under his steps.

The coldness of his expression when he looked at everyone and everything aside from me.

But I also saw the cracks—thin, fleeting moments—when something warmer flickered through. The slight pause when I met his gaze. The way his voice softened when he spoke to me.

I was falling for my beast, and I didn't stop or fight it. I welcomed it like a lover's embrace.

He'd even escorted me out of the castle to the lands just beyond his castle. He did this nightly, and I found myself finding beauty in everything I saw.

And when he asked if I'd like to go to another kingdom with him, to be introduced to the new human queen of the Dark Realm of Blood Ash, I had no hesitation in accepting the invitation. And it was an evening I'd never forgot, not even days later when I still thought about the horrific beauty of Blood Ash and how I'd never felt as protected amongst monsters as I was by Blaylock's side.

Today, I wandered deeper into the castle than I ever had before, curiosity moving me along.

The hallways, once cold and quiet, felt warmer and like this could be my forever

home. The monstrous servants I passed now offered curt nods, their large, robe-covered bodies seeming less fearsome.

I turned down a hallway I'd never ventured into before and came up to a dead end with a tall, metal door covered in intricate gargoyle etchings in the steel.

Curiosity gnawed at me, this hungry feeling clawing at my insides. I pushed the heavy door open, and when I slipped inside, I gasped.

The room wasn't just a room. It was a garden unlike anything I could ever imagine.

There was no sunshine in the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale. Instead, there was this bright moonlight that felt warm and light enough to illuminate everything it touched.

And it made everything pulse with life.

The garden wasn't beautiful in the colorful sense I had back "home". Vines of ivy crept along trellises that traveled high enough to reach the open ceiling. Flowers of deep blues, greys, and the blackest of the black rose from the dark earth, seeking life from that giving moonlight.

The flowers were strange yet just as lively as any I'd ever seen before. A low, melodic vibration filled the air, and I closed my eyes and just felt it wrap all around me.

I wound my way further into the garden, and I breathed deeply, taking in the floral and earthy scent. It was heady—sweet and wild. And slightly intoxicating.

I walked around, letting my fingers brush a dark blue bloom, then did the same to a rich and dark purple one.

“It’s all almost as beautiful as you.”

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I spun around.

Blaylock stood at the entrance, his arms crossed over his broad chest, his horns seeming to scrape the arched stone above him.

I swallowed hard, my face heating from his compliment.

“I watch you,” he admitted. “Lurking in the shadows like the beast I am. Just admiring how innocent and fragile you are.”

Blaylock watched with those ever-unreadable black eyes.

I felt this need to be honest move through me. “I watch you, too.” My heart raced. He hummed as if pleased with what I said.

He stepped inside the garden. The door closing behind him, like an invisible force wanted us sealed in. Then, to my surprise, he walked to the massive, stone bench nestled between two thorny trees and sat down, holding out his hand for me.

I hesitated, then crossed the garden and sat beside him, the heat from his body washing over me and warming me instantly.

For a moment, we said nothing, only letting the peaceful silence and stillness fill the grand space.

“You’re not like the other humans I’ve met,” he finally said, voice low. “You didn’t cry or beg.” He looked at me, the corner of his mouth lifting. “Even in the face of

horror, you stayed strong.”

“I’ve wept plenty of times, believe me,” I said honestly. “I just don’t let anyone see.” I stared at him, my heart thudding.

“I can’t seem to stay away from you, little bird. I watch you because I can’t look away.”

My breath caught. He shifted his body to face me fully now, and I saw raw desire etched on his face.

And I was right there with him.

“I’ve ruled this realm with an iron fist. With blood and gore and violence. Keeping this land under my domain is the only way to make sure it doesn’t fall into the hands of those who would ultimately destroy it,” he said. “I’ve built these very walls and littered corpses over my lands to ward off anyone who thinks to take what’s mine. And yet...” He didn’t finish the thought. He didn’t have to.

I shifted closer before I realized I was doing it. “You don’t have to be gentle with me,” I whispered. “But you don’t have to hide, either.”

The silence between us crackled with electricity. I felt it—undeniable pull and desire. That tension between us of equal parts restraint and something darker. Something hungry.

And I was suddenly starving.

“I’ve never taken a queen,” he said, his voice a growl now. “Never wanted one. Until you, my little bird.”

My breath hitched.

And then he reached out, his clawed hand gentle as it cupped the side of my face.

I should have pulled back.

Instead, I leaned in.

The moment teetered on the edge—of fear, for the monstrous desire I felt... of something that was permanent.

And when his mouth descended to mine, hot and rough, it wasn't uncertainty or fear I felt.

It was surrender and hardcore need.

8

KATRINA

“Katrina,” Blaylock growled, his deep voice vibrating through the night air like a rumble of distant thunder.

Despite us being seated, his massive frame loomed over me, the veins of blue-glowing crystal beneath our feet casting an iridescent sheen on his gray skin.

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His black hair, short and tousled, framed his sharp features, and his horns arched proudly from his head, daring me to touch them.

I could feel the heat of his body, smell the primal musk of him, and my breath hitched as his gaze burned into mine.

“Blaylock,” I whispered back, my voice trembling. My heart was pounding, my body already betraying me with a rush of wet heat between my thighs.

I hadn’t planned for this. I hadn’t planned for him. But here we were, in the night garden, surrounded by exotic, blooming flowers that seemed to pulse with the same desire coursing through my veins.

His chest nearly brushed mine, and I could feel the sheer size of him crowding me and sense the raw power that poured from his enormous body.

Stroking my face, his skin was rough and warm, his claws gentle as he scraped them over my face. I leaned into it, my lips parting instinctively. His eyes seemed to darken even more, and then?—

His mouth crashed into mine again.

It wasn’t gentle. It wasn’t sweet.

It was a kiss that told me one thing. He was hungry for me.

Blaylock’s lips were firm, demanding, and I surrendered to them instantly, my hands

flying to his shoulders to steady myself. When he swept his tongue between the seam of my lips, I felt the prick of his fangs breaking my skin, flooding our mouths with the metallic tang of blood.

He groaned, clearly turned on as much as I was.

The feel of his tongue sliding against mine, hot and insistent, pulled a moan from me. I couldn't help but press against his much larger, harder body, seeking more of what he offered.

Blaylock's hands moved to my waist, gripping me with a possessiveness that sent shivers down my spine. He pulled me closer until I straddled his lap. We were so close—nearly fused together. I felt the hard length of his huge, monster cock pressing right between my thighs.

My fingers tangled in his hair, and when they brushed against the base of his horns, he let out a low, guttural groan.

“Yes,” he rasped, breaking the kiss to look at me with eyes that were blacker than I'd ever seen them before. “Touch them. Stroke them like you would my cock.”

I gasped at his words, never hearing such vulgarity before. But the wetness dripping from my pussy told me... I liked it.

I hesitated for only a moment before my fingers traced the smooth curve of his horns. They were warm to the touch, and as I stroked them, Blaylock shuddered, his hands tightening on my waist, and his claws tearing at the material of my gown.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he growled, his voice thick with desire. His hips jerked forward, and I felt the unmistakable hardness of him, rock-solid and ready for me. I couldn't help but wonder what he looked like. Was he similar to a human

male? Was he... something wholly different?

When he rose again, he pushed me down at the same time, my breath caught, my pussy clenched, and more wetness slipped out of me that I felt my inner thighs grow slick.

Who was this woman who came from nothing but wanted so much from her beast of a king? “Show me,” I whispered, my voice barely audible, the words tumbling out of me before I could stop them.

Blaylock didn’t need me to elaborate. He knew what I wanted to see.

In one swift motion, he stood, and my legs instinctively wrapped around his waist. His big hands supported me effortlessly, his biceps flexing and bulging. His strength was both thrilling and terrifying.

He carried me to a soft patch of glowing, light-blue moss, the crystal veins beneath us casting an otherworldly feel to everything.

And then his hands were everywhere—touching me over my gown-covered body, exploring me in ways no other man had before. I knew this was the calm before the storm. I knew what this was to its very core.

Being claimed.

“I need to see all of you.” He looked at me with an almost pained expression on his brutally savage face.

“Bare me, Blaylock.”

He growled so loudly, so deeply, that the very walls vibrated and illuminated from

the sound.

He shred my gown with the tips of his sharp claws until the tattered fabric lay on either side of my body, a barbaric testament of his need for me.

Blaylock sat back on his haunches. Wonder and gratitude flashed over his face before his fierce, primal side took over. His eyes blazed a burning trail from my face, over my full breasts, stopping on my erect nipples momentarily before landing on my glistening pussy. Baring his teeth, he flicked his very long and pointed dark gray tongue out and swiped it over his lower lip.

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I was breathless under Blaylock's ferocious perusal and need. He peppered heated, fervent kisses down my neck, over my collarbone, and settled on my breasts. That pointed tongue of his smoothed over my nipple, and I arched into him reflexively, a guttural moan escaping my lips. God, that was better than anything I'd ever felt. The sensations bolted right to my clit, causing that little nub to throb.

"Blaylock, please," I begged, my hands spearing through his hair, fisting the silky strands. My fingers found his large, hard horns again and I circled around them. Ever so lightly, I glided my palms along their lengths. Back and forth. Back and forth, Back and forth.

A sound of uncontrolled desire ripped from deep within Blaylock's chest—very primal, very feral. He gave my nipple one last, long lick, and rose slightly to lock his gaze on mine.

I opened my mouth, knowing what I wanted to say, but no words spilled from my parted lips. This low hum and vibration came from him, and he stood slowly, almost methodically, and undid the ties of his leather pants before pushing them down his muscular legs.

And the sight of it sent a shock of heat straight to the center of my pussy.

For long seconds, I just stared at him... at what was between his legs. The length was massive, thicker and longer than anything I'd ever seen, and bigger than what could comfortably fit inside of a woman.

It was a dark gray color, the same as the rest of his body, and looked smooth and

utterly intimidating as it hardened into something more—something stone-like. My breath caught as I noticed a smaller secondary appendage, similar in appearance to his cock, emerging from the slitted tip.

“This,” he rasped, his voice rough with desire as he grabbed his cock and stroked himself, the second appendage emerging even more, “will ensure my seed goes where it needs to—when you’re ready.”

His words sent a jolt through me. The realization of what he meant was both thrilling and overwhelming. The sight of Blaylock, fully exposed for me, fully erect for me, sent a shock of heat straight to my pussy, my body ready to give in to the primal need he ignited in me.

“You are mine,” he said, his voice a low growl that sent shivers down my spine.

He lowered his body between my thighs, his massive hands spreading me wide as his face hovered over my pussy. He looked into my eyes for only a second before his pointed tongue delved into my pussy hole with a hunger that made me cry out.

His mouth was hot, wet, and relentless as he lapped at me with a rhythm that had my hips bucking uncontrollably, my cunt grinding against his face, smearing my cream over his mouth and cheeks. Blaylock growled against me, the vibrations sending sharp waves of pleasure through my body.

“Yes,” I moaned uncontrollably. I writhed beneath him, my hands tugging on his horns, stroking him, and causing him to growl, the vibrations spearing right to my clit. I gasped, my voice breaking as his tongue curled inside me, teasing, tasting, claiming.

“My little bird is delicious,” he snarled and ate me out with more fervor, sliding his tongue in and out of me only to slip out every now and then to lick me from my ass to

my clit.

He didn't stop, his movements growing more fervent as I grew wetter and needier until I was trembling on the edge of release. Just as I was about to tip over the edge, Blaylock pulled away, his breath ragged, his mouth glossy from my pussy juices.

Without a word, he grabbed the root of his cock and positioned himself over me, the thick, stone-hard tip of his cock pressing against my pussy hole, his little appendage wiggling and pushing against me, trying to gain entrance. God... he was hard. Like literal stone. But hotter than fire.

He paused, his gaze locked on mine, silently asking me for my consent.

I nodded, breathless, desperate. With a low growl, he pushed forward, filling me completely in one slow, searing thrust that made me scream his name and tighten my hold on his horns. His whole body shuddered in response.

I said his name repeatedly, chanting it like a prayer as he filled me completely, stretching me in ways that were painful but deliciously erotic.

I'd never been with anyone sexually, and I knew the wetness I felt wasn't just from my arousal but also from him tearing through my innocence. My virgin blood.

As if reading my thoughts, he pulled out, but only long enough to shift his body so he could drag his tongue over my tender hole, licking away my innocent blood and groaning with desire.

And then he was right back inside me, pushing through my unused body, claiming me as his. My body adjusted to him slowly, and when he moved with more intensity, as if trying to race to a finish line, I cried out, my back arching off the ground.

Something in me exploded, lights and suns coexisting as one while the pleasure coursed through my body and stole my voice and the air from my lungs.

Blaylock's thrusts were deep, deliberate, each one hitting a spot inside me with a rhythm that made me see stars and dragged my orgasm out even more. I used my hold on his horns as leverage as I met his thrusts with my own. He groaned, his hips slamming against mine.

He was about to find his release.

His stone-hard cock thickened inside me, and I felt a tickling at his tip. I knew it was his second appendage extending, moving deeper in my body before he came.

The scorching heat of his cum filled my womb. It was wet and thick, and I felt it slip out from where we were connected.

"Katrina," he growled, his voice raw with need. "I'll never let you go."

"More," I gasped, my body craving him, needing him and needing another release.

Not thinking twice, Blaylock began pumping again. His thrusts were fast and hard as his hands gripped my hips with bruising force. The night garden seemed to come alive around us, the flowers blooming brighter, the crystal veins pulsing with a light that matched the rhythm of our bodies.

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Blaylock's fingers found my clit, rubbing it in tight circles, his claws lightly scraping my pussy lips, and I gave him what I needed again.

I shattered, another climax crashing over me like a tidal wave.

And the entire time, Blaylock kept coming, continuing to spill into me in hot, endless waves, his cock still hard as stone inside me. After long minutes, he collapsed on top of me, his breaths coming in ragged gasps, his hands resting on either side of my head, caging me in.

"Blaylock," I whispered, my voice hoarse.

"Yes, little one?" He dragged the tip of his nose along the side of my neck.

"Never let me go."

He pulled back, gently gripping my chin, and with the most serious voice and expression I'd seen him give me yet, he said fiercely, "Never."

9

KATRINA

I was sated and relaxed, but the way Blaylock grinned told me he wasn't done yet.

And I anticipated what he had planned.

His cock, still hard as stone, dripped from his orgasm, and I felt this aching, empty feeling. I was desperate for more, too.

“I’m not nearly done with you yet. My cock is hard and aching, and I need to fill you again until all I can smell is my seed on you.” His deep, rumbling voice cut through the hazy air. I inhaled deeply. The scent of exotic flowers and the glow of crystal veins pulsing beneath us seemed to have my body heightening all over again, as if he hadn’t just sent me over the edge.

“On your hands and knees, Katrina.” His command was low, primal, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

I didn’t hesitate. My body obeyed him before my mind could even process the words. I shifted so I was on my hands and knees on the mossy patch, my palms pressing into the cool, soft ground. The position had my ass popped out, and my pussy was no doubt on display.

I felt exposed, vulnerable, but I could feel the heat of his gaze raking over me like a physical touch.

His hands slid up my thighs, rough and possessive, his claws sharp but not breaking skin. I shuddered at the sensation. Blaylock kneaded the flesh of my ass, his fingers digging in just enough to make me moan and remind me I’d have bruises in the morning. He was being gentle, but even a monster couldn’t fully control his power and strength.

His warm breath traced along my ass a second before I felt him drag his tongue between my cheeks, licking my back hole. I shuddered, never imagining it could feel so... freeing and incredible.

He licked at me like he had with my pussy, until I was moaning and begging for his

cock, rocking my ass against his mouth.

I arched my back, pressing myself into his touch, and he let out a growl that bordered on feral.

“You’re mine, Katrina,” he snarled, his voice dripping with raw hunger. “You’re my queen.” With one last lick to my anus, he straightened and got into position.

I didn’t argue. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to.

The tip of his cock brushed against my pussy opening so hard and hot it felt like it might burn through my skin. And when I felt the teasing, tickling sensation of that second appendage moving along my opening, I couldn’t hold back my low, needy moan.

I whimpered, pushing back against him, trying to guide him inside me. I needed him to shove that enormous dick back inside of me.

He laughed darkly, a sound that made my inner pussy muscles clench with feral desire.

“My impatient little bird,” he murmured, his hands gripping my hips tight. He teased me, brushing the tip of his cock against my entrance but not sliding in, coating himself with my juices.

I groaned, frustration rippling through me as I tried to push back against him, attempting to impale myself on his thick rod. But he held me still, his strength overwhelming.

“Blaylock—” I cried out, mewling and begging. He cut me off with a sharp slap to my ass, the sting making me cry out.

“Beg more,” he demanded, his voice rough and commanding as he popped the head of his cock inside of me—just at the entrance.

I didn’t need him to tell me twice. “Please, Blaylock. I need you inside of me.”

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He growled again, low and satisfied, and finally—God finally—he pushed into me. I cried out as his cock stretched me, filling me completely. He was so big, so hard, it felt like he was splitting me in two. I knew no amount of getting used to his length and girth would ever not make this hurt.

And I loved that.

He didn't waste time, pulling back almost immediately and thrusting in with a force that drove the breath from my lungs.

Blaylock set a brutal pace, his hips slamming into mine. His rhythm left me dizzy with pleasure. This wasn't the easy, gentle way he'd claimed me earlier. No, this was a beast taking what was his.

My body moved with his, my moans and cries mixing with his low, guttural growls.

His hands roamed over my body, squeezing my breasts, kneading my ass cheeks, stroking a claw over my asshole—claiming every inch of me. One hand slid up my spine, tangling in my hair and pulling my head back. The sharp tug made me cry out, but it only heightened the pleasure coursing through me.

His other hand found my clit, his finger rubbing in tight circles. I bit my lip hard enough the skin broke and blood washed along my tongue.

“Blaylock, I'm so close,” I gasped, my voice broken and desperate.

“Not yet,” he growled, his thrusts becoming even faster, even harder. He leaned over

me, his breath hot against my ear. “You’ll come when I say you can.”

I whimpered, but it was as if I had no control in this moment, as if my body knew to obey.

His fingers on my clit were relentless, his cock inside me even more so. It was too much and yet not enough.

Suddenly, he pulled out of me, and I cried out at the loss. Before I could protest, he spun me around, his hands gripping my shoulders and pushing me down onto my back. The moss cushioned me, its softness a stark contrast to the raw, primal force of the monster looming over me.

Blaylock’s eyes were dark with desire as he looked down at me. His cock, still impossibly hard, glistened with my arousal. He didn’t give me a chance to catch my breath as he spread my legs wide and positioned himself between them once more.

I was looking at where we were going to be connected, but when he ordered, “Look at me,” his sharp words and demand had me snapping my gaze up to him instantly.

My eyes were locked with his as he thrust back into me. I cried out, my back arching, my breasts shaking as he filled me again. He didn’t move, just held himself still deep inside me as he leaned down, his hands caging my head.

His magnificent horns brushed against the skin of my chest as he leaned closer, his ragged, warm breath moving along my sweaty flesh. I couldn’t resist reaching up, my fingers tracing the smooth, hard surface. He groaned and shook, his cock twitching inside me as I explored his horns.

“You like that, don’t you?” I murmured, my voice seductive and breathless while I rubbed the base of his horns.

“You know what it fucking does to me, you beautiful little vixen.” He shuddered, his hips grinding against mine in response to me stroking them like I wanted to do to his thick cock. “Katrina—” he started, his voice strained, but I cut him off, my fingers sliding along them with more confidence.

And the effect of what I did was immediate. A low, guttural growl tore from his throat and rumbled outward, vibrating everything around us. I felt his cock pulse inside me repeatedly, spurting his thick, hot release into my body once more, his smaller appendage pushing it deep into my womb.

I continued to play with his horns as he lost control. I felt provocative... powerful.

He made a sound like a wounded, terrible beast, and it was the most attractive thing I’d ever heard. His hands gripped my hips as he moved again, his thrusts hard and desperate. I knew this was for me now.

Each movement drove him deeper into me, and I could feel the tension building in both of us. As he fucked me, his control unraveled with every passing second.

“Come for me again, Katrina,” he demanded, his voice rough and broken.

The moment he gave me permission, it was as if my body shattered, my climax crashing over me. I cried out as I came, my body clenching around his cock.

He followed me over the edge again, his cum spilling into me in hot, endless waves. His body shuddered above mine, and I followed suit, a reflection of the desire that claimed him.

When we were both sated, he collapsed on top of me, his forearms holding his upper body off me so he didn’t crush me. His breaths came in ragged gasps, and I wrapped my arms around him as much as I could, my fingers tracing his warm, damp skin as

we both grew relaxed and contented.

“Blaylock,” I whispered, my voice hoarse from orgasming, not sure what I was asking for.

But he knew.

He pushed up, growled softly, and pressed his lips right by the shell of my ear as he ordered, “Again.”

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KATRINA

Months had passed since that wondrous night in the garden—the night Blaylock touched me like I was both something fragile and something that belonged solely to him, but also something feral and primal that's left me yearning for so much more. Everything.

And since then, everything had changed with me and for me.

I walked through the dark halls of Shadow Vale's castle like I belonged—because I did. The shadows no longer scared me, and the staff welcomed me with low bows of respect. I was now a part of this place. Irrevocably.

This place that once terrified me had become the only home I'd ever truly had. And I loved it immeasurably.

And Blaylock... God, I loved my monster more than I ever thought I could love another being.

The way I'd once been so unsure of him felt like a distant, forgotten dream. Now, I craved him—his presence, his voice, his hands...his cock. I knew the weight of his stare; the softness hidden beneath his monstrous exterior.

And just a few weeks ago, Blaylock had crowned me his queen. He'd made it official.

It hadn't been like the crowning I remembered from when he took me to Draxus's ceremony. No, Blaylock said he wanted ours to be different. Quieter. More intimate.

He had taken me into the throne room at dawn when only the blue flames were lit. There'd been no monsters in attendance, nothing but the two of us to share the special moment. But I knew there would be a time when I'd need to be introduced and presented to all the subjects that he ruled over.

He said he would give me the crown and the ceremony I deserved later when I was ready... when I wanted it.

And I was grateful. God, I was so thankful.

I closed the book I'd been reading and tilted my face up to the sky. The moon was full, casting silver-blue light over the garden. This had become one of my most favorite spots in the castle. I took a deep breath, the cool air filling my lungs, and smiled.

I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. I was just missing the man—the monster—I loved.

And as if I conjured him, the heavy sound of boots scraping across gravel told me I wasn't alone anymore. I looked over my shoulder and saw Blaylock standing at the edge of the garden, his massive frame illuminated by moonlight.

Blaylock.

I stood without thinking; the book falling from my hands. "Hi," I whispered, happiness instantly blooming through me.

"My love," he rumbled, his voice wrapping around me like a snug hug.

I stepped toward him, but he didn't reach for me. Not yet. He only watched me, his black eyes unreadable, his mouth set in something serious.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need you to come with me, my little bird,” he said.

My heart kicked in my chest, and I twisted my fingers together, this nervousness filling me instantly because he looked so serious. “Where?”

His hand lifted, large and clawed but gentle, as he cupped my jaw.

“Home,” he breathed, as if hating he had to say the word. “Your old one.”

A dread settled over me, but I trusted Blaylock.

I nodded. Because with him beside me, I feared nothing—not even the ghosts of my past.

11

KATRINA

The woods were quiet, unnaturally so.

But I was used to it. It was like being brought back into a nightmare you’d been trying to escape your entire life.

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There wasn't even abreeze. Just the sound of our footsteps crunching against the brittle layer of dead leaves and frostbitten twigs.

Moving through the supernatural veil from the Dark Realm and into the only other home I'd ever known hadn't been as jarring as I thought. But this... this didn't feel like home any longer.

I stood beside Blaylock, staring at my childhood home—if it could even be called that.

As I stared at the cottage, I saw it in a very different light now. It was more of a shack, leaning precariously to one side, its roof black with rot. Dying ivy crawled up the crumbling stone walls like veins of decay.

The door hung on rusted hinges from when I'd been taken by the slave traders, swaying in the intermittent breeze.

I wrapped my arms around myself, more for comfort than warmth. But Blaylock was there draping an extra fur over my shoulders.

"I wonder if he's still in there?" I asked quietly, not really expecting an answer. "Or if the animals got to him." Blaylock knew of my past and my father, and what I'd done. I knew if I hadn't killed him, Blaylock would have hunted him down and finished him to protect me... for vengeance.

"His corpse is long gone and rotting in the dark. I wish he was here, though. I'm hungry to rip his head from his body and feast on his blood."

I shivered at how much he meant those words... at how much I loved hearing them.

I took a slow breath. I had imagined this moment so many times. Dreamed of walking back here, stronger, no longer afraid. I didn't think I'd have a monster king at my side. I didn't think I'd feel so... strong.

"Do you want to go in one last time?" Blaylock asked, his voice low and gravelly.

I shook my head. "No. Never again."

He nodded once and then stepped forward, holding his hand out, palms upward and to the sky. I shielded my eyes and bright blue fire sparked from his palms, unnatural and cold, flickering like a storm in the night.

He looked at me, asking for the permission I knew he needed before we closed this chapter of my story.

"Yes," I whispered. "Burn it to the ground."

A pulse moved through the trees like a living heartbeat. Blue fire snaked out of Blaylock's hands and to the cottage. The dry wood caught immediately. The fire hissed as it spread across the structure, blue brightness devouring the rot and ruin that had once been my life.

And we just stood there and watched as the cottage burned, until it turned to ash and there was nothing but smoke curling into the sky.

This chapter of my life—this dark, ugly part—was finally over.

I turned to Blaylock, the wind catching my hair and whipping it across my face. He looked down at me, love and devotion and something primal and dark written across

the monstrous angles of his face.

Without saying a word, I took his hand—his enormous, clawed hand that could shatter bone but had only ever held me gently—and guided it to rest over my belly.

His eyes widened.

“Katrina...”

“I’m pregnant,” I said, the words leaving my lips in the breeze.

He said nothing at first, just stared at me, his expression unreadable. Then he dropped to one knee, still towering over me even from that position, and pressed his forehead to my belly. I felt a rumbling against my stomach, Blaylock whispering loving, soft promises to the child in my womb.

And in that moment, surrounded by ash and memories that would fade, I knew Blaylock was my future, and this was just the beginning.

EPILOGUE

KATRINA

The air in our bedroom was thick with the scent of anticipation, hesitation, and fear of the unknown.

Shadows danced across the stone, flickering over etchings carved into the pillars. Robed healers milled about in the room, their white cloaks separating them from the rest of the staff Blaylock had in the castle.

These white-covered healers were monsters, beasts that didn’t hide their faces. They

had gnarled horns, glowing eyes, and spoke in a language that was harsh and broken but somehow beautiful.

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Sweat covered my face, my hair damp and sticking to my skin as another wave of pain coursed through me. And Blaylock was at my side the entire time, softly encouraging and caring for me.

I cried out, my body aching in every single cell, my eyes squeezed shut as I clenched my fists in the furs and rode out the contraction. It felt like I was changing right along with everything else in my world.

“The child is coming,” one healer rasped, its voice a hollow echo, her eyes glowing a bright white. “Prepare,” it snapped to the other healers.

The pressure mounted. The pain blinded. And then, in a rush of time and heat and blood, I delivered my baby into this dark world.

For a moment, everything stopped. There was nothing but this pressure in the air, this silence all around us. Then came a sound so pure and beautiful it cut through everything else, just washed away all the awful things that I’d dealt with in my life.

The noise was like a beam of light—my baby’s cry.

“A boy. A prince,” the healer murmured.

Blaylock’s massive and imposing body was right by me, these low, rhythmic sounds leaving him, as if he purred. I looked at him, his normal expression was like carved stone. However, now, pure awe covered his face as the healer wrapped our son in a fur and placed him in my king’s enormous hands.

I shifted on the bed as I stared at my monster holding our son. Our baby was perfect.

He had gray skin like his father and tiny nubs of horns poking through tufts of pale blond hair—the same shade as mine.

His eyes opened, and my heart stopped. Bright blue. My baby boy had my eyes.

He blinked up at Blaylock first, his cries softening, settling instantly because he knew the monster cradling him was his protector. Blaylock whispered in his mother tongue, and our son calmed even further.

“He is strong,” one of the elder healers murmured as the creature stood by the bedroom door with the others, knowing it was their time to leave. “A true heir to the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale. A hybrid. The first of his kind in this world.” And then they left us to enjoy this moment, just the three of us.

The start of my new family.

I watched Blaylock lower his head, his huge hands supporting our son’s tiny body and making him seem evensmaller. This monster, a beast who was feared by all and ruler of this land of shadows, had a reverent look on his face.

After a few minutes, he handed me our boy. I curled around the baby protectively, breathing in his scent and smiling at how wild, new, and mine he was.

Is this how I smelled to Blaylock? Instant love and devotion?

“Yes,” he murmured, as if reading my mind.

Blaylock gently brushed a clawed finger down the baby’s cheek. “He has your fire,” he said, voice rough with emotion. “Your perseverance. I can sense it. He’s a strong

little one.”

I smiled, exhausted but complete. “And your strength, too.”

We sat like that for a long time, just the three of us—monster, human, and the perfect creature born of both.

“What shall we name him?” Blaylock asked quietly, his gaze never leaving our son.

I looked down at the little bundle nestled in my arms. I thought about what a perfect little creature like this could be named that would suit him well.

“Lochner,” he whispered. “It means the future.”

“Lock for short.” I smiled at the baby, loving the nickname because it reminded me of my husband.

I looked at my monster husband. Blaylock leaned in, his horned forehead resting gently against mine. “Perfect. Like you.”

At that moment, I knew this was my life now—my future. Never again a captive. No longer broken.

I was queen of the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale. And our perfect baby? He was the future.

A new beginning.

For everyone.

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Years Later

The wind was sharp atop the battlements, carrying a warm breeze that was ever-present in the Dark Realm of Shadow Vale.

I stood by my husband, my king, and the love of my life. Blaylock had his arm around me, and I rested my temple on his chest.

Below us, the Dark Realm stretched on endlessly—dark mountains clawing at the skies, blue torches lining the perimeter of the castle, and the constant sentries that guarded everything and all.

My crown of bone and blue crystal was nestled in my blonde curls, the strands whipping along my face.

Gone was the trembling girl stolen from her broken home.

I was a queen now—loved and protected by Blaylock.

Blaylock's warmth swallowed the chill around us as his massive arms wrapped tighter around me, locking me against his chest. His claws curved over my waist with a familiarity I loved so much.

"You are mine," he rumbled, voice deep and raw like the mountain's heart. "Forever." He kissed the top of my head, and I snuggled in closer, smiling, feeling the same way.

I opened my eyes and stared out at the world I now called home.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Forever.”

The End.