



Taken to the Shadow Realm

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal, Lesbian Romance

Description: My whole life I had been groomed to be the perfect wife, knowing one day I would be sold off to create an even more perfect heir.

And then I was kidnapped.

Taken away to a fantasy land where a cold yet sensitive shadow demon decided to buy me as her companion.

Was it wrong that I was happy to finally be free?

Or that I started to feel things for the cold demon?

Either way, I would enjoy my freedom, and maybe if I was lucky I could convince my new master to make use of her purchase.

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Iris

They were mad at me... again.

Mother and Father sat on the couch in front of me, both with a scowl on their faces, though Father's was the more prominent one. It always was.

The air was tense, thick with the threat of my father's boiling anger.

It spread out from them, painting the space in brilliant reds, orange, and yellows. They fanned out like wisps of smoke, curling and rising into the air until they dissipated almost entirely.

The colors would have been so pretty if I didn't know what they meant.

When I was younger, I loved looking at them. Loved painting them. I would spend hours in my room trying to replicate what it looked like when emotions mixed, but I never could get it quite right.

"You have an obligation to this family," Father pointed out. "I don't have to remind you what happens when you can't meet our expectations."

I knew all too well what would happen if I didn't become the perfect daughter he groomed me to be.

"I know, Father, I'm sorry," I whispered, my eyes falling to my lap.

What I really wanted to say was, It's not my fault the guy you set me up with wanted to get his pussy elsewhere.

I saw it coming. His aura told me everything his dodgy attitude didn't. Late-night meetings had him coming home with a light pink aura telling me exactly what he had been doing at the office.

But I was willing to put up with it. For the sake of peace. For the sake of my family getting what they wanted.

He was the one who got bored with my lack of reaction. He could have just lived in the comfort of my father's money. No one even told him he had to stop sleeping around.

I almost laughed at how annoyed he had gotten when he finally confessed, only to be met with my blank stare.

"This is the third one, Iris," Mother said, her voice lowering as if she didn't want the world to hear what an embarrassment I was. It's okay, I wanted to say. Scream it loud for all to hear.

"I know," I whispered.

"If you know, then you should have done better," Father spat. "You're bordering on twenty-seven, Iris. If you don't give birth to the next heir, our line will end with your failure."

I couldn't help but wince at his words.

The next heir.

That was the contract all my husbands-to-be had to sign. They would get to marry me and be accepted into the McMillan family, but they had to give up their own family name, and any children would have to be raised as a McMillan.

Until my parents, the McMillan family had had a long line of successful financial investors with multiple sons who could continue expanding the family's empire.

Except me. I was the single child of my father, much to his disappointment, and the only way he figured to continue the line was to sell me off like a breeding mare.

My own emotions started attacking me. Devouring me from the inside and threatening to make me break down in a fit of tears. For a long time, I had been able to keep myself in check—for both my sake and theirs.

But it was beginning to eat at me.

I never wanted this! I wanted to scream. I wanted to live a normal life! Go out! Make friends! Fall in love!

But I couldn't. I had known that since I was born. This was my life, and there was no escaping it.

The only freedom I had was in my dreams. A pitiful reality that now only made the emotions swirling in me worse instead of the comfort they had once brought.

I counted back from ten in my mind, letting myself float away from it all. Letting the emotions fall into the background until they were nothing but a small buzzing in my ear.

Incessant, but bearable.

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“The next one, I swear,” I said, imagined strength intertwining my voice. “I’ll make you proud. I’ll do my duty.”

It was a lie, but I prayed they believed it.

“He’ll meet you in thirty,” Father said, standing up. “Dinner. And don’t try anything funny. You won’t like what happens if you do.”

Getting beat? Disownment? There was nothing else he could do to me that he hadn’t already.

But it didn’t stop the slight sliver of fear that ran up my spine.

“Understood, Father.”

Yien

A coldness settled over my chest as I looked out into the sea of darkness weaving through the forest surrounding my estate.

The fog I’d been accustomed to had grown weaker in the last few days as the souls moved on. I could feel them moving in the shadows. The weakening fog once scared me, but just like nature, the souls were on a cycle.

They would come and go, sometimes so many that the fog would be overflowing with them. Other times, it would lessen, the weight of the souls dissipating with each hour that passed.

It was a celebratory thing, the souls moving on. They had done their time, their cycle had ended. They could start over.

Something I'd never be able to do.

I had forgotten how many years had gone by since I was forced into this shell. The memories of my soul wandering through the very same darkness I overlooked were nothing but muddled thoughts that only visited me when I was sleeping.

I could feel the souls when they left, like a tugging at my chest before a wave of relief passed over me. A reminder that the fog—and I—had completed yet another one of our duties.

I didn't quite understand why the souls attached themselves to me and not to any of my siblings born from the same fog. They were just as capable, if not more so.

I was unfeeling, apathetic, but they... they had room in their hearts for these souls.

Sometimes I wished I could be like them, carefree and wandering the realms however I chose. Playing and frolicking without the weight of the realm on my shoulders.

I could hear them, floors below me, where they chatted.

They didn't often all come home for a reunion, but for some reason, they all chose that day to show up on my doorstep.

I was procrastinating. Trying to hide from them so I wouldn't have those foreign emotions inside my chest. Just like the souls, they tugged at my chest, making me feel things I didn't understand.

"Yien!" Allura yelled from the floors below, knowing I would hear her.

My time is up.

I called my shadows to me, becoming one with them, and slipped from the third floor to the first.

“Is there something you need?” I asked, pushing out of the shadows and into the dining area.

Allura and Xira sat around the newly polished marble table, demon meat piled high between them. They had been down there for a while, catching up for what seemed like hours as they snacked.

We were siblings in name only, all of us birthed from the fog. We had no mother, no father. Just the knowledge that we came for the very thing that protected this realm.

Allura was the last to join us three years prior, showing up dazed on the edge of my property. Xira and Uldria had come before, but Uldria had been torn apart in another realm years back for trespassing. It was too common of an occurrence for it to affect me like it had.

As soon as I took in their blackened eyes, the same as mine, and their grayed skin, something attacked my heart. I felt a sense of... responsibility for them. To them. To keep this place safe for them.

Allura had brilliant white hair, while Xira's was deep red. They had become closest, mostly because they had no other choice. I wasn't one for bonding, so it only left the two of them.

“Finally! Good of you to join us,” Xira said with a huff.

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“I don’t see anything good about it,” I commented and sat down on the same bench as Allura.

Something about the way Xira’s eyes narrowed at me made me want to disappear. Allura moved closer to me, her arm brushing across mine.

“I was just telling Xira that there has been an influx of humans coming to the realms!” Allura said, her excitement plain as day on her face.

“She’s trespassing onto royal grounds,” Xira accused, her voice dropping. “She’s going to get killed one of these days.”

“Just the outskirts!” Allura complained with a pout. “They don’t even have guards there! Plus, I saw the humans, several of them, and guess what they were doing?”

“I don’t care,” I admitted, taking a piece of demon meat between my claws before popping it into my mouth.

It was tasty but hard, not as soft or satisfying as human flesh was rumored to be. It had been years since I had my first and only taste. So long that I barely remembered it.

But the consequent killing of the poor thing combined with their soul floating out of their body to join the fog was something that stuck with me.

“They were pleasuring Beau! The prince! All three of them!”

Her words caused me to pause.

“They were what?” I asked. Someone in the royal family? Doing that with a human? Multiple? It was unheard of.

“They call them companions, Allura,” Xira said on a huff. “Instead of eating them, they occupy themselves in... other ways.”

“Keep that to yourself, Allura,” I spat, my eyes washing over her. “We don’t need you disappearing because you couldn’t keep your mouth shut.”

Her smile didn’t waver. She had no sense of danger. Just like Uldria.

“You should get one!” Allura said, sending the table into silence.

Me?

Xira burst out laughing.

“Yien can’t even stand our presence! What would make you think she’ll want a human companion?”

“You’ve seen how the souls chose her!” Allura reasoned. “Maybe she needs to be around more humans instead of being forced into the presence of other demons!”

Rationally, I didn’t agree with her. I didn’t see the need. But something inside me liked the idea of bringing a human here. More out of curiosity than anything else.

I had seen them in their wraith forms, in the in-between phase where they joined the fog, but I had never had the pleasure to just watch as one lived around me.

An image of women pleasuring the demon named Beau flashed across my mind, even though I hadn't seen it myself.

Would the human need that? Would she want it? Would I want it?

Yes. The answer was immediate. Or at least I would like to try.

"Oh no," Xira said with a groan. "You've gone and done it. She's interested."

"I'm not," I lied and plucked another piece of meat before standing. I turned on my feet, ignoring their calls as they tried to pull me back.

It was too late; my mind had already started to think about having a human here. Imagining her as she walked through the halls. Imagining that maybe she would be able to see my shadows and understand me in a way no one else could.

Yes, I need one.

But if I wanted it to happen, I needed to do some research. After all, there was only one place I could acquire a human.

Iris

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Green. Pink. That's all that exuded from the douche in front of me.

I fiddled with the hem of my dress under the table. Father had specifically reserved a seat at one of the most expensive restaurants in the city, making this even more uncomfortable than it would have been if he'd just met me at my house.

He didn't want me running away. Or acting out.

Forcing me on a date in public was a sure way to make me see the whole thing through.

But the man in front of me...

I tried to keep my face neutral and not show my disgust as he droned on about just how much money his family had. So far, we had been over his twelve cars, which he liked to switch up based on what he was wearing. Today it was the green Bugatti to match his gross neon green shirt.

Then we covered his collection of one-of-a-kind million-dollar watches.

And now his ski resort in Canada.

"It's beautiful," he said. "Our personal cabin overlooks the resort, and on a clear day you can see the sun peeking over the summit. I'll take you there on our next date."

"I can't drive in the snow," I mumbled.

“Silly for you to think I drive in the snow,” he said with a laugh and took a healthy swig of red wine. I didn’t miss the grimace on his face as it went down.

“Oh yes, silly me.” I let out a sigh and turned my attention to the restaurant.

No one was really looking at us. Yes, the McMillans had a name for themselves, but everyone in here was just as rich, if not richer. They didn’t care about me.

How do I get out of this? My eyes scanned the room, but not a single waiter or waitress looked my way. As if Father himself had warned them not to help me out of my situation, whatever happened.

“Spa, facials, everything you can think of. They’ll give your skin a bit more liveliness. Maybe it’s the dim lighting, but it’s looking rather dull?—”

Fuck it.

I stood, cutting him off.

“Bathroom.”

I quickly walked across the restaurant as fast as my kitten heels would let me, almost bumping into a waiter with a tray full of drinks. With a muttered apology, I made it to the hallway of the bathroom and leaned against the wall.

I let out a forced breath. Father wouldn’t like this. All I had to do was be a good little girl. Charm him. It should be easy enough.

But the longer I stayed in the hallway, the longer my resolve wavered.

My eyes fell to the fire alarm in the corner. With a muttered curse and the last bit of

bravery I possessed, I launched myself at it, pulling down the lever.

Sirens blared in my ears, lights flashed all over, and in seconds, water started sprinkling from the ceiling.

But I was out.

Iris

Father's ringed hand came into contact with my cheek. The slap echoed through the empty foyer. My damp skin made it hurt ten times worse.

"I know this was you," he hissed. The room was already engulfed in red. The anger threatened to choke me.

"There was a fire?—"

"Don't lie to me! You have a duty, you ungrateful child! Our entire family line is dependent upon?—"

I forced his words to the background again and let my mind wander to what could be. Love. Warmth. A family who understands me. All I wanted was someone to see me and not the perfect shell of a McMillan daughter who only knew how to obey her daddy. The perfect housewife. Perfect baby maker.

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But it was no use. How many times would I continue to fight? How many times would I continue to fail?

For years, I had been losing the fight. And what remained, I'd spent pulling that fire alarm.

"I'm sorry, Father," I said in a meek voice, interrupting his ramblings. "The next one, I swear. This one wasn't good enough for our family name."

Father let out a scoff.

"As if you know what's good for our family," he hissed. His grubby finger was in my face, his eyes narrowed. "I warned you you wouldn't like what came after. I meant it. Tomorrow night. At ten, in the foyer. Doll yourself up."

He tugged at his suit jacket with a huff, an annoyed tic of his.

My blood froze when I digested the meaning of his words. It was enough for me to snap back into my body and for tears to prick my eyes.

This isn't a standard meeting.

All the others had been during the day and outside. Whoever I was meeting... I was already worried about what my father had promised them.

The next day, I waited down in the foyer for him wearing the same dress I always did when meeting these men.

It was a red off-the-shoulder dress with a neckline lower than I usually felt comfortable with. The dress was made of a flowy yet thin fabric that melded to my body, giving them a look at the only thing they really wanted to see.

My mind had gone through scenario after scenario all night long. My anxiety was through the roof. I had an inkling of what he had promised the man and I didn't know what would be worse.

His promise, or what would happen if I ran off on yet another one.

It was twenty past ten when I started to worry. I checked my phone again, my eyes drifting to the door. I hadn't heard my parents welcome him yet.

Did he run off? Or heard of my reputation?

I was scared of what my father would say. Of what the consequences would be if I managed to chase off another suitor.

Yet a different part of me, one that I normally hid behind locked doors in the recesses of my mind, felt relief that I wouldn't have to entertain another man.

How long is this going to go on?

I thought about it often, but I knew. This would never end. Not until my belly was heavy with some random man's kid that would someday take my family's name.

There was suddenly a burst of color coming from the corner of the room, and it caused me to jump. My head swiveled to it, only to come face-to-face with something I'd only seen in my nightmares.

She was crawling over the couch toward me, long hair white as snow, large bloodred

wings spreading behind her. If the wings or her red eyes didn't tell me she was otherworldly, the long horns that curled back around her head would have been more than enough.

Pink flowed from her, along with fragments of yellow and green, all of them painting a picture of her thoughts about me.

I jerked back, trying to get as far away from her as possible, but her hand snapped out to grab my ankle. It was cold and claw-tipped. The talons on her fingers were sharp and brushed against my skin gently, but the threat of what they could do to me was loud and clear.

I held in my shriek, not wanting to draw attention to this room.

This is not real. I'm just so stressed I'm hallucinating.

Obviously, that was the true answer. Yes. All the stress of being passed around from man to man was making me see things.

Right. That's it. I'm seeing shit.

I needed to stop daydreaming about being saved from my reality by being whisked away to another world, or else seeing random demon fairies was going to be the consequence.

I tried to blink rapidly to dispel the image in front of me, but nothing I did worked. I even pinched the meaty part of my thigh, but the thing was still there, her red eyes watching me intently.

Then she inhaled deeply through her nose, a small humming noise coming from her throat.

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“You’ll do perfectly,” she said with a purr.

“I think you’re mistaken,” I squeaked out.

Why isn’t she disappearing? Better question is, why am I talking to a hallucination?

“Oh no,” she said with a chuckle. “I can smell the power from you. You’ll fetch a pretty large sum. I just know it.”

I swallowed thickly and attempted to jerk my ankle from her.

I should scream. If I scream, Father will rush in and... save me, right?

Or he would realize just how insane I truly was.

“I have money,” I said quickly. “I can give it to you?”

“Aw, you’re pleading?” she asked, her tongue coming out to dart across her lips. The action gave me a perfect view of the rows of sharp teeth in her mouth.

“Yes,” I said quickly. “I don’t get why you’re here, but if this is about money, I have more than enough?”

“Human money is useless to me,” she replied, cocking her head. “Unless you’re offering your body—then I might be willing to bargain with you. It’s been a while since I enjoyed a human.”

Fear clawed at me, and I used my hands to try and push her away.

Fuck this.

“Let go of me?—”

“Pity,” she said, a smile spreading across her face.

Light burst forward from her chest, and I was pushed backward into a darkening void, the now playful yellow of her emotions following me into a dreamless sleep.

Yien

For the first time in my existence, I felt relief—or at least I guessed that was what this was—when I saw Aris sitting tall in a chair toward the back of the auction, her long black hair flowing around her. Her eyes were sharp as she took in the crowd, her distaste for them obvious.

She was a demon that liked to keep to herself, much like me, but unlike me, she had been known to purchase many a human at these auctions.

I had come across her many times before, enough to know that out of all the demons in the various realms, she was the most trustworthy. It was... comforting seeing her here.

I had let myself melt into the shadows, not wanting to be seen until the very last minute, but made sure to keep an eye on her.

Two twin royals had seen her within seconds of arriving and stalked toward her.

I didn't much care for their playfulness, and I wasn't too sure why Aris would allow

them near her. But as much as she obviously didn't like them, she still turned to them when they came up to her.

She even stood and bowed her head.

It was necessary. All demons were supposed to give them respect, but I wasn't like most demons. I didn't need anything from the royals, nor could they rule over me—not when my task of protecting the souls was so important.

“Eros, Oros.” Her voice was curt but lacked any heaviness to it.

Maybe Aris is lonely. Maybe she also comes here because the curiosity of what the humans could offer overtakes everything else. Maybe that's why she keeps trying, time after time.

“Oh, knock it off, Aris,” Eros said. The instigator. The outspoken one. Eros spoke her mind while the other twin stayed silent, but no demon underestimated the second. Everyone knew she was just as dangerous as her counterpart.

Aris gave them a forced smile.

“I, too, am bound by the rules, Eros,” she said. “No matter how long we've known each other.”

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Oros turned around and motioned for the human worker to get a chair. He quickly went to work, the scent of his fear lingering in the air, causing some eyes to linger on him. When he noticed it, the human made quick work of concealing it.

Smart.

I allowed my eyes to linger on him. If the humans didn't have powers or turned out to be unusable by their owners, they could be brought here for work. But it was a dangerous game for a human to be surrounded by all those bloodthirsty demons just waiting for them to slip up so they could sink their teeth into their flesh.

Still, no one cared about what was good for a human. If they were useless to the demon who purchased them, why not put them to work? Or at least, that's what the majority thought.

Something I didn't have a need for. Such a waste.

Aris finally sat down, her eyes still lingering on the twins.

"Answer the question," Oros demanded as soon as she sat down. There she is. The enforcer.

"I heard there was a spirit seer here," Aris said after a minute, having no choice but to answer the royal's probe.

A spirit seer?

If I could feel pity for the demon, I would. She had purchased multiple humans long ago, but none of their souls made it to my realm. That means they must be stuck inside her realm, forever to wander the ground.

To bring a spirit seer there would certainly give them their own little dose of hell.

It hadn't crossed my mind until that very moment that it might be in my realm's best interest to ask what she was doing with all those souls.

Oros threw her head back and let out a laugh that was so loud it caused others to turn to look.

"And what would you need with a spirit seer, hm?" she asked.

Aris looked uncomfortable with the question.

"To eat them, of course," she said quickly. "Maybe steal their power if I am able to."

A lie. I could see it in her face. Why would she need to lie?

"Didn't you stop eating humans?" Eros asked, their eyes never leaving Aris's face. It wasn't surprising that the more cunning of the twins would catch her in her lie.

My eyes scanned the rest of the group as their conversation was quickly boring me.

There were many powerful demons packed in here, all their barely viable souls touching my shadows.

I could feel them brushing across the tendrils, and as soon as they did, I was able to latch on to every small detail there was to know about them. What they wore, how much money they had in their pockets—I had no problem stealing a few gems and

some royal coins as I searched. The issue was how much I would be able to. It was minuscule to what I potentially needed. I didn't have enough, not with this crowd. Not with the rumored powers of the humans.

There was only one way I would be able to win. Something that could cost me.

Eros let out a hum.

I inched closer to the group, letting my shadows conceal me. They were still going on about the humans.

"Aris," I called, letting myself step out of the darkness only enough so she could see my face and half my body. I needed an escape plan after all if things went to shit.

Her eyes widened in surprise before a tenseness fell over her face.

"Yien," she greeted, her eyes shifting to me.

"I need your help," I said, letting the words settle between us.

It had been a few weeks since I first decided that I was going to try and purchase a human. In that time, I had made many deals with the demon realms, helping get rid of some of their less-than-welcoming wandering spirits. It gave me some money, but not enough.

Aris, on the other hand, had a lot of it.

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“You want one?” she asked, her voice unsure.

I gave her a nod. I needed money. I had other tricks up my sleeve, but the last thing I wanted to do was show my cards to a room full of potential enemies.

“I have enough money for one or two rounds, but not more.”

“Too bad they don’t take that god-awful glitter that falls out of your ass,” Oros commented, her words hitting my chest like an annoying stab to the heart. I imagined taking the same knife and ramming it between her well-filed horns.

“Why do you need a human all of a sudden?” Aris asked, her words cutting through my bloodthirsty haze.

“I want a companion,” I admitted.

Oros let out a laugh that caused a few of the demons’ heads to turn. They were laughing at me.

That’s fine. They could laugh all they wanted. When the souls of their companions finally made it to my realm, they’d be hoping I would not be able to glean any information that would harm their ruling.

“If you want a companion so badly, just fetch one of those demons your estate employs. I’m sure they’d jump at the chance to get a mouth full of?”—“

“Once you run out of money, let me know,” Aris said, cutting them off.

She's kind. A kindness I would take advantage of.

"Thank you," I replied and sank back into the shadows so only my face and claws were showing. Aris's face went through a flurry of conflicting emotions before the crowd roared to life when lights flooded the stage. A small, winged demon with brilliant white hair and red horns took center stage.

Madam. Older than me and all the souls in my realm combined.

"Who's ready to purchase some humans?" she asked, a wicked smile spreading across her face, showing off all her sharp teeth.

And then I felt it.

Her.

Iris

"It's been too long. Maybe we should wake her?" I whispered, taking a look at our newest addition.

"The longer she sleeps, the better," Eve said, crossing her arms and looking at the sleeping girl with a scowl.

It had been a few days since we were both forced into this small room. There had been others, but slowly our numbers dwindled until it was only us. The girl lying there on fluffy blankets was new to our group.

Eve might act harsh and unaffected, but she cared about each and every girl that came through here. I could tell from the color of her concern, painting the room in light orange as it floated off her.

“But maybe we can think of a way to escap?—“

“You know that’s not an option,” she hissed, giving me a look. “Just let her be blissfully unaware of our situation. I’d join her if I could.”

Never in my life had I felt such an insane need to escape. Even when Father had been forcing me into marriage. Even when the men he gave me to raised their hand to me. Even when Mother looked the other way.

All of that had been hard, but I could endure it. But this? Ever since I woke up in this room, I knew I had to run.

The room itself looked harmless enough. The walls might show exposed brick, but they were draped in beautiful tapestries, and the floor was covered in rugs made of a similar material. A large chandelier hung above us, its light reflecting off the fabrics.

Gorgeous. Expensive. I had seen enough material like it to last me a lifetime, all of it in my father’s pristine mansion.

But the emotions that had soaked into the fabric over time were enough to make my stomach twist.

Lingering emotions weren’t a constant thing. But when they did happen, they always gave me the chills. And since they had brought in another girl, I was getting more and more worried that our time would come soon.

“What if they come?—“

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The new girl groaned and pushed herself up from the bed. Both Eve and I paused to look at her.

“I’m awake, Jesus H. Chri?—“

When her eyes popped open to look at us, they went wide, and she stopped speaking. She took in our matching slips, the high beds, and the expensive drapery before her eyes wandered back to us.

The emotions were just pouring out of her.

Orange and yellow.

Orange for alarm. Yellow for curiosity... But there was no hint of fear.

Yet.

“Are you okay?” I asked hesitantly.

“I’m... as good as I could be after getting kidnapped,” she replied almost casually.

Eve threw her head back with a loud laugh.

Eve’s blue hair shimmered in the light, a playful light yellow dying the emotions that swirled around her as she moved. When she wiped the fake tears from her eyes, she gave the new girl a smirk.

“At least your brain’s working,” she commented before nudging me with her elbow. “This is Iris. I’m Eve. There are a few other girls, but it’s been a while since we’ve seen them. I assume they’re dead.”

“Eve!” I hissed.

My eyes shot toward the girl, partly wondering why and partly concerned when there was still no fear in her emotions. Just like Eve, she seemed somehow well suited for this type of environment.

I, on the other hand, had been a ball of nerves since I arrived here.

“I’m Mia, by the way,” she said, a forced smile gracing her face.

I gave her a small nod before glaring at Eve.

“We don’t know what happened to them, but you shouldn’t scare her,” I muttered.

We could guess, and I was sure our guesses were pretty accurate with the information we gleaned over the time we had been here, but there was no need to cause undue stress on someone who had just woken up in literal hell.

“Can’t you tell if she is or not?” Eve asked, giving me a look.

“I’m not that good of an actor,” Mia said with a small laugh, her hand coming to tug at her hair. “I’m still trying to digest everything, so I’m not sure my mind knows how to be anything but confused right now.”

Eve sat up straight, giving Mia a devilish smile.

“No, that’s her thing,” she explained. “She can see it, can’t you, little mouse?”

Fuck. I hated when she called me that. The men my father made me see would often call me something similar, but the way she said it felt more like an insult than anything else.

“Don’t call me that,” I ordered.

“See what?” Mia asked, desperation slipping into her voice. “Please. I’m losing it here.”

I pursed my lips, not sure how much I’d like to share.

I had never shared what I could see before, but as soon as Eve saw me interact with the previous girls, she somehow knew.

“I can read emotions,” I said after a moment. “See them. Kinda like an aura.” Sometimes feel them too, if they were overpowering enough, but that I would keep to myself.

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She swallowed thickly, a deep purple sprouting from her. Fear.

Damn. We were so close.

“So, what can you... see?”

My eyes shifted to look down at my hands.

“You’re confused. It’s frustrating you. You weren’t scared... until I told you about my gift. Sorry.”

Guilt gnawed at me. If it hadn’t been for me, she might have been able to stay in her non-frightened bubble a bit longer.

“It’s not you. It’s just this whole situation?—“

“It’s okay, I was freaked out about it too,” Eve said, cutting her off. “I don’t like people seeing into me like that. Which brings me to you. What can you do? Read minds? Fly? Teleport?”

I looked up at Mia slowly. The fear was still in her aura.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It took a lot of talking, but we figured it out between us and the few that came before you. We all have something. Iris is auras. I can tell when someone lies. And you?”

She stilled as panic rose in her. Bursts of oranges and purples mixed together. The swirls were so violent I worried for her sanity.

“She’s having a breakdown,” I said, sitting up straight.

“No,” she said quickly. There was something in her aura. A flicker of deep orange, but then it was gone. “It’s just... She called me a spirit seer.”

What was that? I blinked, trying to clear the swirl of colors in my vision, but it didn’t help.

Eve relaxed by me, an easy smile spreading across her face. “Well, then maybe you can spot the one that comes into our room to deliver food.”

I couldn’t look at Mia. She was hiding something. Something I wasn’t sure would hurt or help us.

“Food?” she asked when no one spoke. “How long have you been here?”

“Almost a week,” Eve said. “Iris is on day three.”

I only had a moment to clamp down my own emotions before I was attacked with ones that caused my stomach to twist. We all turned to the door as it was forced open.

The room was bathed in darkness as it got closer, rendering me speechless.

Fear gnawed at my insides and closed my throat.

“Oh, it’s the food,” Eve commented as if it were just a normal thing. “Don’t try to run. That’s how the last one disappeared.”

I turned to stare at my hands, trying to push away the onslaught of fear those emotions brought me. Whatever it was, it wasn't human. Their aura was sticky, and even though most of the auras never carried feelings, this one felt so heavy it threatened to suffocate me.

"So... did you see it?" Eve asked Mia.

My eyes wandered to the newest recruit.

"That wasn't a ghost," she murmured. "Whatever it was..."

She shuddered, unable to continue.

"It's angry and in pain," I whispered. "Maybe another type of demon?"

Eve shook her head. "If that was the case, we would see it."

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I shut my mouth, unable to add anything else to the conversations. I just hoped those emotions wouldn't follow me into my dreams.

Iris

An onslaught of violent emotions pushing up against my senses was the thing that awoke me.

The others seemed much more ready for what awaited us than I was.

Immediately, they started kicking and fighting back, but it took me until we were down the hall to realize that the demons holding me were taking me to the place where all those other women disappeared to.

But even then, I didn't fight. I let them lead me right in front of the group as the other two fought tooth and nail. I couldn't wrap my head around what was happening. The mix of emotions in the air was enough to warn me that they enjoyed the fight more than their expressions let on.

What should I do? I asked myself over and over again, but there was no answer.

I could fight, but they would enjoy that, and I was determined not to give them that. Plus, now that we were in their clutches, the chances of escape were looking less and less likely.

What was I thinking? Eve had been right—thinking of escaping was a stupid and futile idea.

The demon gripping me chuckled as they forced us into a dark room and pushed us onto the dirty ground.

Mia had tried to make a run for it, but one of the demons in the back of the room shot rope-like lights out that wrapped around her body and bound her.

Fear hit me like a punch to the gut. They took her down like it was nothing.

“Be gentle,” the demon who seemed to be in charge warned the others that stood still around us. “Humans are fragile, and the buyers will be really upset if their goods are damaged.”

Buyers?

His words made me freeze. This demon’s emotions were more contained than the others’, but even he had a mix of pink and a brilliant red that caused my stomach to twist.

The demon that had taken me mentioned something similar. But they had fed us, kept us in comfy rooms, so I hadn’t thought?—

Rough hands gripped my arms and forced me and the others upright.

“It’s not like they would care anyway,” one behind me muttered. I looked back to see him reaching out to grip Mia tightly, his claws almost puncturing her skin.

I was waiting for a sign. For her to tell me what to do as panic clouded my brain.

“Right?” The one who held Eve looked at us. “They’ll be too busy in a feeding frenzy to notice a bruise or two.”

It sent a burst of fear through the group, painting the room in color.

Feeding? That doesn't mean what I think it means, right?

The demon in charge huffed as we passed them, irritation leaking into his aura.

“Remember that not every demon is here to get a human to feast on,” he reminded them, giving the one in front a meaningful stare. “Some come to find a companion or someone to bear their children. Either way, they pay good money to make sure humans are in good condition. If I find out even one of them got discounted because of your actions, I'll cut off your access to human leftovers for two months.

Human leftovers.

Whatever fog had been covering my mind before disappeared, allowing a fresh wave of fear to sink in.

I'm going to die here. Right here, right now. I'm gonna be eaten alive by these sick freaks.

The sound of Eve flinging her whole body back hit my ears. I turned to look. The demons on either side of her scrambled to hold her, not expecting her to react so suddenly. I kicked at my guard's shins, trying to push away from his grip.

The guards in front stumbled back, and Mia quickly shook off her own before diving under Eve's legs.

“Go Mia!” Eve yelled.

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I used my body weight to shove the guard at my side enough to allow Mia to race through. She grabbed the curtains that separated us from the next room, and I had to squint against the bright light around us.

The sound of her footsteps suddenly stopping made me blink quickly, trying my hardest to get rid of the millions of dots that had formed in my eyes.

I could still hear Mia running and screaming, but when the room beyond came into view, every little bit of hope I had shriveled up and died in my chest.

Just beyond the curtain was a stage.

And beyond that? Demons.

A whole auditorium of them.

Yien

Impatience.

That was what it was called. The feeling that ate at my entire body. The one that was causing my eyes to dart to whoever shifted even just the slightest.

Aris had killed a realm ruler, Demis, so she could get her human. The twins barely had to bargain for theirs... but mine still hadn't been brought out for viewing. All of theirs had been over in mere minutes.

It was grating on my nerves.

I came because I had heard Madam was bringing out humans with certain powers. I had no idea if those would be right for me, but I was willing to try. I was even willing to ask Aris for help.

But then... I felt her.

I couldn't see her, but she was calling to my shadows. A human who felt as if she'd been made for me. She was back there. I didn't know what it meant, nor had my shadows ever been called to a being other than the souls so strongly.

But they wanted her, and I took it as a sign that whoever was back there was meant to be mine.

"Cover us more," Aris ordered me. The fact that it was her ordering me to do something caused irritation to flare in me.

"My human is next," I muttered.

"This won't take long."

Clenching my jaw, I sent my shadows to cover Aris and her newly acquired human.

I blocked out whatever they were doing as my eyes focused on the stage. She's coming. I could feel it in the way the shadows on stage gave way.

And then my heart stopped in my chest when I first laid eyes on her.

Her hair, white as bone, her pale cheeks flushed and angry as she glared at the demons in front of her. Brilliant purple eyes behind thick lashes darting across the

various demons salivating to purchase her.

Until she paused the moment her eyes stopped on me, widening as she took in not just me but my shadows too.

I was sure that was what she was doing.

Normal demons couldn't see the tendrils, but her eyes outlined them perfectly, trailing my shadows—the extensions of my consciousness.

Perfection.

Something swelled in my chest.

My companion. A human who could see me.

“Last but not least, we have an empath!” Madam said, her arms gesturing toward the girl.

A silence descended onto the crowd before the yelling started.

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“Twenty royal coins and a fire gem.”

“Thirty coins!”

“A portion of The Glowing Isle!”

On and on it went. My first instinct was to jump in there with them, but I wanted them to wear themselves out before I did.

I only had one chance to make this work, and it looked like all the royal coins Aris had to offer me wouldn't be enough for her.

“Maybe if you beg, I'll buy her for you,” Oros said, a smile curling her lips.

“Don't you have a plaything to take home?” I shot back, my eyes traveling to the human who was still lying limp in Eros's arms. “Hurry before she wakes up and rejects you.”

Oros gave me a scowl while Eros just smirked. She made a show of letting her claws run down the unconscious woman's cheek.

“At least we have one,” Eros muttered. Oros let out a laugh.

“Half a soul sphere!”

My entire world felt like it would implode in that moment.

Shouts rang. Chairs were thrown. Bodies clashed against each other. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, someone forced their hand straight into the skull of the person who offered the sphere.

Aris peeked her head out of my shadows just in time to see another chair being thrown.

“Empaths are a hot commodity, it seems,” Madam called out over the roaring crowd. “Let's add something interesting to this bet, hm? Does anyone have another soul sphere to offer?”

I stepped out of my shadows and raised my hand.

“Put your hand down right fucking now. You do not have a?—“

“I do,” I said in a clipped tone. I appreciated Aris, but she needed to let me do what I needed to. “A soul sphere for the human. No royal coin.”

Madam threw her head back with a loud, crazed laugh.

“Don't kid yourself,” she spat. “Anyone else?—“

“A soul sphere... of a realm ruler.”

Silence fell across the room.

The room was tense. All the demons and my human were looking at me.

I can do this.

“Proof,” Madam demanded. The human on the stage began to shake. Could she feel

the way my shadows moved to caress her skin? The way the tension rose in the air as I prepared for a feat that would solidify her as mine?

My eyes fell to the already dead Demis, and I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face.

They want a show, so I'll give them one.

My shadows raced toward the body, tendrils wrapping around him and lifting him off the ground. I let them writhe over his skin, looking for the barely-there soul I knew he had. When they found it, they began pulsing, sending his energy back to me. With each pulse, the body they covered got smaller and smaller until—

“How is that possible?” Aris breathed. “He was dead.”

I pulled my shadows back to me until there was only a single, black orb with a red core floating where his body had been.

Aris was lightning quick. She turned to my shadows and yanked the human out.

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I glared at her. Did she really think I would turn her human into a soul sphere?

“That hurts me,” I said. “I thought we were friends.”

“I didn’t know you could?—“

“Sold!”

That was all I needed. I sent my shadows to the human, allowing the orb to drop to the ground. She didn’t resist the tendrils as they grabbed her. Instead, she seemed to sink into them—like not only could she see them, but she was also unafraid. Like she knew I wasn’t like the others.

Good. I knew I could trust my shadows, and they had been right to pick her.

I didn’t bother looking at Aris or the twins. As soon as I had my prize in hand, I took us straight back to my realm.

Iris

“So, you’re not going to eat me?” I asked as I pushed myself up onto my knees. The bed tilted under my weight, bringing me closer to the breathtaking demon in front of me.

From the moment I saw her—Yien, she said her name was after I offered mine, even if she didn’t say anything else about her—I knew she was different.

Her aura was large—larger than any of the others’—and completely devoid of color, save for a few dark sparkles hidden throughout. Even those were spread out, some of the inky tendrils extending out, trailing close to me but never touching.

Her hair was as long and black as her aura. Her eyes all black except for the small white pupils. Her horns curled backwards with glittering gems embedded in them.

I want to trace them with my fingers. The irrational idea popped up in my head, and I realized that, even as I got closer, she didn’t move from her seat at the end of the bed. She was looking at me, her expression devoid of emotion, and even without being able to see her colors, her eyes told me everything.

She was curious. Just as curious as I was.

I had never been with a woman before. Even if I wanted to, Father always set me up with men. Selfish men who didn’t know what to do with their own equipment and who didn’t care about making it pleasurable for a woman.

But this demon... She ignited something in me I had never felt before. A want.

I wanted her.

More than I had any man.

“I don’t crave human flesh anymore,” she finally said, her answer straight to the point without any further explanation.

I had been caught off guard when I woke up in a cold castle-like structure with no memory of how I got there, but when I saw her sitting at the end of my bed waiting patiently for me... I wasn’t afraid.

She seemed different from the ones at the auction. Those monsters projected their bloodlust far and wide, potent enough that it made the air thick with it.

Even without the colors in her aura, I felt none of it from her.

And if she wanted to eat me, she would have already. So why am I here?

“Why me?” I asked. “Do you need my powers for something? The other demons seemed to want them for themselves.”

I could still hear their shouts in my head. The fear I felt when I saw the bright, colorful bursts of red—what I came to realize was bloodlust.

Then I remembered the caress of what I learned was her aura.

I had never met someone who could control their own aura like she had.

“I want a companion,” she said, her eyes trailing my face.

A companion. Maybe she is lonely?

Whatever it was, it didn’t sound like I was to be her sex slave.

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“But why me? And what does a companion do?” I asked, moving my hands forward. I was so close to her now that just one wrong move and my face would be buried into her robes.

All the late nights in my bed, I would dream of moments just like this. Whisked away to a world where I would be wanted, and not just for my father’s money.

Wanted for me. Taken care of and allowed the freedom of any other human.

Being sold at an auction was a pretty twisted way to get it, but beggars couldn’t be choosers and all that.

“Are you not scared?” she asked, her aura coming to tease my fingertips. It was a ghost of a touch. Not as heavy as a hand, but the weight was there. “Your human friends were.”

“I am,” I admitted, my eyes searching her face for any bit of emotion I couldn’t glean. “But I’m more curious than anything.”

She tilted her face forward, long hair brushing across my cheek.

“Curious?” The tilt of her lips was enough to send my heart racing. My own reaction caused the haze in my mind to ease just the slightest bit.

What is happening to me?

I was just about to be handed off to another man for marriage when I was kidnapped

and brought to a demon realm to be someone's... toy?

I had no business being flirty with someone who could eat the flesh off my bones.

But I am.

I gave her a short nod.

“About so many things. You’re some type of demon... right?” I asked. “Where am I? Can a human even survive here?”

She tilted her head slightly.

“Demon, yes. You’re at my home. I live here with a few other demons. I believe a human can survive here. You will be proof.”

Her last sentence had a burst of amusement running through me.

I’m to be her guinea pig. I kept waiting for that thought to scare me, but it didn’t.

“Where is here?” I asked, trying to dig a bit deeper.

“The Shadowlands.”

Given the color of her aura, the name definitely fits her.

“Okay...” I trailed off. “Tell me more about yourself.”

“I am the keeper of this realm,” she said. “The shadows surrounding us are my responsibility and the reason I am tied to this realm. I am them, and they are me.”

I nodded and let out a breath.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” she asked. “Are you not scared?”

I shook my head.

There was something so... freeing about being rid of my father's pressure. Of not having to be married off to a random man who only wanted my family's money.

“I can't read you,” I admitted. “I've seen everyone's aura for as long as I can remember. Everyone but yours.”

She stared at me for a long moment before I felt the heat of her aura racing up my arms. I held my breath as the tendrils teased the straps of my slip and brushed the tops of my breasts. Some teased my calves, slowly working their way up to my thighs.

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“No one can read me,” she reasoned. “You are no exception.”

Or so she thinks. Her words ignited a challenge in me. Something I hadn’t felt since I was a child.

“I may not be able to read you, but I can see them,” I said, and let my hand brush across the tendrils lying on the bed around us. “Though they give me no indication of what you’re feeling. They’re just... black.”

“You can feel them too. I see you react to them.”

“I do,” I confessed on a breath.

Her tendrils continued to travel, wrapping themselves around me and slipping under my dress. My body pricked with heat when they reached my inner thighs.

“Is this why you wanted a companion?” I asked, allowing her tendrils to pull a strap off my shoulder.

“You mean, do I want to touch you?” she asked. “Have you touch me? Taste the nectar from between your legs that causes demons to go mad?”

My face flamed, and there was a pulsing between my legs when I thought of her face between them.

Nectar was certainly a word for it. But the image of being spread out before her was feeding my desire for her. For something new. Something otherworldly.

“Do you?” I asked. “Is that why you purchased me?”

Like a switch, her tendrils pulled back.

“No,” she spat.

The sudden change caused me to pull back slightly.

“No?” I asked, confusion filling me. “Then why am I here?”

Had I misread the situation?

“As a companion,” she said and stood from the bed. “I’ll come pick you up in the morning.”

And without another word, she turned and left. The tendrils of her aura pulled away but lingered at the edges of my room.

I sat back on my heels and buried my head in my hands.

“What the actual fuck?”

Yien

Is that why you purchased me?

Her words caused something to stir in me. I wasn’t like those demons. I didn’t want to force the human to spread her legs for me.

No matter how tempting it may be.

A companion. That's what I went for, and that's what I got. No more. No less. And I wouldn't allow myself the pleasure of touching or tasting her unless it was what she wanted.

"Don't touch it," I said as Iris got too close to the shadows that lined the property.

"They're so pretty," she said, her hand still coming up to touch the glimmering souls despite my best efforts to warn her not to.

I learned quickly that's just how Iris was. Her eyes delighted in the challenge I was providing her, even if it was as simple as not touching the souls.

It shouldn't amuse me as much as it does.

Just how bored had I been that this little human's existence could light up my life in such a way?

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The answer is... severely. I needed a companion; I just didn't know how it had taken me so long to realize it.

My eyes kept wandering to her almost bare back. She kept on wearing the slip Madam had given her even after I had placed clothes in the closet in her room.

Maybe she doesn't like them.

Or maybe she didn't like the way I touched her the other day, and this is her rebellious phase.

I couldn't believe that I had let my shadows wander across her skin like that.

Even just the memory of her warm skin was enough to cause my mind to go into a frenzy.

Never once had I been so overtaken with the urge to touch a human like I had in her room.

It was... distasteful.

I purchased her, but I wasn't going to force her into anything. Especially of that nature.

Time. She needs time.

And in this instance, time meant staring at the souls for a long while. Walking back

and forth, peering into the darkness as if she could make them out. I couldn't understand what she was seeing.

They weren't pretty. They were twisted, ugly things. Filled with a person's fears and wasted hopes.

More often than not, whenever I let my shadows venture too close, all I saw was pain. Flashes of murder, assault, loss. All of it was forced into my head.

Never once had I found anything beautiful about the pained souls that lay beyond.

So, I ignored them for as long as I existed. Watched them from afar and only left my realm to go get souls from others.

Many parts of my realm were covered in shadows, making it almost impossible to travel. But here was this human, stepping into something she knew nothing about, and unafraid.

You need to protect your companion, a voice in the back of my head said. Make sure she doesn't hurt herself.

But the other part told me to wait and see.

She thinks they're pretty. Maybe she could see something I couldn't. Maybe, unlike my siblings, they would accept her.

Even so, I let my own shadows trail her feet, keeping them close enough so I could pull her back to safety if I needed to. Her gasp cut through the silent air as her fingers dipped into the shadow.

My shadows slithered up her bare ankle, ready to pull.

“That was a human,” she whispered.

“Most are,” I said. “It’s after that many of them change.”

She made a humming noise before forcing her hand further into the fog.

“After?” she asked, her eyes unfocused as she watched the memories run through their minds.

“We have to come from somewhere as well, little human?—”

“Oh,” she blurted out, a blush traveling up her neck. I had never seen such a breathtaking color before. “That’s what you mean by companion.”

“What did you see?” I asked and stepped closer to her.

Did she see them getting torn apart limb from limb while the demons feasted?

From the look on her face, the souls had decided to show her something much more... interesting and much less painful than they ever chose to show me.

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Bitterness rose in my chest. I am jealous of what the souls are showing her.

She cleared her throat before looking back at me with a forced smile. “Nothing you haven’t seen before, I’m sure.”

“I haven’t,” I said quickly and closed the space between us. My shadows traveled up her body, keeping her in place. I needed to see it once more—that devious pink that covered her face and neck. Can I make her react that way again? “I’ve never seen anything that turned my skin the shade of red that graces your face.”

“What do you see?” she asked.

I didn’t want to tell her. A part of me wanted to protect this idea she had, that the souls were beautiful... because why should everyone have to suffer seeing the same things I did?

I’m sure the souls enjoyed the attention after years of me ignoring them.

“I asked you first,” I said.

I thought it was impossible for her face to get any redder, but she proved me wrong.

“I saw a demon between a girl’s legs,” she mumbled. “Tasting that thing you call nectar.”

My body responded before I could think. I was leaning down, pulling her to me, getting our faces impossibly close. I could smell her. The arousal that was building

between her legs.

She isn't disgusted by the idea. She likes the image of a demon licking her.

"How did it feel?" I asked, trailing my shadows up her legs. "The memories were in your head. Could you feel it too?"

"Yes," she replied breathlessly.

I reached past her to where her hand had been, searching for the same memory. I wanted to feel it. Wanted to see what the humans felt when a demon did that to them.

But as soon as my hand came into contact with it, images of the woman being torn apart by the demon she thought she loved raced through my mind.

I felt the pain. Tasted her blood. Heard the sounds of her begging them to stop.

I jerked away and turned from Iris's curious gaze.

"What did you see?" she asked, her voice hesitant.

"The demon you saw between her legs ripping her limb from limb because they liked how she tasted a bit too much." I didn't mean for it to come out as a growl, but it did, and before I knew it, I had turned away and started walking toward my home without waiting for Iris.

"Come," I ordered. "Humans need to eat to live."

Iris

"Thank you," I said sheepishly as a small demon with short blue hair and matching

horns came to deliver yet another dish piled high with questionable meat to the dining table.

The demon's jeweled eyes lingered on me before shooting Yien a look, but she just waved them away.

"Am I not supposed to say thank you?" I asked, a slight teasing in my tone.

Yien's face was impossible to read, but her tendrils swished back and forth lightly.

"You're my companion," she said. "Some masters would not like what's theirs talking to other demons."

"Good thing you're not most masters," I said, then used my hands to pick at a piece of meat from a random plate.

This better be human-safe. Should I ask what it is? Do I want to know?

Trying not to grimace, I plopped the food into my mouth.

I expected something gross. A taste that matched its look, but instead a delightful burst of spices played across my taste buds.

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“Worried your master might poison you? It’s lesser demon meat. Totally safe for humans.” Yien’s drawl shouldn’t have ignited a flame inside me.

Neither should the use of the word master. And yet, I’m burning.

“I was afraid it’d taste horrible,” I admitted, plopping another bit into my mouth. I guessed demons weren’t much for utensils because of their claws. But it didn’t bother me much, and Yien wasn’t judging.

Or at least I hoped she wasn’t.

She was watching intently as I shoveled food into my mouth, as if she’d never seen someone eat before.

Then it hit me.

“You’ve never had a companion before, have you?” I asked.

I expected her to get flustered by my questions, but instead she just blinked.

“No,” she admitted. “I didn’t need one before.”

“And you do now?” I asked, raising a brow.

“Yes.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her one-worded answer.

“It’s okay to be lonely,” I said. “I felt the same at home, though I couldn’t just buy myself someone.”

Her aura reached out to me, wrapping around my ankle.

“Are you mad that I purchased you?” she asked. “Because I don’t want to return you.”

Her words caused my face to heat, and I couldn’t help but notice the way her eyes zeroed in on me every time it did. As if she likes it when I blush.

“Not mad,” I muttered. “Grateful. I could be in a much worse situation.”

“You could,” she admitted. Silence, as if she were considering my words, then, “I don’t treat humans like the other demons do. I want you to live here freely and enjoy my realm. Nothing will be asked or forced from you.”

I didn’t think I was worried, but her admission caused my shoulders to sink and a weight to be lifted from my chest.

“That’s new,” I said with a laugh. It was meant to be a joke, but the way her eyes narrowed on me caused my heart to stop in my chest.

“Have you come across a demon before that forced you?” she asked, her tone deadly. Her aura spread out around her, darkening the space.

It was almost... endearing.

“In the form of a human,” I supplied, though I wasn’t sure why. I didn’t intend to talk about my past, but it just came spilling out. “Let’s just say my family had... a use for me, and if I wasn’t doing my duty, they would see fit to punish me.”

“They hurt you?” She growled. Three more tendrils wrapped around me possessively, and I ate it up.

Never once had anyone cared about what my family was doing to me. It was always swept under the rug. All throughout my life, and once I became an adult, there was no need for counselors or teachers to even pretend to be concerned.

I was stuck with no one to fight for me.

But this random demon who bought me at an auction was growling and upset at something someone in a completely different world did to me.

It was sweet and maybe it made me sick that I was enjoying it.

“They did,” I said. “But you don’t need to worry anymore. They can’t hurt me now.”

I thought that would placate her, but she was still angry.

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“No one will touch you here,” she vowed, her dark eyes never leaving my face. “Tell me you understand, human. If anyone even attempts to hurt you while in my care, all you have to do is tell me.”

Air whooshed from my lungs.

“I understand,” I whispered.

She nodded and just like that, her aura shrunk down in size and she began eating the meat on her plate as if that conversation hadn’t happened.

But it had, and she had no idea just how much it caused my chest to warm.

Yien

Rage boiled in me as I brought Iris into my bedroom for bathing.

Who had dared hurt her? Her own family?

I used to think that I didn’t care much for my family, but as soon as the words were out of her mouth, I was horrified that family could do that to their own blood.

She didn’t want to talk about it, that much was obvious, so I let it slide for now. But I made note of her words and vowed that once she gave me all the information I needed to know, I would go to her family seeking vengeance for what they’d done to her.

“Is helping me bathe normal in this realm?” she asked when we reached the bathroom. Inside there was nothing more than a toilet, a large tub with a window that looked out into my realm, and a sink. It should be enough, given all the research I’d done.

I had no idea what a human might have needed, so I had made all the adjustments I could. Hopefully my human would let me know if she was displeased.

No, my mind said.

“I would like to help,” I said instead.

That delicious pink traveled up her neck and face once more.

She followed me to the tub, looking out the window and to my realm. On this floor, you could see straight over the fog and out into the far reaches of my land. Though the fog had densened in the past few days, hiding the forest that surrounded my property.

“All of that are souls?” she asked.

“They are,” I confirmed before turning on the water.

She let out a hum before letting her eyes fall to the tub.

“I don’t know why I thought you wouldn’t have running water,” she murmured.

“It’s demon magic,” I explained. “Though this property has been here far longer than me, so I wouldn’t know where to begin if anything went wrong with it.”

“So there is something you don’t know,” she said with a giggle.

“Of course,” I confirmed, unable to stop my chest from puffing. “I cannot know everything. If I did, I wouldn’t just be ruler of this realm. I might as well try my luck with the royals.”

Her answer was another light giggle. I opened my mouth to ask what was funny, but she shocked me by slipping off her dress and stepping right out of it.

Lust and hunger hit me all at once at the sight of her body.

Beautiful rosy nipples stood out in contrast to her skin. Her hips flared out just enough that I dreamed of grabbing on to them. And right there, between her legs, was a curly tuft of white hair. But it was trimmed and gave me a look at the pink folds of her cunt.

Stop looking.

I forced my eyes back up to hers, noting the sly smile on her face.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a naked human before,” she said and walked to the tub before dipping her toe in. The sigh she let out was sinful.

When she wobbled slightly, my first instinct was to hold onto her, and one hand went to her arm, the other to her hip. Just an innocent touch, but my entire body heated at it.

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“Thank you,” she murmured and stepped fully into the bath.

I could have let go of her, but instead I continued to help her in, even so far as submerging my hand along with her.

I was now kneeling behind her, leaning over the tub and her as I assisted her. I had the perfect view of her entire naked body, my hand so close to her pussy.

With one wrong move, my hand could slip between her legs.

I want that so bad.

I wanted to play with her right there while she was lying in the water. Have her come apart in front of me as I watched.

Swallowing thickly, I gathered what I needed. One soap for her hair, another for her body. I also had oils for her hair that would be applied after.

“What did I do to deserve this treatment?” she asked as I lathered the soap in water with the washcloth.

“You’re my companion,” I reminded her as I started to use the washcloth against her chest. Droplets fell from it, rolling down and off her erect nipples.

Her slight gasp as I ran the cloth down her breasts only caused the heat burning inside me to blaze hotter.

Helping her bathe. That's all this is.

But my mind knew it wasn't. Not when she arched into my touch. Not when her head fell back against me as I ran the cloth down her side, dipping so close to where I wanted to be.

And definitely not when her legs opened, inviting me to touch.

My fangs pulsed. My body itched. My mouth watered. Her neck so close I could bend down and place hot kisses against her heated skin.

"Does this feel good?" I asked, not able to hide the huskiness from my voice.

I hadn't noticed the way my shadows had come to play. They now filled the space around us and brushed across her skin, some even daring to touch her nipples even though I didn't. I knew she noticed it, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Yes," she breathed. "Is this how every bath time is going to be? Finally getting what you paid for?"

That's right. I paid for her to be here. To be like this.

I am forcing her.

Her body was telling me yes, but her mouth had just reminded me that I had bought her. That maybe she expected that to be the reason why she was here—that she owes me something.

And until she realized I would never make her do anything she didn't want to just because I got her at an auction, there was no moving forward.

My shadows pulled back, and I placed the cloth on the side of the tub.

“No,” I said. “Just showing you how it’s done. You got it from here.”

I got up, willing my gaze to dart away before her wet body was bared to me again.

“Yien—”

“I’ll wait for you outside,” I rushed to say, turning on my heels and walking to the door. “Take your time. The water will stay warm.”

Slamming the door behind me might have been too harsh, but it was the reality check I needed to keep me sane.

Iris

I walked the length of the fog once again, my hand brushing across the souls gathering at the edge of the property.

I had lost count of the days that I had been here. It was possibly day three, or five, since I first ventured out of the castle without Yien.

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And altogether too many days since that moment in the bath when I should have kept my mouth shut. I instantly knew that I had said the wrong thing. And since then, I hadn't found the moment to broach the subject with her.

At first, I had been scared of what awaited me outside. I wasn't afraid of the souls. I was worried that the demons at the auction would come back for my flesh.

But when I realized how densely packed with fog the area was, my fears slowly started to lessen. I wasn't sure if all demons had the same reaction Yien did, but if it was even a portion, they would be rendered defenseless.

I could still see the way her face twisted in my mind. The pained expression that had crossed her face but also the dark veins that extended from her eyes.

I hadn't had to see the colors of her aura to know what those eyes meant. I had seen them as I scanned the crowd at the auction and in the memories of the souls I touched.

Bloodlust.

But unlike them, hers was gone in the blink of an eye, causing me to be just that more curious about who the demon who bought me really was.

And what she wants to do to me.

I paused when a particularly strong memory passed through me.

I wasn't surprised to be hit with the stench of sex or the feeling of pleasure coursing through my veins. It was common in the memories that I saw.

Sometimes I saw more innocent things. Happier times when the humans actually liked living with their demons.

But more often than not, those happier times included a demon between a woman's legs, devouring her like they were starving.

It quickly became my guilty pleasure. At first, I was trying to see what Yien saw. Trying to dig through the memories that caused her to react like that.

But all I got were flashes of pleasure.

This time, I was watching a girl with not one, but two demons on her. One between her legs, the other trailing hot kisses down her neck.

"You're so sensitive, Jillian," the one kissing her neck said, their fangs scraping across her skin.

Her pleasure became my own. It heated my blood. Caused my heart to race.

It hadn't been long since I allowed one of the men I was married off to touch me, but none of them had ever made me feel like that.

I was envious. Jealous of how easily they made her come. How they lavished her with attention I never got and probably would never get.

As a child, I had often thought, Why am I not good enough? But after seeing those memories, those same words began to have a different meaning altogether.

Why doesn't Yien want to do those things with me? If all other demons pleased their human companions like this, why doesn't she?

I let myself get lost in the feeling. Get lost in the way they writhed against each other.

Unlike men in the real world, demons seemed to truly love bathing her in attention. Got off seeing the way she came.

I gasped when I was abruptly pulled back.

"Stay present," Yien warned, her voice close to my ear. The tendrils of her aura wrapped around me and pulled me closer to her chest. "Don't lose yourself to them."

I was breathless. My skin too sensitive from the memories that were forced into me. The tendrils had a heavy, searing touch that made me sink back into her. It reminded me of the bath. Of the way her hands teased me but didn't dare touch.

"Have you?" I asked. "Lost yourself to them, I mean."

She shifted against me, her breath brushing across the back of my neck.

"I have not," she said. "I have more control than that."

Did she mean for her tendrils to travel up my thigh? To brush across my wet panties? I wished she did.

I wanted more of them.

“Are your tendrils exercising that control right now?” I was trying to goad her into doing something. “I see what other demons do to their companions,” I mentioned. “What you should be doing.”

“Are you accusing me of not playing with my purchase enough?” she asked, her hands coming to grab my hips and pull me back to her.

“I’m accusing you of not playing at all.” I tilted my head back onto her chest, looking up into her dark orbs.

“What did you see?” she asked. More tendrils slithered up my arms, teasing the tops and undersides of my breasts.

I couldn’t think. Couldn’t move.

“Two demons sharing a companion,” I answered on a breath. “One between her legs, another like how you are now.”

She let out a hum.

“I wanted to give you time,” she finally said. “I didn’t want to force you into anything.”

“Even though I want it?” I asked, leaning into her. “Even if I beg you to fuck me? Because I’m tired of you teasing me.”

A breathy chuckle fell from her lips, and like she snapped, her movements became less teasing. More searching. She moved her head, getting closer, her breath teasing the shell of my ear, her warmth seeping into me.

“Is that what my little human pet needs?” she asked. “Her caretaker to please her? If I knew all humans would come with these requirements, I might have rethought my purchase.”

Her words caused me to flush.

“If you don’t like what I need, why don’t you stop touching me?” I growled.

“Who said I don’t want to watch my little pet squirm as I make her writhe against my shadows, hm?”

Her tendrils slipped into my underwear, sliding against my folds. My gasp cut through the tense air between us. Shadows, she called them.

They were light, almost silky smooth, as they moved through my wetness. I groaned and fell against her, letting her shadows do the work of holding me up.

“So?” I asked, my voice heavy with need. “Is this something you wanted to see?”

“Not quite,” she replied, a semblance of a wicked smirk spreading across her face. She forced two of them inside me before using the other two to rip off the top of my slip. “Better.”

Yien

I didn’t see this coming. I just wanted to watch her and make sure she was safe. I liked that she was finally wearing the clothes I had left for her.

This wasn't how I expected to take her. Not in the front of my property. Not because she was turned on by watching the dead souls get it on in their memories.

When I took her, I wanted it to be me she was thinking about. Still, I couldn't deny the heat that rocked through my body when she looked up at me as my shadows filled her.

But she wants me to fuck her. That's what she said.

And that was what I had been waiting for.

I had fucked myself to the image of her in that bath. Trying to imagine how she would feel when I finally touched her aching cunt.

But now I didn't have to imagine.

Any reservations I had on how we got to this point quickly left me when I felt how her cunt pulsed around my shadows. How she welcomed them deeper and deeper until her body all but fell limp against me.

My hands kept her still while two of my shadows filled her and another two plucked and squeezed her nipples. She was moaning against me. Her body convulsing with need.

She is leaning on me. Letting her body be used by me. Trusting me.

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My mouth watered as her scent hit me. Heady and full of need. My bloodlust had never made a show before, not even when humans were getting torn to pieces, but smelling her arousal was enough to cause my gaze to redden.

Her tongue traveled along her bottom lip, inviting me to taste.

I leaned down, but instead of kissing her plump lips, I brought my face to her neck, licking the sensitive skin.

She tastes just as sweet as I imagined. The blood thrumming just beneath her skin was enough to send my mind haywire.

“Does my little pet like it when I take care of her like this?” I asked.

She surprised me by gripping one of my hands and forcing it between her legs, showing me how to rub her clit in a way that caused her to writhe against me exactly the way I wanted her to.

“Like this, yes,” she gasped. “I wondered when you’d finally put your purchase to use.”

Her words caused amusement to tickle my senses. Maybe she hadn’t meant her comment about me purchasing her as the jab I thought it had been. Maybe she had meant it as a tease.

I nibbled her neck in warning, but I hoped she continued with those words. Something shifted in me whenever she fought back. I could feel it in her as well. As

if something inside her was just awakening and peeking its head out.

She was just testing the waters. I couldn't wait until she actually let go.

"You're a spoiled pet," I whispered against her skin. "My hands and my shadows. What next? Will you beg for my mouth on that needy cunt of yours?"

Her pussy fluttered around me. I shifted my shadows inside her, circling them, sliding them over each other, forcing them out before back in again. I paid attention to every last detail, letting my shadows tell me exactly what she needed.

They were in tune with her more than anyone I'd ever felt before. They moved on their own, changing as her body reacted to them.

Just as I felt that she was about to come, something went off inside me. My shadows warned me that someone had traveled to my realm and now stood a mere few yards away from us. Danger. And we were out there exposed.

I wrapped her in my shadows, hiding her from view.

"I have to take care of something," I said. "Stay in your room."

She didn't have time to protest as I used my shadows to transport her there.

This better be good.

I hadn't expected my meetup with Aris to take so long.

Apparently, the demon and her little pet had run into an issue with the souls that had been collecting on her property.

At first, I meant to tell Aris to just leave and that I wasn't in the mood to play with her, but the look in her eyes made it seem that she cared more about her current human than the others. Feelings I would probably have mocked her about before. Feelings I wouldn't have been able to imagine before.

So, after she convinced me, I left to do the right thing—to tell my pet that I would be leaving.

I had not expected to be welcomed by the sound of her fingers fucking her needy cunt and the sounds of light moans filling the hallway when I showed up in her room.

Looks like my little pet took matters into her own hands.

I paused near her doorway, letting myself blend into the shadows before moving against the walls. I stayed hidden so I could watch as she writhed on her bed.

How did I get so lucky with this pet?

I hadn't wanted to pressure her. I told her that I didn't want her as a sex toy because that was the truth. What I wanted was a companion. Someone to talk to. To learn from.

Of course sex was a plus, but I never imagined she would be so interested in it.

And who am I to deny myself such a beautiful sight?

She was completely naked, her hands deep inside her. Her mouth was open, letting her moans fall freely.

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Her body was so responsive, even to her own hands. Heat shot up my spine, warming my insides and causing desire to swirl in my belly. I needed her. More than I ever needed anyone before.

I stepped forward, letting her know of my presence. Her eyes snapped to me, surprise flashing across her features for a second, but her hands did not stop. As soon as she laid eyes on me, her hands pounded into her even harder. Fucking herself to the image of me. Me.

She is mouthwatering. Saliva collected in my mouth, my fangs aching to sink into her soft skin.

“Have you finally come to finish your job?” she asked breathlessly.

“I can't imagine all humans are this needy,” I said as I stalked toward her bed. I ordered my shadows to grab a hold of her thighs, pulling them apart, so I could get a better look at how perfect her cunt was.

It was glistening with her wetness as it greedily sucked in her fingers, begging for something more. Begging for me to fill it.

“Maybe I'm just letting go of everyone's expectations of me. Maybe I'm the only one this needy. But I'm the only one you have anyway.”

“Expectations,” I hummed and leaned forward, letting my mouth brush across one of her knees. Her smell was so intoxicating, lighting up my entire body.

No other human had ever affected me this much. Even just being this close to her was making my bloodlust go haywire. Something I would normally have completely under control threatened to overtake me. It whispered things to me. Commanding me to remove her hands, to stick my face between her legs and feast on her cunt until she begged me to stop.

I wanted to hear her come. I wanted to see what she looked like on the edge. The feelings were so foreign to me, but I couldn't stop myself. I let my tongue drag the length of her inner thigh, my hands coming to grab her ass and pull her closer to me.

“To be a good girl. To marry the man they wanted me to. To be a good brooding mare for them.”

Something lit inside me. Hot and burning my insides. Bloodlust hit me straight in the chest, constricting my lungs and causing my vision to turn red. She hadn't mentioned that before.

“Is my pet married?” I growled. “Is there someone waiting for you? Hoping you'll come back? Because I must warn you, there's no way I'm ever letting you go.”

Iris shuttered against me, her breathy sighs filling the air. She looked... happy... as she pulled her fingers out of her pussy and spread her folds for me.

“Then show me I'm yours,” she said. “Show me that. Whoever may be up there waiting for me pales in comparison to my master.”

Iris

Yien's white pupils were larger than I'd ever seen them. Black veins stuck out against her skin.

She opened her mouth, letting me get a peek at her sharp fangs. Bloodlust. But she had it under control. It wasn't something to be scared of. I learned that quickly.

Instead, I saw it as a sign of her desire for me.

Her tongue traced patterns in my leg at the same time her shadows teased my entrance.

She likes being my master. I could see it in her eyes. In the way her shadows attacked me when I asked her to show me what it meant to be hers.

I opened my mouth to tell her to hurry it up, but she pushed two of her shadows into me, effectively stopping me. Fuck. I had never felt so full. Nor had anyone ever made me feel like I would explode with just a single touch.

But there she was, doing everything I never thought possible.

She wasn't hesitant, like she had been outside. This time, she filled me to the brim, fucking me with her shadows all while her eyes watched my every single reaction.

Her tongue was driving me insane. Teasing me in a way that made it unable to ignore but still nowhere near where I wanted it.

I attempted to buck my hips against her, but her shadows held me in place, controlling my movements so she could use my body like the toy she wanted.

Being restricted by her while she gave me this mind-blowing pleasure was something so freeing it caused my head to swirl. I need more. I needed her until I got sick of moaning her name. Though with the way her tongue traced my cunt, I wasn't sure if I'd ever get enough.

“Just be a good little pet and lie back while I play with what’s mine.”

Fuck. There was even a hint of a smirk on her lips when she said it.

It had never been like this for me. My body was on fire. The only thing bringing me any relief was the steady rhythm of her two shadows fucking me.

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But I still needed more.

“Please,” I gasped. “Please use your mouth.”

“On here?” she asked as she descended further between my legs. I gasped when her hot tongue finally flicked against my clit.

My hands flew up to her horns, gripping them and forcing her mouth closer. More. More. More. That’s all that was going through my mind.

The action caused a harsh growl to fall from her lips. I threw my head back against the fluffy pillows as she pulled my clit into her mouth.

“Yes,” I groaned and gripped her horns like my life depended on it.

I could do nothing but lie there as she fucked me. Her hands stayed on my ass while her tongue and shadows did the work of bringing me to my orgasm.

“I’m gonna come, Yien,” I whispered. “Please. Please. Please, keep going.”

She did as I asked, continuing to fuck me until I fell apart beneath her.

“Stay still,” she ordered, pulling away from me. When I looked up at her, a dose of fear shot through me.

Her face looked just like the others as they were bargaining for me. And the thought crossed my mind.

She is going to eat me.

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked. Her eyes shot to mine.

“No,” she growled. “You’re mine. Mine to keep. Mine to play with. Not to eat.”

But how can I trust her words when she looks to be at odds with herself?

“I’ve never wanted to play with a human like this,” she said. “Not until I met you. And it’s all I can think about, but I fear my bloodlust?—”

“It’s okay,” I said, part of my fear starting to subside. “I’m your companion for as long as you want me. We can take it slow.”

The fear that remained wasn’t because I thought she would kill me.

It was fear that she would send me back.

She stood back with a sigh, slowly letting her shadows unravel from me.

“I came here to tell you that I need to help out Aris,” she explained. “She was the demon who brought your friend. The spirit seer.”

“My friend?” I asked, sitting up. Sex disappeared from my mind when she said those words. She’s alive?

“I think her name was Mia?”

“She’s alive,” I whispered, relief washing through me.

“Aris doesn’t eat humans,” she said, her expression giving away nothing of what she

thought about my assumption .

“Like you,” I noted. She gave me a nod. “Is she a companion like me?”

The veins were slowly starting to fade away, and she was coming back to herself more and more as our conversation went on.

“She told me she needed the spirit seer’s help,” she said. “But from the looks of it, she's concerned about her.”

“Is she okay?” I asked, but when I tried to get closer, Yien stepped away.

“She's alright,” she replied, her voice clipped. “But I will make sure when I go see her, if you would like.”

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Something burst through my chest.

“Yes, I would like that very much.”

Yien only gave me a stiff nod at that.

“I’ll be leaving soon. It’s urgent, and I don’t know when I’ll be back. But don’t go outside. Let the staff know if you need anything.”

I nodded and had to watch as she melded into the shadows, feeling even more confused than when I first arrived here.

And feeling alone for the first time.

Iris

This time, instead of playing with the souls, I wandered the grounds.

It didn’t take me long to realize there were many more demons here than I had originally thought. All of them must have been hiding away during my first few days. But as I roamed the halls, I caught quite a few either cleaning up or down in the kitchen preparing food.

There were so many I couldn’t believe I had overlooked them. Many of them ignored me, focusing on their work. But there were a few who turned. A few whose veins turned dark. But when I noticed, I merely nodded at them, and they returned to their work.

Simple as that.

They clearly weren't like those at the auction. Maybe those were just the bad of the bunch.

But if so, why was Yien there?

I shook the line of questioning out of my mind. Yien wasn't like the others, and neither were the demons she employed. That had become obvious over the short time I had been there.

I don't know how long I spent exploring, but somehow I ended up right outside the kitchen, my stomach clenching painfully. I peered in, unable to help myself.

Two demons were inside, hard at work, tearing apart demon flesh and bashing it with what looked like a hammer. They were too busy chatting to notice me.

Just go in, I told myself. This is your house too.

Well... I was sort of a captive here, but I'd much rather think of myself as a guest than as someone who came here unwillingly. No one treated me awfully. They left me alone. I had a comfortable bed. Food every day. Baths.

I am free.

And it could have been worse. I could still be stuck with my father and the men back in... whatever realm mine was. I bet they had a name for it. Yien did say this was the Shadow Realm.

How pitiful is that? I am actually relieved to have been swept up by a demon and sold to Yien.

Of course the arrangement could have gone so much worse in a number of ways, but I had gotten lucky with her. Beyond lucky.

I could still feel the way her shadows moved across my skin, sending a wave of heat through me.

“So this is the little plaything Yien brought home,” a teasing voice said from behind me.

I jumped and turned around, coming face to face with a demon with deep red hair, the same grayed skin as Yien, and almost all-black eyes save for two white pupils, a bit like her too. As always, my first instinct was to run, but I tried my best to clamp down on it.

They won't hurt you. Not here. Though there was a twinge of worry running through me when I realized just how alone I was with Yien off helping her friend.

But this demon... She wouldn't hurt me. Her aura was clear as day.

There was a slight smirk on her face, but behind her sprouted dark blue wisps of smoke that spread out into space. It was a painful, melancholy picture painting the walls behind her with such sadness it caused my chest to clench.

Whoever this demon was, she was grieving.

“Iris,” I corrected her. “And you are...?”

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A light red played at the edges of her aura before disappearing completely.

“Xira,” she said, her smirk dropping. “I came from the same shadows as Yien.”

Is that some roundabout way of saying they are siblings?

She paused, her eyes taking me in. I expected her to say something else, but whatever emotions she was fighting with seemed to be overtaking her at that moment.

My hand reached forward, grabbing hers, and pulling her into the kitchen with me. The two demons chattering stopped when we crossed the threshold.

“You’re just in time to have lunch with me,” I said, giving her a smile.

“It would be best if Yien was here for this,” Xira grumbled as she pushed a piece of demon meat into her mouth.

I had finished my lunch long ago, all but inhaling the cooked meat and yellowish vegetables, the cooks proving once again that the food was actually not half bad.

Though that didn’t mean I enjoyed watching demons eat bloodied, raw meat with their claws.

“Fine,” I said and sat back with my arms crossed. “I won’t push, but I can see something’s bothering you.”

“I know. In fact, by now, all the realms know that Yien has picked up an empath.”

I sat up at the mention of the other realms. Maybe this would be my chance to learn something about my demon.

“Other realms, you say? Do they often gossip about Yien?”

She frowned, her eyes looking down at the bloody meat between her claws before she popped it into her mouth. The sadness in her aura was overwhelming. I could feel it starting to seep into mine. A painful, heavy sadness that was too much to bear for one person alone.

“People gossip about her because she is an enigma,” she replied. “Our realm is an enigma. I'm sure you've seen the souls around our property.”

I gave her a nod. I'd done more than see them.

“No one really knows why they're here or why they showed up. It's not the only place where the souls exist in that form, but they seem to gather here.”

“And they just stay like that?” I asked. “For all eternity?”

She gave me a shrug. “The souls come and go. Move on when their time is done. I'm not privy to the secrets of the shadows. The souls picked her.” There was a heaviness to her words, a bitterness to them that didn't go unnoticed.

“Is that something honorable?” I pried, leaning forward. “To be picked by the souls?”

Her eyes shot to mine, as if the question I asked was offensive in itself.

“To be picked by the souls is to be leader and protector of this realm,” she explained. “Yien has a responsibility to protect them until her last moment in this plane of existence.”

“And they just chose her like that?” She nodded, so I continued. “Why her?”

“I asked the same question many times,” she said with a sigh, giving me a forced smile. “Out of all the demons that spawned from their depths, they chose her. They gave her the powers, while myself and—” She stopped short, clearing her throat. “While I was just left as an ordinary demon.”

Her aura told me not to go on. The blue had spread out around us, engulfing the small dining space. But she did give me an in, one I would gladly take.

“Powers?”

“She controls the shadows,” she clarified. “All of them are at her whim. She can move them, order them, protect people with them. As soon as the shadows touch you, she knows everything she needs to know about you.” She shuddered. Does Yien... scare her? “The shadows are the only thing protecting those souls from being taken by other beings. Those shadows you see around her? They're an extension of her.”

Shadows. She called them that before, but I didn't realize that she controlled all the fog around the property.

“It's a protective barrier. She lets them stay there until their time comes or until one of us is spawned. She knows everything that happens in there. How many souls, who tried to breach and when. All of it. Regardless, the barrier was there before her and will be there after her. But only the keeper of this realm can connect to the shadows like she can.”

Spawned. She said she came from the same shadows as Yien. Did that mean...

“Did Yien spawn you?”

A laugh burst from her.

“Yien?” she managed to say through bouts of laughter. “No, Yien hates interaction. If she had any way to control the process, I wouldn’t be here.”

I hummed and gave her a stiff smile. I wasn’t sure what to make of all this information.

“Have you seen them?” I asked. “The souls’ memories?”

“The souls?” Her expression turned serious. “Yien never let me near them, and even when I tried when she wasn’t here, the shadows pushed me back. She lets you?”

“Not really,” I said, feeling heat spread up my neck. “I kinda just do it. But each time, I’m only hit with memories of them doing the nasty. Yien has a different reaction when she sees them.”

Xira was silent for a long while.

“What?” I asked, a panicked laugh spilling from my lips. “Is that bad or something?”

Xira opened her mouth to speak but stopped abruptly, her eyes fixed behind me.

“What are you doing?”

Yien

Panic.

It was the first thing I felt when I came back to my realm and realized that Xira was there.

I let the shadows engulf me, taking me directly to her.

When I saw Xira and Iris together, my heart stopped and rage filled me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, unable to stop the venom from filling my voice.

Xira had come from the same shadows I had. I had known her all her life and most of mine. I knew she had impeccable bloodlust control when it came to humans. I had seen her exercise it time and time again. I had no reason to worry about her... but still, as soon as I saw them together, my mind went into overdrive.

All I could think of was wrapping my shadows around Iris and pulling her to me and as far away from the demon as I could.

I stopped just short of that, commanding my shadows to wrap around Iris’s ankles and waist, ready to pull her back as soon as I needed, but paused when Iris looked back at me, her smile wide.

No one had ever looked at me like that. No one had ever been excited to see me, their entire body radiating with joy at just the sight of me. But there she was, right as I was ready to pounce on my sibling from the shadows, smiling at me.

Images of her on the bed yesterday flooded my mind. It was breathtaking, the way she reacted to my shadows, and refreshing to meet someone who could feel them and

see them the way I could.

Xira was ignorant of the fact that I had my little human wrapped tightly and was ready to protect her, but she didn't need to see the shadows to understand the look on my face and know how much I wanted to end her.

“I came because I have news,” she said. Her eyes shifted to Iris. “Human, you may want to leave for this.”

“She stays,” I spat before Iris could speak. “She's my companion. She can hear whatever it is you have to say.”

Xira's face changed in that moment. It dropped and allowed her true emotions to filter across her face. I knew what she had come to say before she said it.

I took a step back, the realization hitting me like a slap to the face.

Allura. The youngest of us. The one whose spirit was the most kind, the most playful... somehow, she had been the one to leave us first.

No. Something hard hit my chest. An emotion I barely had time to process.

Why her? Hadn't there been enough deaths from the Shadow Realm?

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“I didn't feel her,” I whispered.

“I suspected as much,” she replied. “Which is why I came.”

I could feel Iris's eyes on me, but I couldn't meet her gaze. How could I begin to explain?

“It happened a few days ago,” Xira continued. “Just like you warned, she was caught sneaking into the borders of other realms.”

“The royals?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“I'm not sure,” she whispered. “We were due to meet at the edges of this realm. She never missed a meeting before. I waited for three days and nothing.”

A light burst of hope sprouted in me.

“You don't know, though,” I said quickly. “I would have felt her. She would have joined the others?—”

“You and I both know demon souls do not always join the shadow.”

She was right. I knew she was right, but I didn't want to believe her. I couldn't; something in me refused to believe that Allura, the brightest, happiest of us all, was no longer with us.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. “Feel free to stay here as long as you'd like.”

She nodded and stood.

“I’ll leave you two, I’m sure your human pet has a lot of questions.”

I nodded at her words but didn't say anything as she got up and left. I didn't have it in me to watch her. I was stuck there, frozen and disbelieving.

Iris looked at me and then stood slowly. My shadows tightened around her as she came closer. She stopped right in front of me, her chest brushing mine.

I looked down at her as she looked up at me, and then she stood on her tiptoes, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

I froze, unsure what to do. My shadows were still wrapped around her, but my hands twitched. My first instinct was to touch her. My arms were begging me to wrap around her like she was wrapped around me.

Why? I wanted to ask, but I couldn't force it out through my tightened throat.

Her hand came up to run gentle strokes along my hair.

“Let me help you,” she whispered, holding me tighter. “Just let me help you, okay?”

I could do nothing but nod.

Iris

“Will you tell me?” I asked in a low voice, afraid if I spoke too loud, I might scare her.

She froze for a moment before relaxing. “About what?”

“Why Xira is so sad,” I said. “It feels like loss, and if I’m right, you’re feeling it too.”

“Yes. We may have lost someone very important to us,” she replied after a moment, her tone tight.

I would have to be careful about this topic.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I can see how much it hurts.”

“She was...” Yien paused for a while, but I didn’t say anything. “My sister. Allura. I... can’t say much.”

My heart broke for Yien. A sister? No wonder they were both so sad. I wanted to help. To talk it out. But I could feel I was pushing too hard.

So... I deflected.

“Your hair is so pretty,” I cooed as I ran a comb down her wet strands.

Her shadows had come out to play as soon as we sat down on the bed. They snuck up my legs and held on to me as I started to brush her hair. She stayed still, not speaking, but her shadows told me all I needed to know.

While at first I couldn't read them, now they told me how Yien was feeling—not in colors, but with their actions. And right then, they were holding me close.

Every time I moved the slightest bit out of reach, they would pull me back and wind further up my legs and arms, slipping into my robe and rubbing mindless patterns over my skin. They needed the comfort.

She needed the comfort, even if Yien didn't want to admit it. Her shadows told me every little thing she was thinking.

Xira fully believed they had lost Allura, but for the first time, I saw disbelief and frustration on Yien's face. She didn't want to believe it. It was almost an insult for Xira to even suggest what she had.

But Xira's emotions and the blue that surrounded her told me that she firmly believed their sister was dead. There was even a burst of pity that flooded through her aura when she realized that Yien wasn't going to accept her words easily.

“No one's ever brushed my hair before,” Yien said, breaking the silence.

“Have you ever let anyone?” I asked and moved on to another section. I was about halfway through.

“No,” she answered.

“It's okay to rely on people sometimes,” I advised. “Especially me. You chose me as your companion. So I'm here whenever and wherever you want me.”

“I didn't ask for you to brush my hair,” she said bluntly.

If she had been a normal human, my feelings might have been hurt by those words. But this was Yien, and I could sense that she had some trouble putting what she actually felt into words. So, I let it slide.

“No, but I knew that you needed it.” I smiled lightly. She couldn't see it, but her shadows traveled further up my legs and arms, tickling my skin, telling me that she heard the smile in my voice.

“I've never needed anybody.” That was a lie. Or maybe she just couldn't comprehend the concept of someone helping her. Of someone wanting to help her. Maybe she didn't understand what it meant to be needed or to need someone.

But I could show her.

“Maybe you have, but you haven't been able to put it in words,” I said with a shrug. “Everyone needs someone, demon or human.”

“Do you need someone?” she asked, and I paused, letting her hair slip through my fingers.

Her question caused my heart to skip a beat in my chest. How many times had I laid

in my bed, my mind screaming into the void, begging for someone to come save me? How many times had I sobbed, curled up into a corner because of what my parents were putting me through?

“I’ve needed someone for a very long time,” I admitted. I never thought it would be possible for anyone to come to my rescue. But it happened in the most twisted, fucked-up way, when I least expected it.

And I’m not sorry it happened this way.

“You weren’t happy. I could tell when I first saw you—you were afraid on that stage, but it was more than that. But something has changed since you’ve gotten here. You feel... less tense?” Her words were careful, like she was afraid of my answer.

“Yes,” I said carefully. “I think the other humans would be appalled if I told them that I would rather be here with you as a demon’s pet than back home.”

“I’ll always be there for my pet,” she vowed, twisting around to look at me. Her eyes scanned my face, searching for something.

“Is that all I am to you?” I asked. “A pet?”

A slow smile spread across her lips. It was enough to cause my heart to jump in my chest. Every time she showed even just a little bit of emotion, my own feelings went haywire.

“No,” she answered. “You’re my companion, but you like it when I call you my pet.”

She wasn’t wrong. I liked it when she called me hers.

Her shadows slithered up my legs, teasing the junction between thigh and hip and

brushing slightly over my underwear.

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“Is that your way of saying you want a distraction?” I asked her.

“Distraction?” she purred. “How can my little pet distract me? It seems like I’ve been doing all the distracting.”

I bit my lip, unable to hide my smile. “We can make a little competition out of it. See who could distract the other more.”

Her eyes lit up at this.

“Do you want to touch me, my pet?”

“I want to taste you,” I said, lowering my voice. “I want you to ride my face while your shadows fuck me. I want to see who can last the longest. Who can keep up while the other becomes a quivering mess.”

She let out a light laugh, and the sound made me burn all over. It was so unrestrained, so... genuine. For the first time that day, there was lightness in her eyes.

“The only quivering mess will be you.” The certainty in her voice won her a glare from me.

“If you’re so sure,” I sang.

“I am,” she said, her body puffing. “Your cunt sucked me in so greedily last time; you really think this time will be different? I’ll have you begging for me to make you come while I’m riding your face.”

Fuck.

I couldn't stop the shower of excitement that went through my body—not that I wanted to.

“My little pet's mouth is so sweet,” Yien said on a moan as she dragged her cunt across my tongue.

I gripped her thighs, my hands and arms shaking as I tried to hold myself together.

“You're not giving up already, are you?” she asked, a playfulness to her tone.

I made a noise and used my tongue to tease her entrance before running it up and around her clit.

“Just like that, my little pet,” she cooed. “Your master's so close. Show me how good of a little human you can be.”

I had already lost the competition many times. Her shadows were forced deep into me, rubbing against my G-spot while another played with my clit. If there was one thing I learned quickly about Yien, it's that she loved a good competition.

It was unfair. She had so many shadows at her disposal. Three pumping into me, stretching me. Another on my clit. Two more pulling apart my legs and forcing them to keep still so she could continue working me as orgasm after orgasm crashed through me.

But I would never back down from a competition either, and she hadn't even come once. She looked down at me with a smug grin. I glared back at her, digging my nails into her thighs to keep her still so I could suck hard on her clit.

Her mouth dropped open, and she let out a shaky groan.

“Are you going to make me come, my little pet?” she asked. “Are you going to lick up all my nectar after I spill all over your mouth?”

I made another noise, trying to tell her that I would like nothing more.

She let out a growl and leaned forward, placing her hands on the bed, grinding fully against my mouth while I flattened my tongue.

“Just like that,” she breathed, her pants filling the room, our moans entangling.

It was such a surreal experience. She was a completely different person. During our time alone together, she showed me more of herself than I ever got to see outside the bedroom.

I watched as her eyes hooded, her mouth widened, her face twisted in pleasure, and her body shuddered against me.

Bloodlust played at the edges of her face, and her shadows paused as her orgasm ran through her body. Her movements became wild, her hips bucking against me as she sought her continued pleasure.

Her wetness leaked onto my mouth, and just like I wanted to, I cleaned up every bit of it, moaning at her taste.

She was every bit the demon I first thought her to be. But seeing her as she came was like seeing her in a totally different light.

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I was starting to understand just how wild she could get. How her claws could dig into the soft mattress. How she cried my name as her orgasm consumed her.

I had never felt more powerful in my life while still being controlled. But the type of control she had over me was comforting. I knew that no matter what, I could let myself go and she would take care of me, and so I did just that.

My orgasm followed shortly after hers. I cried into her folds as I desperately tried to lick up the wetness that had spilled from her cunt. A clawed hand came to grab my hair, forcing me still as she teasingly ran her cunt over my lips.

“Did you think we were done?” she asked, a light laugh falling from her parted lips. “I won fair and square. Do you know what my reward will be?”

My eyes shifted to hers just in time to catch her wicked grin.

“Get comfortable, pet. I'm going to show you what my shadows can really do.”

Iris

Living with Yien was pure bliss. I had no other words to describe it. From the moment I stepped into this realm until she left for Aris's for a second time, I had wanted for nothing.

She gave me food whenever I was hungry. She took me to explore her realm—even if we were only allowed outside the fog for a few moments at a time. She told me about the souls she was protecting.

And of course, we spent days in bed getting to know each other.

I started to know her body as well as I knew mine. I knew that when I licked her inner thigh and met her eyes, arousal would flood through her. She would try and distract me with her shadows, but I saw how wanton she became with even the littlest bit of attention.

I also saw how desperately she had needed a companion. It made me realize that she was much more like me than I could have ever imagined. I had felt so alone back home with no one but myself to trust.

She was the same, except with a much bigger burden on her shoulders. She had a realm—and all the souls that gathered there—to care for.

It was that thought that brought me back out and into the fog.

I wanted to understand more.

I wanted to help her.

I saw how she would look out at the souls when she thought I was asleep. There were just so many of them all the time, and I couldn't help but wonder if she was waiting for a specific one.

I had stayed away from the fog wall, unsure of what I would find, but as soon as she left, I couldn't ignore the need to explore, even if it was just for a few moments.

I let my fingers dip into the fog. Something burst through me. Instead of the memories of the souls with the demons, this felt lonelier, more painful.

I gasped, pulling my fingers back. It wasn't just memories that flooded my system

this time. There was a burst of feelings as well.

Sometimes, when the feelings were strong enough, they would bleed into my own. I was used to that. But this was different.

This was a flood of emotion that I knew was not my own, but I couldn't stop myself from feeling. Like a parasite burrowing into my being and making me feel exactly what they felt. What their souls felt. Was this what Yien felt when she touched it?

The fog is an extension of her, Xira had told me.

Did that mean it was her who was feeling this, not the souls?

No. It couldn't be because I knew I had seen memories before. Maybe she acted like a barrier so I couldn't feel their pain? Just to test that theory, I put my fingers against the wall of fog, just barely brushing across it.

Fear, anger, and pain attacked me all at once, just as strongly as if I had placed my entire hand in there. This time, I stumbled back, unable to bear it.

“What the fuck?” I whispered to myself.

“If you wanted to touch the fog, you could have done it while I was here.” Yien's voice came from behind me. I jumped, turning to look at her.

“I'm sorry. I?—”

She held up her hand. Her shadows wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer to her.

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“You don't have to apologize to me. You don't have to apologize at all. I just—” She cut off, her lips pressing together in a thin line. “I wanted you to be safe. I was worried about you.”

Her admission caused my heart to soar.

“You finished early,” I said, trying to change the subject as uneasiness unfurled in my stomach.

Her eyes searched my face before she nodded.

“Your friend is doing well. It seems like you're not the only human who has found a better life in the demon realms,” she told me as she looked into my eyes. “I daresay my friend is quite enamored with her.”

“Does that mean you are enamored with me?” I asked, batting my eyelashes. A whisper of a smile spread across her lips.

“More than you would ever realize,” she admitted. “I never felt this way about anyone, let alone a human.”

My throat closed, and tears threatened to fall from my eyes.

“You barely know me,” I whispered.

Her clawed hand reached out to run her fingers through a stray strand of my hair.

“My shadows accepted you as one of their own,” she said. “No one else has ever been able to see them or interact with the souls the way you can. I am not sure I believe in the Fates, but I will not ignore the signs. You did not stumble into my arms by accident. You asked me once why I picked you, and there’s no real reason except that I felt you. You hadn’t even come on stage yet, and my shadows were already telling me about you. Like you were meant for me.”

I couldn’t take it. Not when she was looking at me so sincerely. I can’t trust it. Who in their right mind, demon or not, would want someone like me? Especially after knowing me for such a short period?

I wanted more than anything to believe it. I yearned for a love like the one she was promising... but the voices of Mother and Father were swirling around my head, reminding me I would never get it.

I stepped away from her, looking down at the ground with my heart pounding in my chest.

“I’m hungry,” I muttered.

She was silent for a moment before she wrapped her arm around me and pulled me back toward the house.

“Okay,” she said in a tone softer than I had ever heard from her. “Let’s go inside, hm?”

Yien

My little human needed space.

As soon as I saw the smile slide off her face, I knew that I had gone too far.

It didn't matter if I already knew what she felt. Or that I could feel the way she relaxed against my shadows. I hadn't lied when I told her that no one had ever been accepted by them or allowed to see the souls' memories.

Maybe it was too soon. Or maybe it was too hard to hear.

But I could wait. For her, I would wait an eternity. I would give her as much space as she needed, no matter how much it pained me.

In the meantime, I had things to do.

I had been agonizing over Allura. Desperately trying to think of ways she might still be alive.

But with each passing day, I found myself more and more angry.

Angry that I hadn't noticed. Angry that I hadn't been able to stop it. Angry that I hadn't been more motivated to find out what happened.

I let myself materialize from the shadows into a room that felt like it should have been the dining hall. But where a long table with hundreds of chairs should have stood, there was a large bed placed snugly against the wall instead.

A fireplace was off to the left and floor-to-ceiling windows to the right.

Everything looked expensive. From realms other than this one. Everywhere I looked, the entire room was drenched in wealth. Like every other royal, the twins were no exception—they loved to show off the absurd amount of money they had in every facet of their lives.

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I had never tried to sneak into the twins' bedrooms before, but there was a first for everything and I needed answers.

I wasn't just going to banish myself to a corner of my realm while I let my human figure out what we were. There was a nagging, heavy feeling haunting me day and night. The need to do something.

"I just knew you were a fucking pervert," Eros said, amusement in her tone. The human between them made a noise and hid herself beneath the covers, but Oros just stared at me.

They were all naked, though I did have the kindness to let them finish whatever it was they were doing before I barged in.

"I heard a rumor. I came to see if it was true," I said, shifting on my feet. My anger was barely contained in the shadows around me, all moving closer and closer to them.

"Speak," Oros commanded, her tone not as light as her twin's.

"Allura was known to frolic at the edges of this realm. She hasn't been seen in weeks."

Eros looked at Oros, silent for the first time. A red flag if I'd ever seen one.

"I saw her around," Oros said. "But I made sure to send her on her way."

I gritted my fangs. How stupid do they think I am?

“And did she actually go on her way?” I asked, my voice low.

Eros didn’t meet my eyes, and I felt it boiling under my skin. The rage. I didn’t know how much longer I could hold it in.

“The first time,” Oros replied.

“And the second?”

“I tried to stop it,” Eros said, finally speaking up. Her gaze met mine, making it impossible for me to ignore what I really didn’t want to believe. Pain rushed through me, cracking something in my chest.

Xira had been right.

But she didn't return to me.

My shadows extended around us, winding violently throughout the room. Lights from above shattered. The human in the bed cursed.

My shadows darted toward her, wrapping around her. The twins might not be able to see the tendrils, but they sure as hell could feel them and notice how the room darkened.

“A life for a life,” I growled.

I didn’t recognize my own voice. Didn’t have time to think about my actions. All I could think about was Allura’s poor face as they murdered her.

“Please, Yien, let’s talk?—”

“Talk?” I asked. “Don’t you think you should have talked to me the first time she was caught?”

Windows broke. The human shifted in my shadows, her breathing heavy and panicked.

Both Eros and Oros looked more scared than I had ever seen them in my life.

“One royal favor,” Oros said quickly. Eros already had her arms around the human, attempting to pull her away from my grasp. “It’s not the same as her life, but we’ll grant you a favor—anything within our power.”

I swallowed thickly, a bittersweet feeling overcoming me.

I wanted to kill them. Make them pay for what they had done.

I wanted to use my shadows and take what they had taken from me... but I couldn’t.

The feeling of my own helplessness only exacerbated my anger.

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Allura's smile flashed across my mind. She wouldn't want this. She wouldn't want me to endanger myself.

The royal guards had probably already been alerted of something going on in the twin's bedroom. Soon, this room would be filled with people who wanted to kill me. And if that happened... What about Iris? She wouldn't be safe in my realm, all alone.

It was that thought alone that calmed me.

"I would have sent for you," Eros said, noticing the room was getting lighter as my shadows retreated. "But I assumed you knew."

"Well, I didn't," I hissed. I let the shadows consume me. Home. Get home. "I will hold you to that fucking favor."

I used my shadows to travel back to my realm and into the kitchen where I'd left my human.

I needed to feel her against me. Tell her everything will be alright. To tell her she's safe in this realm. With me.

But when I got there, there was only a half-eaten plate.

My little pet was nowhere to be found.

Iris

I was struggling to get my eyes open.

My body felt heavy, the weight of it pushing me down into the soft bed. My mind was fuzzy and desperately tried to lull me back into a deep sleep.

But there was something wrong. Something nagging at the back of my mind told me I was in danger.

I shifted against the material, my body sinking into it and refusing to get up. It was so soft. So welcoming.

Then, memories flashed through my mind.

Me and Yien. Talking about the souls. The way her claws caressed my skin. The look on her face when she found out about her sibling. How at home I felt in her arms. I had been eating. Waiting for her to come home. And then I was?—

I jolted out of bed, panic running through me.

My eyes adjusted to the bright room in seconds. It's the same. Horror washed through me. The same exposed brick. The same tall beds.

I pulled back the blanket on the bed, looking down at my attire.

The same slip. I am back at the auction.

It was the same as when I had woken up the first time. Except then, the room was silent.

“The little human awakes,” called an all too familiar voice.

My eyes darted to the other side of the room, where the white-haired, red-winged demon was waiting for me. My first instinct was to flee, but with her right by the door and no other exit in this place... I was trapped.

There was a sinister smile on her lips as she watched my mind come to terms with where I was.

How? Why?

Yien promised no one would ever hurt me again, and then all of a sudden I was back at the auction?

It doesn't make sense.

"Where's Yien?" I asked, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

The demon looked amused that I even asked.

"She skimmed on payment," she said with a shrug. "So you are back here and will be going through the auction again."

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Skimped on payment? That soul thingy she paid with? I saw it with my own two eyes. I might not have understood what it meant back then, but I had an idea now.

“We all saw the orb,” I said, my hands gripping the cloud-like comforter around me. “She paid you.”

The demon tsked and stood, her large wings brushing the tops of the ceiling.

“And when one tried to consume the orb, it turned out to be fake,” she growled. “Not that you would understand anything about it.”

“Yien wouldn’t do that,” I said quickly. The need to defend her honor even if it cost me my life was so foreign to me, but so strong in that moment. “It must have been a misunderstanding.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Little pathetic human thinks she spent enough time with demons that she understands us?” In a flash, she was across the room, her clawed hand gripping my chin and forcing me to look into her bloodred eyes.

“You think that she’s honorable just because she showed you kindness? That she wouldn’t cheat my auction for even the chance to get something she was salivating for?”

I swallowed thickly. Tears burned my eyes.

I was angry. I was scared. I didn't know what to do.

“It's a misunderstanding?—”

“A misunderstanding is you thinking that Yien was nothing but a thief. She thieved to get you, and she will continue to thief until she faces the consequences of her actions. Now tell me, are you going to be a good little human and stop this attitude until it's your time to be called, or do I need to call in reinforcements?”

She was trying to scare me. I could see it in her aura. She was playful. She loved seeing how I reacted to her games.

So even through my fear, I forced my lips to break into a shaky smile.

“And ruin your precious merchandise?” I asked, letting a laugh thread through my words. “You put me here in this comfy room. Feed me. Clothe me. Keep me locked away. I think that's for my safety because you and I both know the demons you employ would take advantage of your wares. So no, I don't think you'll call them. You'll leave me in this room—alone—until it's time.”

Her eyes searched my face before she all but pushed me back into the bed, her laugh echoing throughout the room.

“Oh, I wish I could take you as a pet for myself,” she said and wiped fake tears from her eyes.

“But you're a businesswoman.” I leaned forward. “And selling me is a lost opportunity.”

She let out another laugh as she retreated, not at all fazed by my words.

“I’m serious,” I continued. “I’m sure you can strike a deal with Yien. I mean, come on, that power of hers has to be good for somethin?—”

She yanked open the door and sent me a wicked smirk.

“A businesswoman knows when she’s being played,” she said and slammed the door behind her, leaving me alone in the room.

Fuck this.

I wasn’t going to stand around waiting for Yien to come save me. This time, I would have to do it myself.

I knew the demons now, knew how they worked. I could at least try my hand at this.

So I waited. Hours passed until the room plunged into darkness. I noticed that no food was sent. She was punishing me.

But no matter.

I closed my eyes, putting my back against the door, and waited.

I tried to focus on the auras of the demons just beyond the door. The back of my eyelids lit up whenever someone passed.

It took a lot of concentration, but as soon as there was a lull, I tried the door.

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And it was unlocked.

When I was here the first time, none of us dared to try the door after the one girl who did was immediately attacked by guards. We never saw her again.

But I would be different. I just knew it.

I pulled the door open slowly and slipped out into the dark hallway, making sure to close it behind me.

There was not a soul. No sound of footsteps and no lingering aura.

I can do this.

Keeping calm, I traced the way back to the auction room. If I remembered correctly, it was just down the hall and inside one of the large doors to the right.

Found it.

Maybe I can hide out here until the demons panic and have to look for me.

I opened it and slipped in just as the sound of footsteps hit my ears. I paused, listening to them as they passed, and when they sniffed the air, my heart stopped in my chest.

Can they hear me? Smell me?

Then there was a small laugh, and they were on their way.

Thank god.

Walking toward the curtain that separated the room and the stage, I allowed myself a peek. The auction hadn't started, but some seats were already filled. Not a single demon that I recognized.

No Yien.

So I decided to hide. I scurried back into the room and made quick work of trying to conceal myself. As I made room in the wood stack in the corner of the room, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

"Naughty, naughty human," a demon growled. "Just wait until Madam hears about this."

Fuck. This time, I didn't hesitate to fight back. I swung my body back. Wailed. Screamed. Hit. Kicked. Punched.

It threw the demon off, but reinforcements weren't far. And with them, I was carried back, kicking and screaming to my room. All while the white-haired demon smiled down at me.

Yien

"Fake?" I echoed as Madam stood at the center of my property.

Her smug smile ticked me off. Anger was boiling underneath my skin, just begging me to tear her limb from limb.

“We consumed it,” she said with a shrug. “What you said was a soul sphere turned out to be a dud. And burned the insides of one of my favorite little pets.”

My shadows swirled around me, inching closer and closer to her.

The only reason I didn’t attack her was because I needed Iris back. Anything that I did here would only make it harder for Iris. If I couldn’t prove what I had given her had been a true soul sphere, then Iris would?—

“It was a demon ruler. A fire demon at that,” I insisted. “It’s the same as eating human souls—it isn’t guaranteed you get powers. On top of that, demon souls are almost nonexistent, so in order to take advantage of their powers, you would have to make sure someone compatible?—”

“But you see,” she interrupted, twirling her hair around her fingers. “That wouldn’t happen with any other soul sphere. Any other one would almost guarantee getting powers, but yours? We got nothing, and you still claim it’s genuine?”

“It is!” I growled.

I cursed my stupidity. I knew that might happen to the soul sphere if they weren’t careful, but I expected them to have more common sense. To actually test it instead of just randomly ingesting it the first chance they got.

Demon souls were testy. Without the proper care, they would do exactly what she described. A once-in-a-lifetime chance had been ruined because they hadn’t done their due diligence.

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“Just because you didn’t think to find someone who was compatible with it doesn’t mean it was a dud. And you just stealing what I rightfully purchased is going against your own rules! Aren’t you ashamed?”

She threw her head back and let out a laugh.

“Maybe if you had added some type of disclaimer, this wouldn’t have happened,” she said. “You think everyone on this plane knows the ins and outs of soul spheres? It’s your fault it didn’t work out, and therefore I should be able to call on your faulty payment.”

“If you don’t want to accept the truth,” I growled and took a step forward. “Then why are you here? To mock me?”

She clicked her tongue.

“To think I was doing you a favor by telling you your little pet will be put up for auction,” she said with a sigh. “I guess I should have known that someone who tried to trick me wouldn’t be grateful for a second chance.”

Ice cold fear was injected straight into my veins. It chilled all the rage and cleared the haze in my mind.

She is being put back up for auction.

“No,” I choked out. “Give me some time. I’ll make you another. I’ll make you five! Just please don’t?—”

“See, that’s the reaction I was waiting for,” she said and turned as if wanting to leave. “But instead, you lectured me. Blamed me for your fault.”

“It’s mine,” I agreed and staggered forward, my clawed hand reaching out to grab her. “Please. It’s my fault. I didn’t mean?—”

She jerked away just as my hand came into contact with her shoulder.

That wicked fucking smile was plastered back on her face.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “It’ll be twenty hours from now. Let’s hope your little pet can bring in a good price. After all, she is second-hand. Maybe I’ll even sell her at a discount to make up for it.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but before the words could be forced out, she sent me a wink and disappeared in a burst of bright light.

No. No. No.

I fell to my knees. Unable to breathe. Unable to move. My claws dug into the dirt. The demon’s words ran through my head again and again.

She’s going to be auctioned off.

She’s going to be sold.

My fault. My fault. My fault!

Iris

Just like before, all the demons were staring at me, bloodlust in their eyes.

Their growls, jeers, and laughter echoed through my mind.

I couldn't understand how it had come to this.

How one moment I was enjoying the warmth of Yien's embrace and then... nothing. My dreamy reality had been violently ripped from my hands, and I was placed right back where I started.

How? How can the world be so cruel? Haven't I already suffered my fair share?

Maybe this is my fault. My fault for letting myself enjoy it too much. For forgetting what my true purpose was in life.

I had been too enamored with this fantastical world. A world that led me to finally be free... even if I was a demon's pet.

But the thing was, I knew that wasn't all that I was to Yien.

My shadows accepted you as one of their own, she said.

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She protected me. She loved me.

She wouldn't just leave me here to get destroyed. Even though I didn't handle it the way I should have. I should have told her I accepted her and her shadows too. And how I felt about her.

“All right, everyone!” the white-haired demon said, clapping as she appeared on stage. Her suddenness caused me to jump, the bright, binding magical ropes chafing my skin. They were being extra careful since I tried to run. It was annoying, but they hadn't tried to hurt me... yet. “We have a little treat today. Something that was taken from me has come back, and I decided she is to be sold at a discount!”

Cheers spread throughout the room, thundering in my chest. Their growls and roars were so vicious this time around that I couldn't help the spike of fear in my heart.

“You see, last time a soul sphere was offered for her.” She clicked her tongue. “And let's just say I learned quickly not to be fooled by the Shadow Realm.”

Boos rang throughout. She wasn't even here, and yet I felt a spike of worry for her. What would happen to her when I was gone? Would they go after her? Would they kill her for this?

“So we'll start low... Let's say, one royal coin?”

I didn't know much about the currency of these realms, but from the previous auction, I knew her offer was insulting. It wasn't just me she was punishing. She was making the Shadow Realm look bad by selling me as obvious sloppy seconds.

“Two royal coins!”

“Ten royal coins!”

“Fifteen royal coins and a Krether eye!”

“Already?” the white-haired demon purred. “Let's see... Does anyone else have anything interesting to offer?”

Hand after hand rose steadily, the bids gaining traction.

I didn't know at what point my hope started to fizzle and die, but each and every time a hand rose and someone growled out what they thought I was worth... I felt nothing.

She's not coming to save me. This is it.

What I thought was something magical and a new adventure turned out to be my death sentence, and there was no one I could blame but myself.

I had gotten too comfortable. Too delusional. Yet I had been happy. I didn't care that I was only with her because she purchased me. I didn't care that she was shut off emotionally or that she had a duty to forever protect the souls of her realm.

During our time together, we had been something.

And that was enough for me.

After years of being taken advantage of, of being treated like less than, of being hated by Father while simultaneously being used by him to further his family line...

I feel free.

And maybe that was enough. Maybe in my pitiful life I was only allowed those few moments with her. And I loved each and every one.

So when facing death, why hide?

I rolled my shoulders and lifted my head, looking out at the crowd of bloodthirsty demons as they bid for my life over and over again. Spit flew. Fights broke out. Tables were thrown.

They were degrading themselves... and for what?

It was laughable. But I wouldn't let myself be scared. Not when this auction had given me the best moments of my life.

If this was how it had to end, I would accept it.

Tears gathered in my eyes, and heaviness weighed down my chest.

It's sad, but maybe this is how it was meant to be.

"Is that it?" the white-haired demon asked. "Three thousand coins, a sparkling Yote feather, and a bejeweled horn? Going once, twice... sold!"

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Yien

Now's my chance.

I commanded my shadows to spread across the room, bathing it in darkness.

The cheers from the audience silenced, and all eyes followed the dark, turning to me.

“It's already over, Yien. Go home?—”

Eros and Oros stepped out of my shadows, decked from head to toe in the traditional royal uniform.

I had only seen them wear it once or twice in my lifetime and never expected they would go through such lengths for a single royal favor... but I was grateful.

They owed me so much more for what they had done, but if they could help me get Iris back, it was a good start.

“I see what you're doing, and I want no part of it. Your soul sphere was faulty and?—”

“Come one now,” Eros said, a smirk spreading across her face. “Let's not kid ourselves, hm? We all saw her payment.”

Whispers broke out amongst the crowd, but I kept my eyes on Iris. Tears started falling from her eyes, and I saw how her legs were shaking with the weight it took to

hold her exhausted body. It made me murderous. I ordered my shadows to go to her, wrapping them around her legs and waist for support.

It only made her tears fall harder.

“What happens between me and my customers has nothing to do with the royal family,” Madam hissed. “Now, if you’ll please excuse me?—”

“Selling and distributing precious realm materials without reporting it to the royal family is considered trafficking,” Oros said, her eyes lazily gazing over the crowd. “And everyone here can be charged for allowing this to go on and not reporting it.”

This scared quite a few. Many of them looked panicked, looking around for a way to escape unnoticed. The white-haired demon herself was close to exploding, her body shaking with anger.

“You yourself know that my business has followed the rules for decades and has never once misreported?—”

“Are you sure about that?” Eros said, cocking an eyebrow.

The demon bared her teeth at us.

“For this human?” she asked, her clawed hand gesturing toward Iris. “All of this for a human?”

“You stole from me,” I said as I used my shadows to pull Iris to me. The demon acted like she might launch herself at Iris, but with a growl from Eros, she pulled back.

“Let’s keep deals fair, hm?” Eros asked. “We like it here and don’t want to see this business go into the ground, but if you keep acting like a greedy barbarian, then we

will have no choice but to treat you like one.

Madam let out a guttural scream just as Iris reached me and I wrapped my arms around her. The demon even had the gall to stomp her foot on the ground like a petulant child.

“Get out, everyone!” she screamed. “Out! Out! Out!”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

My shadows engulfed us all, bringing us back to my realm.

As soon as our feet touched the ground, I crushed Iris to me. Her arms wrapped around me, and I felt fresh tears fall against my robe.

“I thought you were going to leave me there,” she sobbed and clutched at my clothing.

“Never,” I growled. “I never intended for this to happen. I’m so sorry. I promised no one would ever hurt you, and I let this happen. I’m sorry.”

Her sobs intensified, each one feeling like a knife to the chest.

“Not to interrupt?—”

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I growled at Eros and sent her a glare before managing to somewhat control myself. “Thank you,” I spat. “You may go.”

Eros opened her mouth to say something, but Oros grabbed her and gave me a wave before they disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

When they were finally gone, I finally allowed my claws to run through Iris’s hair, soothing her. I had never been so terrified to lose something. Never once had my heart twisted so painfully in my chest that I feared it would break.

I was a mess. Unable to think. Unable to breathe. And knowing that it was my fault made it even worse.

I could have prevented this. I could have stayed with her, kept her safe and wrapped in the comfort of my shadows... but I allowed revenge to get the better of me. And almost messed it all up.

“I knew she was wrong,” she said, looking up at me with tears still falling down her face. “I knew you wouldn’t have done that.”

“It was my fault,” I replied as I wiped her tears from her cheeks. “I should have been more careful. I never thought she would here and?—”

She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and pressed her lips to mine, silencing me.

I couldn’t help but melt into her. Needed to feel her against me. Needing reassurance

that she was still here. Knowing I needed her with me, but also knowing that, with her being an empath, she would always be coveted by others. And I wouldn't be able to bear this happening again. I needed to know she was safe.

With that nagging feeling in my chest weighing me down, I had to pull myself away from her.

"Iris," I whispered, placing my forehead against hers. "I need to let you go."

Iris

Just when I thought my heart couldn't break any further, she dropped those words.

Her face looked pained as she said them, her black aura somehow going even darker. Pitch black.

She didn't want to let me go. I could feel it.

How dare she?

"The fuck you are," I growled and stepped away from her, my tears no longer falling. "You think I'm gonna let us go through that and have you just throw me away like trash? What is it? Are you done playing with your toy?"

Surprised and hurt flitted across her face.

"I never thought of you as trash," she said, offense obvious in her tone. "I have never felt such pain in my existence as when you were taken from me. Never such fear as when I tried to bargain to get you back and was denied. My soul aches for you. You, Iris, will never be trash to me. I will never be done with you."

Her words caused heat to expand in my chest.

“Then why would you even think about letting me go?” I asked, my voice cracking.

Her shadows stretched out around her, and her face took on a contemplative expression.

“It is not safe for you here,” she explained. “Demons will come for you. They will try to eat you. You think this was the end of it? If you stay here, all you’re signing up for is danger.”

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face.

“Stupid demon,” I said and reached out, bringing her back to me for a quick kiss. “I’m staying because I love you. Because I never want to be apart from you. Getting taken from you was my worst nightmare, and when I was there, all I could think about was you.”

“Love?” she whispered, a light blush running up her neck and spreading across her face.

How fucking cute.

I slapped my hand across her chest playfully.

“What else do you think this is?” I asked with a laugh. “I may have been purchased to be your companion, but we are the real deal now. And you are not getting rid of me that easily.”

Her face hardened.

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“If this is you feeling like you have to love me because?—”

I let out a sigh.

“I know what I feel!” I said. “And it has nothing to do with what you have done for me. Yes, I am grateful you saved me at the auction, but even before, I knew how I felt about you.”

A smile slowly spread across her face.

“Love?” she asked. “My little pet loves me?”

I nodded.

“Have you ever seen it?” I asked. “Felt it? In the memories?”

She shook her head and pursed her lips.

“No, but... I think Aris loves your friend,” she said. “I think I saw it in the way she looks at her. Not like a pet. Not like food. She fears for her safety. She cares about her. Like I do about you.”

My friend. I guess I wasn't the only one who was falling in love with their demon.

“Then don't ever say that again,” I said as I grabbed her robe. “Let me show you what love means. Let me stay with you for as long as I live. Let me live in your world with you and come up with more competitions so we can both be distracted and find

more uses for your shadows. I don't ever want to be without you."

Yien shocked me by picking me up and crushing me to her.

"Whatever my little pet wants," she said with a laugh, placing quick kisses all over my face.

A giggle spilled from my lips. I never thought something silly as that could bring me such warmth, but it did.

"Take me home," I told her, grabbing on tighter. And this time, I wasn't planning on ever letting go.

Not until I was old and gray. And even after my soul drifted from my body, I would stay with her, waiting until the day we could be reunited again, no matter how long it took.
