



The Hellbeast's Betrayal

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: Love can conquer many things.

Sacrifice even more.

But what happens when betrayal runs deeper than blood?

The journey isn't over. Jared and Ella's story continues in the next pulse-pounding installment of the HellBeast Kings story. As darkness looms and the past refuses to stay buried, secrets will be unearthed, alliances shattered, and destinies rewritten.

Loyalties will be tested. Blood will be spilled. And no one will escape the cost of war.

The fight for the future has never been more dangerous...

And the next chapter begins NOW.

Total Pages (Source): 90

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THE VOW OF A LIE

JARED

Seeing the way Lerna embraced Koro, forced a question from me.

“Why do I get the impression that you know my wife?”

The response was one that felt as if the rug was being pulled from under me, before trying to fucking suffocate me.

“Because she was never your wife... but, she has always been mine.”

Wife...his fucking wife.

What... The... Fuck?!

I swear, my mind could barely process the asshole’s words. Hence why instead of standing around with my mouth on the ground, feeling like the biggest fucking idiot ever, I scoffed.

“Your wife... oh right, but of course she fucking is,why the fuck not?!”I shouted.

The irony of it all was like being struck with venom I had first begged the snake to bite me with. I tossed the sword that I had picked up, ready to use to save her life, to

the ground. This before walking away from this fucked up lie of a life she had spun me. Like a fucking fool.

A fool that had believed myself to be in love.

All these fucking years.

Every single one I wasted.

Oh yeah, it was a bitter pill to swallow alright. It was a fucking grenade of mockery that exploded in the pit of my stomach. That's what it fucking was!

"J... hey, J, wait up... where are you going, brother?" Orthrus asked, now catching up with me.

"Where do you think? To find my woman," I snarled.

"And what about..."

"I don't give a shit! They can do as they fucking please!" I told him angrily as my mind spun in a million fucking directions.

"We both know that's not true," my brother said, making me stop so as I could grab him by the shoulder, gripping him tightly and walking him backwards.

"Listen to my words, Orth... I... Do... Not... Fucking... Care!" I growled out each word, making him raise his hands in surrender. So, I let him go and carried on walking. Of course, I should have known it would take more than that to shut my brother up on the matter.

"But you know, that's some heavy shit you just heard and..."

“Fuck sake, you just don’t quit, do you?” I moaned, scrubbing a frustrated hand down my face, tempted to add claws.

“No, I don’t, but that’s beside the point.”

“What do you wanna hear, Orth? How I wasted over three hundred years on a fucking lie?! You wanna hear how many days I wasted trying to get her back? How many hours I wasted thinking about her, or how many fucking minutes I spent fucking hating myself for getting her killed?!” I bellowed, knowing that they could hear but I didn’t give a flying fuck. My last fuck given had already fucked off and left me.

“Okay, so maybe I see your point,” he conceded.

“Great... good talk, brother,” I said dryly, storming back towards the way we had been traveling before this fucked up drama.

“But aren’t you even curious as to find out why?” he asked, making me roll my eyes as I should have known the tenacious fucker wouldn’t let it go. And I just knew what Ella would be saying right now, asking me if that was enough fucks and well...no it fucking wasn’t. Hence why I replied with,

“No, couldn’t give a fuck.” And it was true. Right now, I couldn’t have given two shits as to what bullshit excuse for fucking up my life she gave me.

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“That’s not...”

“No, Orth, just fucking no!” I barked at him, making him shake his head at me.

“But why?”

“Because the only thing I care about is getting my Ella back. That is the only Gods be damned thing that matters to me, so this...” I paused to lash my hand out to the shit I left behind, “...This fucked up bullshit, it means nothing to me. She...that lie I once called wife... she was dead to me before, and she sure as shit is dead to me now... you got it?” I seethed, making him sigh before finally... fucking finally, letting this go.

“Yeah, I got it, brother.”

“Good, now let’s go get my Chosen One back,” I stated, feeling my HellBeast rumble his agreement. Orthrus nodded, and this time as we walked, he did so by keeping the rest of his opinions to himself. Because every word I said was true. Right now, was not the time for this rabbit hole of my past. And if I were to dig right down in there, then yes, I knew I wanted to know what the fuck was happening. I had a million questions churning like fire in my gut. But seeing as I knew none of them would ease the pain of being lied to, of being deceived, then what good would come of it now? I was so close to the surface of erupting. My anger and resentment, my bitter rage ready to be unleashed from a single word uttered.

What was the use of it when I knew I was not in the right mind to listen?

The question now was...

Would I ever be?

* * *

Only minutes later and this question was answered, as it seemed I had no choice, not when she gave me none. It turned out that Koro hadn't just been interested in retrieving his wife, after all. The disdain I felt when even thinking the word, had me growling under my breath.

"Jared, can we... can we please talk?" She huffed, trying to keep up with me. Her angelic beauty not something I bothered to look at, as there was no getting lost in her aquamarine blue eyes this time, no marveling at her white-blond hair. There was no asking myself how fucking lucky I had been to possess such beauty. Not knowing now that she had used it like a cruel weapon against me. A way to play me like her fucking puppet.

"You can, doesn't mean I have to listen," I said, my tone speaking for itself.

"I understand how you must..."

I stopped walking and snarled, "I suggest you not finish that sentence, girl!"

She flinched back, and I glanced to the side to see Koro take a step towards us. Once upon a time, I might have felt guilty lashing out at her like that, but not anymore. And as for Koro, I was hoping for the son of a bitch to make it the rest of the way over here. I would welcome him with my fist. Unfortunately, he didn't move any closer, and I glanced down to see Lerna shaking a hand at him to stop. I snarled before telling her,

“Run along to your husband.” Then I continued walking, my brother and Marcus both watching this exchange with keen interest. However, the silly girl didn’t take my advice, instead rushing once more to keep up with me. Something I refused to make easy for her. So, I kept my long strides as they were, wishing I could just fucking run if it wouldn’t have been so gods damn obvious.

“I know I hurt you and for that...”

“What? You’re sorry...? A bit fucking late for that, Lerna,” I snapped, her name now feeling like swallowing sand.

I heard her sigh next to me before admitting,

“What is it that mortals say, better late than never.”

I scoffed. “I would rather have taken the never, so make of that what you will,” I replied, making her wince next to me.

“Yes, well clearly fate has other ideas, and if I am to save my...”

I stopped her right there, snapping,

“What? Your soul?! Your soul is not one I give a fuck about right now, so no, if it’s forgiveness you’re after, then you are wasting your breath.”

She faltered in her steps like I had struck her. But even this hadn’t been enough to get her to take the hint, as she caught up with me again.

“What if it told you that I had no choice!” she exclaimed, making me shake my head at her.

“So, what...? You were forced to pretend to love me, is that it?” I asked, hating myself for doing so.

“I had to get close to you, at first I thought it could be as a friend, but I think my connection to her must have made you...”

I ignored her bullshit excuse and was once again interrupting her.

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“Made me what? Foolishly fall in love with a girl who was nothing but my enemy?” I challenged, making her sigh.

“I was never your enemy, Jared.” The sound of my name coming from her lips was just like I used to remember, just like I used to adore... Now, though...? It just grated against my bitter soul.

“No? Then it wasn’t you who planned my demise?” I questioned, making her scoff.

“Oh, but I hardly think having you become who you were destined to become can be considered as a demise,” she argued.

“Oh, I see, so you did me a favor then?” I asked sarcastically.

“Didn’t I?”

I gritted my teeth and snapped my reply.

“I had no fucking choice, Lerna, you ripped it from me, you and your actual husband!”

Again, she sighed, as if getting frustrated.

“Yes, and have you thought to ask yourself why?”

I had, but I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of this.

“It doesn’t exactly matter now, does it? Seeing as I am stuck in Hell with the both of you!” I growled, my eyes casting to the fucker, Koro, who was watching this scene of ours with a narrow gaze.

Yeah, come and try it, fucker.

I tensed my jaw. I swear I would have no fucking teeth left after this conversation.

“You always were stubborn,” she muttered, making me warn,

“Don’t... don’t you fucking dare act like you know me.”

“Don’t I?”

I glared down at her before telling her in a hard tone,

“No, you don’t. A lot has happened since those days and I am very, very different, Lerna.”

“I can see that,” she said, looking me up and down, noting my demonic appearance. One I hadn’t bothered to try and tame. Not that it did me any good as the little fool just wouldn’t take the fucking hint. I knew that, when she continued.

“Yes, and like I said, you are now who you always were fated to become, I just played a part in that.”

“A fucking cruel part,” I gritted out through clenched teeth.

“You may feel that way but...”

“Oh, but I do feel that way, and have you ever thought to ask yourself why?” I said,

interrupting her and making her shake her head, like this would help.

“Jared, I...”

I finally stopped walking and turned to face her, because if she wanted to do this shit, then here it was... she would get it all!

“I watched you die, Lerna. I was forced to watch the woman I thought I loved die... do you have any idea what that’s like!?”

“I do actually,” she replied, surprising me, but it wasn’t enough to make me stop.

“Yeah, well fucking multiply it by three hundred years and you might be where I am at!” I snapped, making her gasp in shock, making me wish I hadn’t given her that.

“Jared, I... I didn’t know,” she uttered quietly, and I hated her even more for it...the pity.

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“No, you didn’t. Just like you didn’t know that I spent every one of those years searching for you. Spent every one trying to bring you back. Spent them all feeling guilty, every fucking day of this immortal life!”

“Oh, Jared, I...”

“A guilt that I never once needed to feel...but you did,” I said, nodding at her before carrying on, for there was no stopping me now. “You were the one who should have felt that, but I was the one to carry that pain, Lerna, not you. I was the one who blamed myself every damn day, when the truth is, you were to blame for it all.” Again, I nodded down to her, emphasizing my point, and at the very least she looked pained by it.

“I did feel guilty, Jared,” she told me, and once upon a time I might have believed her. But not now. Fool me once and all that shit.

“Good, then now it’s yours to carry alone, for...I... Am... Done,” I said, stopping long enough to snarl each word venomously. Then I started walking in earnest. But damn it, the stupid girl just wouldn’t fucking quit!

“It is no use, he won’t listen, Lerna,” I heard Koro tell her.

“You’re damn right, listen to your husband, girl, and let his curse console you!” I shouted back, tossing an arm up over my head in an ‘I don’t give a fuck’ gesture. My brother and Marcus caught up with me, but I didn’t miss the way Lerna said,

“You have to get your brother to listen!”

“For you, lady, I don’t have to do shit,” Orth replied before Marcus said,

“No hard feelings, love, we just hate you, is all.”

I scoffed a laugh at that. But then the moment they joined me, this was when Lerna had hit her limit, as she shouted at me,

“And what about my sister!”

“Your sister?” my brother asked.

“We need to find her!” she snapped, making me roll my eyes, because of course there was something she wanted from me. Hence why I was now dealing with this bullshit now. Which was why I said,

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Good luck with that?!”

I turned, walking backwards whilst I told her,

“Yeah, but hey, if it isn’t obvious yet, then here it is... I don’t give a shit about your sister.” Then I held up my arms and shrugged in a cocky way she seethed at. Koro strangely smirked as she stomped towards me in angry little strides, showing me a side of her I hadn’t ever seen before. But then again, who the fuck knew who she was, as I sure as shit didn’t... obviously.

“Oh, I doubt that!” she snapped.

I frowned, turning back to face the way of the snowy mountains before I shouted back,

“I don’t even fucking know your sister, so why would I...”

“But that’s not true, is it? Especially seeing as it’s the very reason you’re here now!” she said, this time making all three of us stop dead at the same time.

Then I turned around slowly, feeling as if my HellBeast veins had been doused in ice.

Ice that grew shards the moment she said,

“To save Ella...”

“...My sister.”

2

THE FATE OF SISTERS

“Come again?” I asked dangerously, making her sigh as she continued to close the distance between us.

“Woman, what have you been smoking? Ain’t no way Ella’s your sister,” Orth said disbelievingly,

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“What my brother said,” I snapped.

“I second that,” Marcus said, making her shake her head in exasperation. Before turning to Koro and accusing,

“You didn’t tell him?”

“The HellBeast wishes to rip my head off and doesn’t trust a word I say, so what do you think, heart of mine?”

I rolled my eyes and completely ignored her.

“Good point.”

“Someone get fucking talking, and now!” I yelled, making her expel a held breath before telling me the fucking unbelievable.

“Ella is my sister, the reincarnated soul of Anástasi.”

That name...The second she said that name, my demon reacted, suddenly howling enough that it had me doubling over, gripping my head in pain. It roared, bellowing its agony in my mind!

“J!” Orth shouted, making me shake a hand at him to tell him I was alright. Fuck me, but why had that name caused my HellBeast so much fucking pain? I shook it off before standing, my head still ringing like I had just had ten shits kicked out of me by a Berserker.

“That name...”I whispered with distrust.

“Aná...”

“Don’t! Don’t say it again,” I quickly warned, snapping the first word before forcing myself to calm enough not yell at her. Because I didn’t know how my HellBeast would react again.

“She is my sister, that is who she is to me, before she became your Ella.”

“How... how is this fucking possible?” my brother asked, beating me to it.

“This isn’t a conversation I wanted to have with an audience,” she said, looking to my brother and Marcus.

“Tough shit, you’re having it... now answer him, how is this possible?” I replied sternly, making her sigh before her shoulders slumped.

“Very well, we are the daughters of Hades.”

Marcus whistled, chuckling disbelievingly. “Now that’s a doozy.”

“Yeah, right, pull the other tail, love,” Orth said, whilst I just stared at her like she had two heads, not one.

“She speaks the truth, HellBeast,” Koro stated, folding his arms across his chest.

“Oh yeah, ‘cause I’m gonna believe the bastard in league with my fake wife,” I stated, making him look down to Lerna as if to say, ‘I told you so’.

“Alright, ask yourself, why would I even be telling you this now? What would I have

to gain?”

Well, she had a pretty good point there.

“I came to you because I knew my sister was your fated,” she added, making me shake my head at that.

“And how did you know who I was? Your sister and I had never even met each other,” I pointed out, because I knew there was no chance I would have ever forgotten Ella.

“Not you... your, HellBeast,” she stated, making me fist a hand to my chest as the beast in me whined again.

“So, you really expect me to believe that you’re the daughters of Hades, the God my HellBeast was born to serve, and I would have no knowledge of this?” I asked incredulously.

“And why would you? Barely anyone even knows of our existence, and are you really going to stand there and try to tell me that your HellBeast didn’t feel something for Ella the very first second you saw her?” Lerna exclaimed, as clearly, she wasn’t stupid like I thought. Because my HellBeast had wanted me to claim her from the start. Hence why my brother punched me on the arm and gave me an annoying as fuck, ‘see I told you so’ look.

“But why? Why would no one know of you both?” I asked, making her sigh in exasperation before telling me,

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“Long story short, because we don’t exactly have time to waste here, but Hades fell in love with our mother, Leuce. She was a water Nymph and daughter of the Titans, Oceanus and Tethys. From their love for each other came the birth to twins, Ella and myself. But from fear from his wife’s wrath and what Persephone may try and do to us all if she found out, he hid us.”

“Hid you where?” I asked, even as I tried to wrap my head around it all.

“He hid us in the Elysian Fields, where he had a secret temple built for us. One that borders closest to the Underworld and where we remained even long after our mother passed.”

“Elysian Fields?” I uttered, knowing the place was separate from the Underworld, despite it being ruled by Hades. It was like a paradise for the heroes of men. Or so I had been told, as naturally, it wasn’t a place the likes of any HellBeast had been.

“It was the only place no one could cross to. It was our safe haven, one untouchable by outsiders. That was, until your HellBeast started to call out to Aná...”

“Again, we don’t need names here,” I said, pausing her again, as I didn’t fancy knowing what a fucking HellBeast heart attack felt like.

“She left the safety of our home in search of you,” she told me, making me suck in a quick breath.

“And she found him?” Orth asked, as my mental capacity to absorb any more shocking news was failing me.

“Yes, and for a while, it was fine. But then another discovered her.”

“Garmr,” I snarled his name, already knowing this.

“Yes, our uncle,” she confirmed.

“And what exactly makes him your uncle? As I gather you mean more than just some family friend that wants to fuck up your lives?” Marcus asked this time.

“Garmr is my mother’s half-brother,” she said, her face one of hatred even speaking of him.

“How? He is of Norse decent?”

“Garmr was fathered by Loki, this is true, but what you don’t know is that Loki disguised himself as Oceanus’s husband and tricked her into sleeping with her.”

“Sounds like they did a lot more than sleeping,” Marcus muttered, making Lerna frown before continuing.

“From this she birthed a child, Garmr, who was born a HellHound. So, she gave him over to Loki as a child and cast him from the Olympian line. After which he grew up and was given to Hel, the queen of the underworld that neighbors my father’s own realm. I don’t know exactly what happened after that, only that at some point he was cast from the realm of Niflheim as well.”

“And has been hellbent on bringing about Ragnarök ever since,” I added with a growl of words. Her bright blue eyes widened before she agreed.

“Yes, and he wants to use my sister to do it, to do what he failed to do all those years ago.”

“But what happened to you both? What happened to make Ella’s soul reincarnate?” I asked, as this was what I wanted to know more than all else.

“Garmr discovered the power she possessed, that of our father. So, he devised a plan and kidnapped her. Only when she wouldn’t do as he commanded her to do, he knew he needed leverage. So, he had me kidnapped also, so as he could force her to do terrible things, things she did for fear of what he would do to me.” I felt my whole-body tense at that, my demonic hands curling into fists.

“But you escaped?” Marcus assumed.

“Koro, who was acting as his second in command, he was the one to kidnap me but we... well we...”

“Fell in love,” Koro affirmed, reminding me of what he had told me, about the innocent soul he had been forced to kidnap. Well now I knew who that innocent soul was.

“Yes, we did,” she said, looking up at him with the same love in her eyes, a love I would have wanted to curse to damnation only moments ago. As for now...it seemed as if I wasn’t so sure of anything anymore.

“I got her out and, together, we planned a way to free her sister,” Koro told us, and I swear I felt like my heart was going to pound its way out of my fucking chest hearing this!

“But in order to achieve it, we first needed to ensure her guardian was ready for her, when the time came,” he told me, making me assume,

“Hence where I came in.”

“Yes, the plan was to befriend you and lure you to the caves where you were to cross over but you didn’t trust me the first time,” Lerna said, causing me to jerk back a little before asking,

“The first time?”

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“Your memory of our meeting wasn’t the first time we met. We had your mind wiped of the memory and next time, we met under different circumstances.”

I held up my hand and stopped her.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it... what next?” Clearly, I had no desire whatsoever to take a trip down that backstabbing memory lane.

“We comprised a plan that would get you to become one with your HellBeast without fighting against it. But the only way to get you to accept each other was with rage. To get you to embrace your true self and your destiny, you needed to feel ferociousness that matched that of your HellBeast. One who was living in agony without his Fated.”

“Yes, well I would say you achieved that,” I said dryly.

“It had to be enough that he would recognize you, knowing you were also a tortured soul, and given my connection to Ella, it was strong enough to work. I had you believe we had been married and far longer than what we had.”

At this I tensed, my jaw hating the idea that I had been played and manipulated into this. But how could I lash out now? Especially knowing why they needed me to become who I was always preordained to become in the eyes of the Gods. I may not have been able to argue their reasons, but I could certainly argue another point, one that would have saved me three hundred years of grief and self-loathing!

“Why didn’t you find me after...? Why didn’t you tell me all of this? Why did you just let me believe...” I asked but she was quick to interrupt.

“Because I had been gone too long. I needed to get back to where Garmr couldn’t reach me, and Koro couldn’t be suspected, or his cover would have crumbled. He took an oath to the Bloodstone Covenant, and he couldn’t break it.”

“And what of Ella?” I gritted out.

“We freed her from Garmr’s control, but there was only one way to hide her,” she replied, looking pained.

“In the mortal realm as a human,” Marcus guessed, causing her to nod before adding,

“Yes, but we had a problem.”

“Which was?” I asked in a hard tone, but nothing could have prepared me for what was coming next.

“Only death would bring life,” she replied, her tone close to breaking. The reason for which soon came to light when I pressed for more.

“Meaning what exactly?”

I wanted to know and at this, tears formed in her eyes as she told me,

“I had to kill her.”

3

WHEN DEATH CALLS

I shook my head at this, not understanding what she meant. Because surely, I didn’t just hear those words come out of her mouth. Hence why I uttered in sheer disbelief,

“Come again?”

“Yeah, what the hell does that mean, you had to kill her!?” my brother shouted, as he too was suffering the same bewilderment as I was.

“We didn’t understand it at the time, but this was the only way to bring her back from what he had done to her.”

I gritted my teeth but didn’t speak, for I needed to hear what else she had to say.

“His control... he...” she paused as if it was too much, forcing me to press her for more.

“He what, Lerna?What did he do?”The venom in my tone was easy to hear, as I was once again close to losing it.

“He locked her soul to his own.”

A hiss of air whistled through my brother’s teeth, whereas I outrightly growled.

“Meaning what exactly?”I forced myself to ask.

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“That she had to die first before she could then be reborn,” she said, her expression crumbling at what she had to do.

“What?!” I snapped.

“I didn’t want to do it. But it could only be me. I had to be the one and at the same time, do it when death was calling for me to do so. For hundreds of years, I hid her body in its unconscious state in the temple with me. Knowing that if I woke her up, she would still be under his control, and he would find her. That the Hellish cycle would never end,” she said, now with tears in her eyes, and it was clear to see the toll this had taken on her all this time. Making me realize that I hadn’t been the only one living with guilt and the pain of loss. That was why she told me that she knew how it felt. I understood that now.

“But how was that possible?” Orth asked as Marcus muttered,

“Sounds like some twisted fairytale.” A comment we all ignored.

“We had a spell cast when trying to break her free of his control. One that would keep her suspended in time in an unconscious state, until the time was right.”

“Until the time was right for what, Lerna?” I asked with gritted teeth, as I had a good idea I knew what was coming. She lifted her teary eyes to Koro, who nodded for her to go ahead and tell us.

“Until I would have to force myself to do the thing I loathed to do the most... The one part of the plan I had no choice but to see through. The part where I had to end

her life.”

“Fuck!” I hissed, knowing it was coming but feeling the effects of it all the same.

“We thought with you in the mortal world, it would have been sooner, but it was not. The Fates told us to wait for Death’s call and I did what I had to do when it came,” she argued as more tears fell, giving Koro cause to comfort her, turning her body into his and making me release a heavy sigh.

“That is why we need to find her, if he gets hold of her again, then I don’t know what would happen this time, or how we would bring her back from it,” Lerna cried and honestly, it was worse than I ever thought it could be.

“How did she come back?”

“I am not sure exactly. I heard Death’s call and did what needed to be done. After that, the soul I had protected disappeared, along with her living body, as it turned to stone. After that, it took me a while, but I discovered that she had been reborn a mortal, just like she had been fated to.”

“Carrick, the Death Dealer,” my brother said, quietly piecing things together, whereas my mind was spinning.

“What?” I uttered, even though the second he said it, those pieces started to make sense.

“He helped deliver Keira’s sister’s child, her father is an Angel, they fathered a child, and the vessel must have been destined for her, that would have been the call of death,” he explained, and Marcus agreed.

“That makes sense, his presence there must have acted like a beacon, leading her soul

from the Elysian Fields and tethering it to the mortal realm. It's the only explanation of how Frank, an Angel, would have been able to father a child. It was Fated."

"Perhaps you're right," I said, knowing that this made sense but all the while wishing, for selfish reasons, for it to have been sooner.

"She was always supposed to find you," Lerna added, making me grit my teeth when I thought back on our first meeting and how foolish I had been not to recognize who she was to me.

"She did," I replied, not wanting to add that I had been too fucking stubborn to see it that way.

"But what of her illness?" my brother soon asked, making Lerna sigh.

"We needed to mask her presence as we got her back to our temple. It had to seem as if the Summoner Queen she had become under his control had been killed. To this we had to ensure her blood would not be recognized as belonging to Hades. My only guess is that it must have crossed over to her mortal body once she came of age. Something Koro discovered when he was trying to get her back to me and safely away from the Garmr."

I felt my blood boil at this, knowing the pain and suffering she had endured and then to be kidnapped and near dragged to Hell!

"She was fucking protected!" I argued furiously, glaring at Koro now.

"No, she wasn't, for you had failed, HellBeast."

I went to lunge for him, but my brother knew me well enough to hold me back.

“You wanna say that to me again, dickhead?!” I seethed.

“Garmr had his minions in the mortal realm kidnap her and bring her to the caves. I turned up just in time to ensure that didn’t happen. But I couldn’t get her to cross over and without you claiming her, her blood was tainted enough that it was not recognized,” Koro stated calmly, something that only riled me more.

“A good job too!” I snapped.

“Yes and no, for it was clear that she was too vulnerable and had become too exposed. Garmr continued to pursue her, and soon Orson could no longer protect her.”

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I growled at the mention of that asshole's name.

“That's why he called you brother,” I gritted out venomously.

“Like me, he too took an oath to the Bloodstone Covenant. So, he agreed to help me, as he also owes me a life debt. You hadn't claimed her like we hoped you would, so we took matters into our own hands before she could fall into Garmr's,” he argued, making me lash out with the foolish reasons why.

“No, because I thought Lerna was my Chosen One and thanks to you two geniuses, changing her blood made it so she needed fucking medication... medication that changed her scent to a fucking HellBeast who relied on that shit!” I snapped, making Lerna wince.

“But he should have known who she...”

“Oh, don't get me wrong, he wanted her, sensed she could be his, wanted me to taste her but she didn't have the same scent he would have recognized to know for sure and in my world, it is forbidden to claim a mortal unless it is Fated!” I told them, making my anger and frustration known. Again, Lerna looked guilty for this, especially when I continued.

“Now, had I known, then I would have claimed her at eighteen and she would have been protected better.”

“We can all point the finger at the mistakes that were made, Cerberus, but there were no guarantees in any of this. We did what we thought was best to protect her. To give

her a chance at another life, one where she wouldn't be used as Garmr's personal power slave," Koro reasoned, maintaining what they did was right, when I knew otherwise. For had they involved me in this from the beginning then we might not all be forced to watch the shitshow of events playing out now.

"But if you wish to continue to cast blame our way, then ask yourself this, had it not been for you thinking of her on the battlefield when fighting Garmr that day, then he would still not know of her whereabouts," Koro added, this time making my brother want to kick his arse, now forcing me to be the one to restrain him after he said,

"Fuck you, blaming my brother like that!"

I released a sigh at this as Koro's words hit home.

"It's true, we have all fucked up here in regard to Ella, but the question now is, what can we do to stop it from happening again?" I said, which is when it utterly pained me to hear what the very last option was, when Lerna said...

"It's simple, but not for you."

"Why not?" I asked, having a feeling I wasn't going to like the sound of what she said next.

"Because, HellBeast, you have no choice but to..."

"...Let her go."

4

MISTAKES MADE

“Let her go.” Lerna’s words made me jerk back as if I had been struck.

“What the fuck?” I hissed in disbelief, making her look pained, telling me that she believed in what she said.

“It is too late for her to remain in the mortal realm,” Koro claimed, and I snapped a finger in his direction without bothering to look at him, quickly warning,

“You shut the fuck up. And as for you, you’re crazy if you think I am letting her go.” I added this last part aimed down at the new bane of my existence. Although, in truth, she had been that from the very first day I met her, I just hadn’t known it until now.

“She became a Summoner, Jared... the Summoner Queen was always fated to be a daughter of Hades. And it wasn’t Persephone’s own daughter, Melinoë, like the Queen hoped it would be.”

“Melinoë?” my brother asked, clearly keeping up with this fucked up conversation.

“She is our half-sister, although not that I readily claim her as such. She is the Goddess of nightmares and madness and believed that, by right, Hades’ summoning power should have gone to her,” Lerna told us, adding more fucked up players to the board for us to contend with. Just fucking peachy!

“Yeah, not sure she understands the way genetics work, as you can’t just demand to inherit daddy’s power unless born with it,” Marcus added sardonically.

“Gods’ bollocks, but just how many enemies are we dealing with here?” my brother complained, and I was glad he and my friend were here to ask the questions I couldn’t. Because I was still stuck on the ridiculous notion Lerna had that I would ever let Ella go.

“They have both been our enemy since knowledge of our birth was discovered, but even more so when they realized who Ella had become. The one who holds the Summoner crown has the power to rule all, hence why it is all they have ever wanted,” Lerna told us, shaking her head and no doubt wishing for simpler times when it was just her and her sister locked away in a temple.

“So, the bitch has to live being disappointed, so what?” Marcus said with a shrug.

“You don’t understand, she had reason enough for wanting us dead just for existing, but now that Ella has the one thing she wanted for herself or her kin, it is no longer possible. Even if she took it, that wouldn’t mean she could possess it, not unless Ella was dead. Which means that is just all the more reason why we must hide once more, as Persephone and her daughter will stop at nothing to get what they want. Just as Garmr will do the same,” Lerna argued in a pleading tone, and her desperation was easy to see.

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“Okay, so we take out the queen and her nightmare daughter, what next?” I stated firmly, making her scoff a humorless laugh.

“Even if you could, it still doesn’t solve the problem of my uncle, and now with the power of the Summoner King he has somehow managed to take possession of, I fear the fight is lost before it has even begun,” she argued, shaking her head in defeat.

“What do you mean?” I asked, making me think back to what Clay had said, for surely, Garmr had merged himself with the wrong King. But if this was true, then how then did he gain his power? Had Clay transferred it over to his replacement in some way and if so, did that mean Clay could claim it back as the rightful ruler of Fraud?

This ended up becoming a mute question when Lerna replied,

“Garmr bound Ella’s soul to his, meaning that he may not have the true power a Summoner does, but he does have the power to command them...to command her. For no one has the same power as my father or...”

“His daughter,” I finished off for her, wondering what would have happened had she not gone back in time and touched that damn book, making me ask, “And what if she had never taken possession of the Book of Souls?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Garmr would have just forced her to become one with her true self by touching any Book of Souls. He now has many Summoners under his command since taking Geryon’s kingdom, with one called Niniane being his most powerful,” Koro told us.

“Yeah, well he killed that bitch,” Orth said, making Marcus chuckle sinisterly at the memory.

“You did?!” Lerna asked in shock.

“What can I say, she lost her head over me,” I replied in a dry tone.

“Good, for I hated that bitch,” Koro replied, obviously pleased about this fact.

“With all that being said, our goal remains the same. We are to find Ella and keep her from that fuck Garmr, so he can’t use her for this fucked up end of the world shit he wants her to achieve... and just so as we are clear, she is not fucking leaving my side, so you can get any idea of her going back to your fucking temple out of your head now!” I stated harshly, making her flinch before astonishing us all.

“Well first we would need to find our father, Hades, as without her power and with her now being bound to this realm, she is...”

My hand snapped up to stop her, and again I was faced with new fucking information that had me feeling as if I was a step behind once more.

“Whoa, back up a second, what do you mean she is without her power and what is this bound to the realm shit you’re talking about?”

Her eyes grew wide before realization kicked in.

“Oh of course, you don’t know.”

“Don’t know what, Lerna?” Koro said, as clearly even he wasn’t in the know either.

“It’s just that with everything that happened and being taken, and we were running

after it, then it just happened...” she said in a rush of words, making me take a step closer.

“What happened, Lerna?” I asked, forcing myself not to bark at her this time, despite having the urge to shake the information out of her by this point.

“She was attacked by a...”

“Attacked!? For fuck sake, is she alright, was she hurt...? Fuck! Lerna, why didn’t you say that before?!” I snapped the second I heard the word, my whole body tensing as panic and fear swept through me.

“Well, there was so much to tell you and I... I...” she stumbled on her words, the emotions rising up within her.

“It’s alright, my love, just say it now... and before the HellBeast loses his head completely,” Koro said after my outburst, now trying to shield his wife from my wrath.

“She wasn’t hurt, but the creature, it’s one known as Epiales, master of Melas Oneiros. He works for the queen.”

Finding out that Ella wasn’t hurt made that stabbing ache in my chest ease enough to ask,

“And exactly what did this soon-to-be-dead thing do to her?” My intent to maim this thing was evident, even though I had never heard of it before. But then that wasn’t unusual, as fucking clearly, I still had a lot of supernatural shit to learn.

“He stole her powers and bound her to this realm, we had been trying to make our way back to our temple by getting on a boat from the river Arceron but as we rested,

it took hold of her dreams.”

My fists clenched, vowing that this thing was going to die... and slowly... by my hands.

“He made her eat a pomegranate,” Marcus surmised, clearly knowing more than me. Although I did know what this meant, as it was how Hades bound people to his realm through temptation.

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“Yes, and therefore, unknowingly giving up her will over not only where her soul remains but also the souls she controls. All of which will only be restored to her when meeting our father, for only he has the power to grant it back.”

“Hold up... so you’re telling me that our biggest worry was that Garmr would kidnap Ella so as to use her powers, but now you’re saying that she has none... am I the only one seeing this as a good thing?” Orth said and well, he had a bloody good point there.

Lerna’s eyes widened as she thought about it.

“I suppose it is, although that still doesn’t solve the problem of her being bound to the Underworld.”

“Nor the fact that her fucked up uncle is still after her.” I pointed out with gritted teeth.

“No, but at the very least it gives us time to plan and fighting him in battle will be easier if he doesn’t have his greatest weapon by his side,” Koro said, making me sneer at the way he called Ella a weapon.

Which is why I was quick to inform them of my only reason for being here.

“Let’s get this straight, I have only two goals here, find my woman and ensure she is safe, then I am going to kill that son of a bitch, Garmr, and this time, I am going to rip his fucking head off!” I said, before turning around to look at the mountain.

I had never been so determined to kill something before in my entire life. Then I looked back to Lerna and Koro, as well as his sorcerous, who had remained silent during this whole exchange. After this I told them,

“Now you are either with me or not, but I promise you one thing... nothing is going to take Ella from me, do you understand?”

“But...” Lerna started to say, but she was quickly interrupted.

“We understand, HellBeast, I more than most,” Koro said whilst looking down at the woman he loved. Something that instead of creating bitterness inside of me, it gave me hope. Because I knew now what he too had to gain from Garmr’s demise...

Freedom to fully claim his own Fated.

“Now where were you headed?” I asked her, assured for now that they understood.

“Before the royal guard hunted us and took me, we had been on our way to the Gate of Hermes.”

“The gate of Hermes?” Orth asked, wanting to know why, as we both knew of the Gods messenger and Ambassador for the Deities.

“We were trying to get a message to you, asking for your aid,” she said, only this wasn’t directed at me, but at her husband. Koro reached out to run the backs of his fingers down her cheek, his bindings also reaching out and caressing her as if his curse was soothed by the feel of her.

“But you said soldiers came?” I asked, needing to know more, and keeping the focus solely on my girl.

“Yes, but knowing we wouldn’t outrun them, I led them away, so they focused on me, not Ella.”

“That was very courageous of you, my love,” Koro praised, his hand tightening around her waist where he held her to him.

“I would do anything for her, you know that, besides, she saved me at the gates of Hades,” she replied, looking to him and then to me. Her account of which I was eager to hear. And thankfully I didn’t have to wait long, for her story continued.

She went on to tell us how it all began, including how Ella ended up jumping through that portal to begin with. How they had the same spell cast on her blood that Garmr had. How if a single drop of blood were to fall, that her sister would give her a way out before Garmr could get her.

Because the one thing Garmr couldn’t do himself was to cross over to the mortal realm. But what he could do was send his minions. HellHounds, like the one I had fought, had fed from her powers, making them stronger. HellHounds that would have kept coming and at a greater rate than her souls would have been able to fight back. The only thing to close the portal was if she had left the realm. Meaning if she had stayed to fight, it would have ended up welcoming Hell on Earth...literally.

Knowing this, Lerna told us that she and Koro had a backup plan in place when learning of Garmr’s next move once the Summoning Games had not gone to plan. They had a witch that was loyal to Koro cast a double spell. A spell that mirrored another so as it wouldn’t be recognized by Garmr. So that not one portal but two would arise with the spilling of her blood. A portal whose energy fed from that of a Summoner, and therefore would stay active until Ella entered one.

Which meant that she had no choice that night and she knew it. Something she must have felt at the time. However, this meant that she was now out there somewhere,

navigating her way through the unknown and this time...

She was...

Unprotected.

5

WHEN THE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

ELLA

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Well, I had to say, I felt a lot better knowing I was protected.

As even when having a nightmare, this time I had someone there to wake me from it. Only unlike last time, this wasn't under the guise of the life I craved. Back to the normality of living with Jared, whether it be in my tiny trailer or in Jared's cabin. No, there was no temptations to lure me in.

There had been nothing but horror...

"Ella... My sweet human, Ella."

I heard the name he only just started to call me this last six months, which had me wondering whether he never knew that I was mortal before. In fact, the more I looked back on my nightmares, it was only recently that he knew more about me. Before, he would always ask me where I was hiding. Of course, I never told him, but now it made sense.

"Oh, but how close I am to finally getting you back to where you belong."

The chilling voice spoke from the shadows. It's strange tenderness was one shrouded in darkness, for there was always an edge to his kindness. The feeling of something more he wanted from me. But, back to all those years of his nightly stalking, I hadn't known what I knew now.

Exactly what he had wanted with me.

To use me in the worst way.

“No,” I managed to utter, barely above a frightened whisper.

“Bolvađe, but why do you fight it so?” he said, snapping a foreign word at the beginning of his question, one I didn’t understand.

That haunting voice of Garmr’s rolled across my skin, making it want to crawl off my body just to be far away from him. We stood in the broken remains of a castle. The courtyard with its cracked marble floor, littered with large chunks of broken pieces of the wall that once surrounded it. The barren wasteland was beyond, scattered with snowy mountains and dead trees. But as for where I was standing, all I could focus on was the large hole in the dirt. One that looked to have once been this garden’s feature. Making me question what had been removed? A fountain or statue perhaps? Whatever it was it looked like it had been removed a long time ago.

“Why fight your destiny, human Ella?” I shook my head in response to the dark looming figure I knew was behind me. As I didn’t need to look at him to know he was there, not when I could feel him approach.

“Why run when you know I will only find you?”

I closed my eyes, as if this would help in blocking him out. I shivered violently when I finally felt his touch at my shoulders.

“Why must we play this game of cat and mouse with one another?” he asked and, again, I shook my head, trying to wake myself up.

“We were happy once, you and I,” he said, and this time I did make a sound, as the uncontrollable scoff of disbelief came out of me.

“No, you don’t think so?” His smug question started to caress my anger, slowly but surely taking over the fear I always had of him.

“We were so close to our goal, so close to achieving all we dreamed together, to rule as King and Queen, for you once welcomed my touch, my caress...” he said as his hands ran gently up my neck, collaring it from each side, and linking his fingers from my chin to the base.

“You welcomed standing by my side, until those that dare take you from me came and stole you away!” he snarled, his hold on my neck slipping down back to my shoulders, then tightening before moving down closer to my breasts. And this was when I finally reacted... my fear evaporating!

“NO!” I screamed, pulling myself from his hold and turning around to face him. His looming dark figure was always so large in my dreams, but now that I had seen him in person, I knew the truth. He was no taller than Tyr, in reality. Not the whole two foot taller than me that he was now. Meaning he purposely did this to try to use fear to control me.

Ominous shadows took shape of a man with glowing eyes of red burning brighter from the cloak of darkness. The only features I had ever seen on him were the silhouette of two massive horns and long, large hands always veiled under moving black shadows. Just like I saw now.

“I was never yours to take...uncle!” I sneered this word like it was something vile.

“Ah, so finally you step from the shadows of your mortal mind and have discovered who I really am to you.”

“Kidnapper, torturer...” I bit out through gritted teeth.

“Master?” he finished as he moved around the courtyard, and I moved with him, not trusting to take my eyes off him for even a second. He shrugged his large shoulders, the cloak like a living entity around him as if they were one and the same.

“I go by many different terms, my dear, but none of those apply to you.”

“No?” I questioned, the single word dripping with loathing.

“No, for I only ever wished to be your equal, so as we can rule together, just like we set out to do from the start.”

I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest, my disbelief and contempt easy to see.

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“After all, you are the one true daughter of Hades, a true princess of darkness, not like that other offspring of his born from that mad wife,” he told me, making me frown.

“Ah but I see, you have not heard of your half-sister, Melinoë the Goddess of Nightmares and Madness,” he told me, and despite wondering why Lerna hadn’t told me, I didn’t give him the satisfaction of reacting.

“She sounds like a right catch and right up your alley, why not just take her out on a date and leave me the hell alone!” I snapped, finding even more of my backbone. Something he laughed at, his eyes growing larger a second before the crimson glow simmered down.

“I have no interest in someone who would slit my throat as I slept,” he told me and it was strange, as this was the most we had ever said to each other. Making me wonder why? Why now? Was he hoping that I would come to him of my own free will?

“No? Then you won’t like me then,” I pointed out, but then shrieked when he came so close, his hand collared my throat as he lifted me to my toes.

“Ah but I have already had you in my bed at night, little mortal, and in it, the last thing on your mind was cutting my throat.”

I sucked in a quick breath at this before hissing,

“You lie!”

At this he let me go, making me nearly fall when landing, saving myself from stumbling.

“I have no reason to lie, and soon you will remember our time together, for like I have told you once before, we are bound, you and I. Destined to rule together, only this time, I finally found what we were missing.”

“And what’s that, a couple’s councilor?” I muttered dryly, surprisingly making him laugh.

“Ah, but all in good time, my dear, for soon you will see and I...I will finally get my queen back!”he said, and this time he rushed at me, knocking me to the ground so he was lying on top of me. And for the first time ever...

I got my first glimpse of his true face.

I gasped, not at the horror of it, but in surprise at how human he looked. I didn’t know why but I had always expected something monstrous behind the veil of his hood. Something truly horrifying. But what I got was the face of a man.

Of course, what set him apart were the deep scars that ran down from his forehead, traveling along his face and branching out like rivulets of a red lightening stream. The scars glowed, matching that of his eyes that were deep set and clouded by darkness. His white hair was a stark contrast to his marred skin, and his narrow lips curled up into a knowing grin, making me shriek back as if he was going to bite me as he snapped out at me.

“And I have a feeling, my dear niece, you will like it...just like last time!”He pressed himself into me, his size consuming me.

I could do nothing but scream out as he turned into an overpowering black smoke that

was impossible to get away from.

“AAAAHHH!” I screamed again, only this time another entity started to take over the smoke. A glowing golden light infiltrating the suffocating darkness that felt as if it was trying to swallow me whole. Like the sunrays were beaming down, one becoming two and then three, and then so many that the storm above me gave way to the light.

“Come back from the darkness, little one,” a gentle, tender voice spoke, and any other mortal would have believed it was the voice of God. Ironical that it turned out to be just that, just not the one I would have thought. As it was a soothing timber I soon recognized.

“Tyr?” I asked the light.

“It is I, little Bál Ásynja, now open those pretty green eyes for me,” he commanded softly, and instantly I did as he asked, unsure as to why I hadn’t already.

The fluttering of my vision cleared, awarding me the godly sight of icy blue eyes, along with golden tanned skin, and the intricate weaving of straw-blonde hair braided back, with the sides shaved to the skin. A Viking God who was now holding me in his huge, bear arms, his skin painted in a complex series of dark blue tattoos.

“I am in your arms,” I commented quietly and shamefully, stating the obvious and making him grin. A devastatingly handsome feature that transformed the face of a warrior into something breathtaking.

“So, you are,” he teased, his tone only of gentle mocking.

“Why?” I asked, unable to stop myself from staring at his face, as if this was part of his Godly power. A face that looked chiseled by some heavenly sculpture, making

sure to emphasize his high cheekbones, straight nose, and strong jawline.

“You were lost to your nightmares, you started thrashing and I didn’t wish for you to hurt yourself in your fight to return.”

“Oh... that... that was nice of you,” I said nervously, fidgeting in his hold, feeling strange. The emotions of being caught in Garmr’s grasp, only to be rescued by this Viking God, were messing with my head.

This feeling of protection...

Was one I wanted to cling to because it felt as if it had been so long since I had been in my HellBeast’s arms. But at the same time, it felt different. The feeling of longing was like an infinite road I still faced. Before I could speak a word, Asher cleared his throat behind us. The shock of knowing someone was watching, despite how innocent it was from my side, still ended up feeling as if I had been caught doing something wrong. My hand was stuck in the preverbal cookie jar.

I scrambled from his hold and unless he wanted to fight me on it, he had no choice but to uncurl his arms from around me. That easy knowing grin of his was now gone as his lips straightened, and a frown darkened the blue in his eyes.

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I looked around, dazed, trying to remember where we were, but Tyr spoke before I could ask.

“We are still in the ruins of Hypnos, come eat... no, keep it, so to keep you warm,” he said when I started to push off the furs he had covered me with. He even reached out as if to touch me, as if wanting to wrap them around me when Asher’s voice stopped him.

“Your kill is about to burn on the fire, God of war.”

Tyr gritted his teeth before rising from where he had been kneeling next to me. His large body towered over me as he held out a hand for me to take.

“Come, for burnt Catoblepas meat is never nice.”

I took his hand and let him pull me to standing. However, his strength compared to someone my size was obviously not something he was used to. Not when I went falling into him. My hands landed on his chest, where I felt his sudden intake of breath rise beneath my palms.

“Easy little, Bál Ásynja.”

I slowly rose my head, looking up at him in surprise, and he warned with a soft rumble of words,

“I advise not looking at me like that, little mortal, for I may purposely forget my vow.”

“Your vow?” I asked, prompting him tell me.

“To get you back to your HellBeast.”

My reaction was instant, and I quickly took a step back. An action he narrowed his gaze at before too stepping away from me. Then when he turned his back on me, I made the foolish choice to ask him,

“That name you called me, what does it mean?”

He paused a step before glancing at me over his shoulder.

Then he told me,

“Bál Ásynja means...”

“...My Fire Goddess.”

6

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

JARED

“Well, that was a lot,” Marcus said, making me grant him a wry look.

“You think?” Orth replied before I could as we continued to walk to our destination. A place that Lerna had assured us that Ella might be, hence why we were making our way to the Gate of Hermes. Because after Lerna had explained all that had happened and how she sacrificed herself so as her sister could get away, it left us with our only option. To head that way in hopes that Ella made it.

Needless to say, my worry was growing by the minute. All I could hope for was that Asher had made it to her, as well as whoever Clay had sent to aid him. I knew, more than most, that in a place like the Underworld, there was strength in numbers.

As for Lerna, I may have had my grievances with her, but there was no doubting the love and loyalty she had for her sister. Her sacrifice when getting captured so as Ella could be safe was clear evidence of that.

No, in that I could not fault her.

“And you really had no knowledge of this?” I asked Marcus, who was quick to throw up his hands and say,

“I’m an Oracle, not God’s babysitter.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Orth snapped.

“It means, meat-head, that Hades made it so that no one knew about his illegitimate daughters, and Fate clearly didn’t trust my ass enough for me to know shit about what would happen... so no, Orth, I didn’t fucking know.”

“But you knew she was coming home,” I pointed out, as that was what he had told me back in Dom’s club.

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“I knew that her soul was linked to this realm, yes, but not that she was a bloody princess of it and, like I said, no, I couldn’t fucking tell you,” Marcus admitted irritably. Half of me wanted to punch him, and the other half felt sorry for his oracle arse.

“Okay, okay, no need to get your micro cock in a twist,” my brother jabbed.

“Pretty sure that’s an oxymoron right there. Carry on and I will happily exchange your meat-head nickname for another...emphasis on the moron part,” Marcus threw back, making me roll my eyes, as here we were once again.

“Whatever, pencil dick,” my brother muttered, each of them trying to get the last word.

“Can’t twist a pencil either.”

“Try me... here, let me try on your neck.”

I groaned but before I could tell them to knock it off, I felt Lerna approach.

“Er, are they always like this?” Lerna asked, making me sigh as I glanced down at her.

The sight told a story of a woman who had clearly been through an ordeal. Her light-grey tunic was patched with dirt, the long panels, front and back, torn around the edges. This, along with her trousers, that were torn at the knees, and boots scuffed as if she had been dragged. She also looked fucking cold, even with her husband’s

jacket still draped over her, one that dwarfed her slight frame.

“Ever since Marcus walked into my club,” I said, answering her question.

“Not to worry though, they secretly like each other, they just show it with threats instead of hugs,” I added, winking at her and making her giggle.

Not exactly the exchange I thought we would be having so soon, but after all she had told me, then I couldn't find it in me to blame her anymore. Not considering everything she had done for Ella. So, in that, we were on the same page. And as long as that page didn't include stealing Ella off to some place I couldn't reach, then peace between us would continue.

And speaking of continuing, I was more than ready to leave the freezing wasteland behind. Not because I was cold, as thankfully my HellBeast blood would have thawed a glacier or melted an iceberg. Although Marcus wasn't faring quite as well, seeing as he kept shivering, complaining about the cold and worried that his balls would freeze off. Every time he tugged his jacket closer around him, my brother smirked, so at least someone was enjoying themselves.

As for me, my mind kept playing out everything Lerna had told me. All the what if's sending me crazy, making me ask myself if this was really what Fate had planned. But the main question was...

To what end?

A war raged within me, as on one hand, knowing it would make it harder for Garmr to find her made me happy as fuck that Ella's powers had been taken from her. I also knew that if he did find her, he wouldn't be able to turn her into some mindless fucking puppet or a slave to his ambitions for Armageddon. But on the other side of that damn coin, she was out there alone and without any means to protect herself.

Gods, but memories of Germany kept coming back to haunt me. It had been shortly after the car crash, and yet another time she hadn't done as she was told. I swear it was like the girl had a score card she was secretly getting stamped.

Of course, at the time I couldn't say I was surprised. Not considering all she was going through when seeing a whole bunch of biker HellBeasts fighting in the street. But it had meant that by the time I found her, she had a HellHound about to clamp his jaws around her and drag her sexy arse to Hell. Or at least try to, as unbeknown to Garmr at the time, due to her medical condition, it meant her blood was mortal enough to prevent that from happening.

As for me, Gods, but I had lost my ever-loving mind, tearing into that thing and no doubt scaring the shit out of her. And then what had I done, chased her down and fucking kissed her. I swear, when I looked back to how I acted and all the shit I pulled, it was a fucking miracle the girl loved me. That she agreed to be my wife and not kick my arse to the curb. Although, she had tried a few times, but lucky for me, I was a stubborn bastard, so there was no way I was letting the girl go. I knew, deep down, that she loved me.

Now did I deserve her? Probably not.

Did I care if I did...?Shit no.

She was mine and that was that.

“Can I ask what you're smiling at?” Lerna asked, her sweet voice no longer tugging at my heart the way it once would have. No, I liked my Chosen One with fire in their blood and sass in their bones.I fucking loved my Ella.

“Just thinking about my girl,” I told her, making her grin.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“Yeah, and no offence to my current company, but can’t say I have ever loved anyone more than her,” I told her. Not holding back.

“Hey, I heard that!” Orth shouted, making me smirk.

“You’re my fucking brother, idiot, can’t marry your Black arse,” I pointed out wryly.

“Not when I am too good for your white ass!” he shouted back, making me laugh. Lerna laughed too before the conversation took us back to Ella.

“I’m truly happy for you, for both of you, as I know how much she loves you also.”

At this my interest perked up.

“Yeah?” I said, not giving a shit if I was being too obvious, as anything my girl said about me, I wanted to know.

“All she cares about is trying to find a way back to you.”

This certainly had its desired effect, as I felt my HellBeast rumbling, causing me to rub a hand over my heart.

“We will get her back, I promise,” she told me, placing her hand on my arm, something that ended with her squeal of surprise as suddenly she was picked up by Koro and tossed over his shoulder.

“And that’s quite enough of that, heart of mine.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, feeling smug that it had made the bastard jealous.

“Koro, put me down, you brute.”

“I will show you brute when I finally get you alone,” he promised, making her groan in embarrassment. And I had to say, if anyone had told me that this was something I would be forced to witness, a year ago, heads would have rolled. I would have blown a gasket and tried to kill the guy. I would have felt bitterness consume me alive.

But as for now...

I felt nothing.

Not a single thing, as I couldn't even claim to be big enough and say I felt happiness for her. As despite no longer feeling any malice towards her, I couldn't bring myself quite so far as forgiving her entirely. Because what I said had been true. I could have been enjoying my life with Ella since she was eighteen years old. Even if I had to have given it a year or two for her to finish college and grow up a bit. I still would have known who she was to me. I could have watched her from afar. Ensured her safety. Helped her through the pain of her illness.

There was so much I had missed.

There was so much I could have fucked up beyond repair.

To think of the heartache I could have saved us both. That was the only bitter pill I had left to swallow. But as for the sight of Lerna's happiness with someone I had considered my enemy all my supernatural life, then, no...there was nothing.

Nothing but the thought of my...

Lost Little Red.

7

GOD OR NO GOD

ELLA

"This actually tastes pretty good," I said, referring to the meat that Tyr had hunted and also cooked. However, the second he started to tell me about the creature, I held up my hand and said, "Nope, nope, nope, as far as my mortal brain is concerned, you

nipped to Walmart and bought this at the store. With a coupon. ‘Cause you’re not flashy. And seeing they were all out of potatoes, corn, and chocolate cake, this is all you brought home.”

Tyr’s expression was priceless as he looked to Asher and said,

“All I understood was potatoes, corn, and chocolate cake.”

“I don’t think you were supposed to understand the rest. I have come to discover mortals’ obsessions with consumption are near out of control,” Asher replied, making me chuckle.

“Yeah, I bet you weren’t complaining about the beer aisles though,” I said, pointing my meaty bone at him, one that was half eaten and tasted somewhere between a chicken and ham.

Asher grinned and, like Tyr, it was a sight that would have half the population swooning. Which meant that yes, I was currently sitting around a fire basically camping with Mr. Hollywood and Mr. Viking God as my bodyguards.

Seriously, where was my HellBeast at? Although had he been here, I think my ovaries would have exploded. But then, if I was right and I was pregnant, then at least they had done their job. And honestly, I was surprised that I was, as I hadn’t a clue Jared and I could even get pregnant. Because who knew that HellBeasts could make babies? I was pretty sure Jared and I would have had the ‘baby’ talk beforehand if he had known.

Unless of course...

He had wanted to get me pregnant.

Speaking of pregnancy, I suddenly didn't feel so good. I quickly scrambled up, making both men rise too, as if they had missed some unknown enemy approaching. However, the second I ran over to a nearby tree and started throwing up, they at least had cause to relax.

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“I guess she didn’t like your Catoblepas meat, after all.”

Tyr grumbled at this before coming over to me, and I soon felt his hand rubbing soothing circles at my back.

“The meat is not to your liking, little one?” he asked ignoring Asher.

“It’s okay... I am just... Yahh...” I stopped speaking to throw up again, finishing my sentence when I was done. “...Not used to it... is there any...” I didn’t have to finish this request, as he brought his leather flask of water to the front of me, just like last time.

“Are you certain you are not sick?” he asked as I swilled my mouth out and spat, before drinking some down when I no longer had the gross taste in my mouth.

“I feel okay, better now it’s all up,” I told him.

“Your belly is empty,” he stated in a concerned tone, making me sigh. Of course, this would have been far easier if I just told them that I was pregnant. But I didn’t want anyone else to know before Jared, so I remained silent. Because really, what could be done about it anyway? This was morning sickness and not something that could be helped, even if I was in the mortal realm.

“I will be fine.”

“No, we will stop at the next village, for you need a proper bed and something else to eat,” he told me.

“But I need to get a message to...” I tried to argue.

“And we will, for if it eases your mind, it is on the way, so will not take us too far from your task,” Tyr said, taking the flask from me, one he must have refilled when out hunting.

However, I didn’t miss the look shared between him and Asher, as if there was something they weren’t telling me. A question I would have asked, if Tyr hadn’t declared,

“We need to leave if we are to make it before darkness falls.”

“Why, what happens then? And please don’t say zombies, I really hate zombies.” I figured this question was a lot more important than figuring out their secret glances.

“Don’t look to me, for not even I know what this means,” Asher replied when Tyr looked to him to translate.

“You know, the walking undead, has a taste for brains, kinda slow, hard to kill, and walks around like this... Bwwlaaa,” I said, holding my arms out in a typical zombie fashion, something both men cocked their heads at like dogs hearing a new sound for the first time.

“Do you think I should point out we are in the Underworld?” Asher muttered, making Tyr reply,

“I am not sure it would help, perhaps she suffers a fever?”

“She’s also not deaf. No, I don’t have a fever and yes, I am sure there are plenty of undead here. What I mean is rotting bodies that still roam around looking for food and don’t have much in the IQ department,” I replied with a hand on my hip.

“I believe she means the Vrykolakas,” Tyr offered, making me shiver at the thought.

“Vi... cola... kis?” I repeated in a fearful tone, butchering the name.

“Vry... kola... kasand yes, they are the walking undead, although they prefer blood over eating brains. They also don’t have problems with their arms bending and they don’t have trouble with their speech, so no burrr sounds,” Tyr replied, making me laugh.

“Well, they don’t sound pleasant,” I commented, making Tyr step up to me before tilting my head back, so I was left looking up at him, wide-eyed with surprise.

“Don’t worry, my little Bál Ásynja, I will protect you,” he said calling me that nickname again, Fire Goddess.

I blushed and Asher, who clearly didn’t like how flirty the God was being around me, kicked mud onto the fire and said with an abrupt tone,

“Then we should leave, should we not?”

It was enough to get me to take a much-needed step back, shaking my head as if ridding myself of the spell he was trying to put me under. Again, Tyr didn’t look like he appreciated the interruption, but said nothing more, holding out his arm for me to precede him like a gentleman.

Then he asked,

“Are you cold?”

I shook my head, telling him no, as I was surprisingly warm in just my dark-green tunic-style jacket, and matching trousers that fitted more like leggings. My thick

leather boots that were over the knee helped with added warmth. However, nothing could replace my hiking boots, because they were the only shoes fit for walking miles in, my blisters were testament to that. As for my hair, this was still tied back from my face, thanks to Tyr's long length of leather he had tied around it back before Asher joined us.

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We walked in silence for a long while, until it became too much for me to bare.

“So, you said you’re here helping me for a friend?” I asked, trying to clear the weird tension. It was as if Tyr was holding himself back around me.

“I am,” he replied, making me chuckle.

“I think this is the part where you tell me who.”

“His name has changed, as he left his home realm to live among your own kind... but to me, he has always been known as Geryon.”

I cocked my head a little at this.

“Geryon?” Now where had I heard that name before?

“He is the King of the Realm of Fraud. Although he grew tired of the title, so he appointed someone to rule in his place.”

I would have asked more, but Asher got there first and told me,

“His name in the mortal realm is Clay, and he works for the Vampire King.”

“Wait, he works for Lucius? That’s my cousin’s husband!” I said, excited to know Jared was not facing this alone. My question made Asher nod.

“They too wish to ensure your safety and would welcome your return.”

Oh, I bet, I just wished it was that simple. However, since that ugly bird man had not only stolen my powers but also bound me to this place, I couldn't see a trip back on the cards anytime soon. Something I would have told them, but then Tyr pointed ahead and told me,

“There, look see, the village of Ananke is up ahead in the Asphodel Meadows.”

“Ananke?” I questioned.

“It means the power of fate,” Tyr told me with a grin, making me wonder what that look was for.

“And what type of people live there? No zombies, I hope.”

He laughed.

“The Asphodel Meadows is a place for souls who are neither particularly virtuous nor wicked...so none of your zombies,” he teased, making me smirk.

“Well, that sounds safe enough,” I commented, making Asher scoff.

“There are dangers lurking everywhere, and any village has its fair share of threats, with bounty hunters and the unruly demons that wish to allude them.”

Tyr's expression hardened, before he affirmed,

“All of which we will protect her from, Demon.”

Asher gritted his teeth in response, but whatever his thoughts, he didn't voice them. Of course, it was getting more obvious by the minute that they didn't like each other. Something that stemmed, no doubt, from Tyr's obvious flirting with me. But then,

Asher was loyal to Jared, so it wasn't surprising. And even though I was putting it down to harmless fun for the God, I did worry that Asher believed it to be more. Something I was hoping would be a moot point once I was back with my HellBeast. As Tyr would soon see for himself where my heart lay. And if he didn't get the hint, then I would explain it to him when the time was right. God or no God, he would soon know that there was only one man for me.

Meaning my mind remained firmly on the one who owned my heart, making me sigh internally before asking,

Where are you, Beastman?

8

INN THE MIDDLE

The village of Ananke was surprisingly quaint for what I would have imagined, seeing as it was in Hell. But then I was coming to realize pretty quickly that any human preconceptions I had of what Hell looked like, was wrong. Because it wasn't all fiery landscapes and tortured souls begging for freedom. In fact, it was just like an alternate version of Earth...just a more brutal and monstrous kind. So, it may have been demons and mythical creatures roaming around, but it was a civilization all the same. Meaning there must have been some kind of an infrastructure in place. Enough to build the houses that I saw now and grow food that I could see being sold at the marketplace we were currently walking through.

Like once again stepping back in time, the village square was surrounded by wooden structures with demonic vendors standing behind, selling their goods. These market stalls were nothing more than crates, planks of wood, and sheets of torn cloth hanging over four poles at the corners.

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At the center of the square was a water fountain of what looked like a horned god, with the legs of a goat holding an upturned hallowed skull as a bowl overflowing with carved stone fruit. Water flowed from the skulls eye sockets and between the teeth of its open jaw, as well as the top of pole the creature danced around.

The stone was marred in black looking moss, like it hadn't been cleaned in decades. The whole place teemed with demons and ghostly figures which at first, had shocked me. Not by how frightening it was but at how normal and charming it all looked.

As for the rest of the village, it was like something you would have found in the renaissance. With houses that weren't quite level but were cute with their dark wooden beams and pale stone walls. Each with their pepper pot roofs in blue slate tiles, that looked to be all different sizes slotted together. The mismatch style made it look like they were wearing patchwork quilts hats.

Dimpled frosted glass windows also made a charming feature, despite not being able to see inside the buildings. However, it was easy to detect which of these were homes and which were shops. This thanks to the old fashion painted signs swinging on chains from beams that stuck out above the doors.

The language wasn't one I could read, and many just had ancient looking symbols in the center of painted shields like family crests. Others were obvious, like the tavern we headed toward that had a drinking horn with foam rolling from the top painted above.

“What does that writing mean?” I asked Asher, nodding to the sign.

“The Tavern’s name,” he replied, making me smirk when asking,

“Which is?”

“The Horniman,” Tyr replied before Asher could, doing so with a wink at me as he strode in front so as to open the door for me.

“After you, Mi’lady,” he said gallantly.

“Now what did I say about you calling me that?” I chastised lightheartedly.

“That I may call you it as long as I don’t add the little part.”

I rolled my eyes at him, making him chuckle. A smile I shared until I walked inside the tavern and ended up stopping short the second I saw the room full of rowdy demons. Demons who were mixed with those that, at first glance, could have been human.

I didn’t understand it, were these people dead or alive or somewhere in between? I would have asked but now didn’t exactly seem like the time, especially when all faces turned toward me... and not exactly in a friendly way.

However, the second Tyr followed in behind me was when things changed. Everyone’s eyes widened before they all looked away as one. Clearly, the Viking God had a reputation. Something I was thankful for, because it made entering this space slightly less intimidating for me. And just like in the marketplace, it was like stepping back in time, something I was now well acquainted with.

Although I had never been in a place like this on my time-jumping travels, but the Viking looked right at home.

The size was definitely deceptive from the outside, I was expecting a cramped room with low ceilings. Instead, it was a large open space with high ceilings. Meaning when I looked up, I could see the curved arches of roof beams, two-stories high, with a second-floor balcony framing the room below.

The pale stone block floor had a warm glow that reflected the flames from the huge, roaring fireplace that was the main feature to our right. Long wooden bench tables were arranged like Tetris, with just enough space between to squeeze bodies through. A bar off to the right of the fire was nestled under the balcony, the shelves filled with bottles in all shapes and sizes.

A kaleidoscope of colored glass shone from the flickering flames provided by the pillar candles, that were held on the shelves by an overabundance of wax. Wrought iron lanterns hung on chains from under the wooden frame of the balcony, that matched the lanterns on the stone walls.

Tyr led me towards a table set for four that was tucked away in a corner. Seeing as the place was full, I didn't know why he picked one that was clearly occupied. That was until he pulled forward his huge axe from his back and dropped it on the table hard enough to spill their drinks. The faces of demons, all with bluish skin, scaled brows, and metal plates hammered into their flesh, all looked up in anger. That was until they saw who it was, and the second Tyr stated in a firm tone,

“This table is taken.” They all scrambled back as one, before rushing from their seats in a comical way.

I gave him a wry look, but he just answered this with his devastating smirk, before grabbing one of the fallen chairs and offering it to me. Asher took his own seat beside me, while Tyr took the other. This put me in the middle of the two great hulking protectors. Meaning no one wanted to make eye contact, despite the whispers being obvious, no doubt questioning who we were.

“Is this safe, being in the open like this?” I asked, eyeing the rest of the tables and watching the way they gossiped.

A table of beings nearby were each wearing cloaks with their hoods raised, and trying to glance our way without being too obvious. Another table of humanoid looking demons all seemed like they had been dipped in a yellowish mud before letting it dry and crack. Every inch of them was covered in the stuff, making me wonder if it was, in fact, skin. They too seemed to be talking about us, making me quickly look away.

“What do you mean?” Tyr asked as he raised a hand, holding out three fingers toward a waitress behind the bar. A short plump girl with killer hips and the swagger to match.

She was wearing a floaty peasant-style white blouse with a teal color under-bust corset, and a maroon gypsy skirt. As for her features, they were half human, half something else entirely. Being that from her nose down to her neck, her skin looked like it was made from charcoal. This was the same as her hands, as they were black as night, with the rest of her arms with skin like petrified wood. Her eyes were a dirty yellow color that, even from here, I could see widened at the sight of Tyr.

“Well won’t people talk?” I asked, wondering if he was oblivious to what I could see.

“So?” he asked with a shrug of his large shoulders.

“I’m sure you’re already aware here, but I am trying to hide from Garmr finding me,” I whispered behind my hand. To which Tyr draped his thick, muscular arm at the back of my chair and turned his body in toward me.

“He would need an army to take you from me.”

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Asher cleared his throat in an obvious way, making Tyr correct,

“Us... to take you from us, that is what I meant.”

I let this slip in order to point out,

“He has an army.” Something that made Tyr scoff arrogantly, prompting me to try harder to convince him of the potential risk. “Yes but...” I started to say, yet he was quick to interrupt.

“Don’t worry, we won’t stay long, just long enough to get you something to eat and a nap.”

“You make me sound like a pet,” I grumbled, making him ruffle my hair and say,

“A cute red one.”

I rolled my eyes and looked to Asher for help, as he at least seemed to be the more sensible of the two.

“And what are your thoughts on this?” I asked.

“Your safety is our main concern, but I agree, you need to rest in a bed and eat before we continue to the port...”

Tyr jarred the table enough that his axe banged against it.

“What were you saying?”

“The Gate of Hermes, that’s what he was going to say,” Tyr spoke for him, and just before I could ask anything else, the waitress came with our drinks.

This was a long plank she held up on her shoulder that she lowered to reveal the large horns that contained frothy beer. I then watched as both Tyr and Asher took theirs, with the Viking quickly knocking his back with great gulps that worked the thick muscles of his neck. As for Asher, he slotted his horn into the hole cut in the table, now telling me what they were used for.

“Er... I think I will just take a water,” I said, then I tapped my belly and added, “You know, thanks to the dodgy stomach.”

“Suit yourself, water and three of your stews with black fire bread,” Tyr said, grabbing the horn intended for me and dropping his now empty one back in the hole on the plank she carried. Then after putting in his order and gaining a wink in return, she walked away with what looked like her trademark swagger. That was if all the appreciative glances she received when walking by were anything to go by.

As for Tyr, he grabbed my ale but, this time, he didn’t knock it back like the first. As for Asher, he seemed to be more alert, watching everyone for the slightest sign of trouble and taking a few conservative sips of his beer.

Shortly after this, the waitress delivered my water, along with three clay bowls of steaming brown stew that looked full of root vegetables and some kind of red meat. One that I was pretending was beef, and even before Tyr could speak, I warned,

“I don’t want to know what’s in it.”

Asher laughed before tucking into his own. To be honest, it wasn’t that bad. The meat

might have been a bit chewy for my taste, but the vegetables were good. They were sweet and tasted a bit like something between a carrot and parsnip.

I think this was supposed to counterbalance the salt in the sauce, which definitely needed the sweetness. As for the bread, it didn't look particularly appetizing at all. In fact, it looked like a large lump of crusted lava on a wooden slab. The crust was black and cracking, revealing lines of red dough beneath. Like someone had burnt a red loaf and this was the result after cooking it with a blow torch.

"Try it, I think you will be surprised," Tyr said, leaning into me and nudging my shoulder. This after tearing me off the first piece. The steam rising did look inviting, opening up to reveal swirls of red and yellow bread inside the crust. And it was dripping with something too, making me ask,

"Is that butter?"

Asher grabbed a piece, took a big bite of the swirly center and moaned before answering,

"Sure is, mmm."

So I did the same, and I too was soon moaning in pleasure as, I swear, it was one of the nicest things I had ever put in my mouth...Jared not included, I thought with a naughty grin.

But the light, fluffy dough combined with the buttery swirl was perfect, however, when Asher started eating the crust I wasn't brave enough, prompting Tyr to say,

"It isn't burnt, if that's your fear."

"It's not."

Tyr shook his head and nodded to the shell of the bread left in my hand. So, I shrugged my shoulders and took a bite, surprised once again to find it salty and a bit spicy, but not in an overpowering way. Then I watched as Tyr dipped his own in his stew, using the curved, hard crust as a scoop before putting it in his mouth. This encouraged me to do the same. Once again, I moaned at the taste, as it transformed the stew into something far more delicious, like the spice was all it needed.

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In the end, Tyr and Asher were right, because the second my belly was full, I was feeling sleepy. As if it was all catching up with me, or perhaps it was being pregnant. Most likely a combination of both. I honestly didn't know, but one thing was for sure, the second I was home, I was buying a dummy's guide on being pregnant... that was, if I and this baby ever made it home in one piece.

Gods, I sure hoped so. I rubbed a hand to my belly.

The second I started to yawn, giving away this sleepy fact, Tyr chuckled and asked the waitress if they had a room available. When the answer had been no, his handsome grin disappeared and his blue eyes started to glow, narrowing as he demanded,

“Make one available.”

This gave me the impression that the God of Justice and War was used to getting his way and now was no exception. Not when she rushed back with a large iron key and giggled nervously.

“Er, wouldn't you know, one just became available,” she said, then glanced behind her for us to see a female and male demon shuffling down the stairs. Doing so with all their clothing in their arms as if they had been in the middle of something and were still trying to dress as they were made to vacate the room. I couldn't help but feel bad for them but clearly, Tyr felt nothing.

He simply stood, finished off the last of his ale, and offered me a hand, telling me,

“Time to put you to bed.”

However, Asher was up out of his seat, not even bothering with the rest of his own ale.

“Yes, allow us to both escort you,” he said, emphasising the word both.

Again, Tyr looked like he wanted to punch him, his scowl would have made weaker men drop to their knees. However, Asher didn’t seem to bat an eyelid at this, instead focusing back on me.

“After you, Ella.”

I couldn’t help but beam up at him, silently thanking him for being so protective with a nod. So, we made our way up to the second floor, and I soon realized it was just an extension of the floor below as it held more seating. And like downstairs, the tables were full and bustling with chatter and drinking.

Tyr had obviously been here before, as he guided us through an arched beam that opened into a long hallway full of doors. Which meant we must have been in one of the buildings attached next door.

Each of the doors held symbols, like ancient numbers, making Tyr look down at his key before stopping at the right door. Then once inside, the first thing I noticed was how sparse it was. As literally, it was nothing more than a few single wooden frame beds, that had the bedcovers rumped up on one of them. This was obvious now as to what the vacated couple had been up to.

As for the rest, there was also a small table with two chairs, a tattered rug that was so old it forgot what color it was, and a window that must have looked out to the street.

“This is pitiful,” Tyr complained, screwing his nose up at what was the bare minimum, no doubt used to sleeping in his own temple dedicated in his honor. I couldn’t help but internally laugh, as he was this rough, ready, warrior Viking God, and the sight of dust and threadbare covers were appalling to him.

“It isn’t much but it’s better than the ground,” Asher said, making me shrug, and tell them,

“At this point, I could sleep on a porcupine’s ass.” To which they both laughed. Then Tyr unbuckled his layers, laying one down for me to sleep on and then bringing the fur from across his shoulders so as I could use it as a cover.

“Thanks,” I said, making him grin, like my thanks had been the equivalent to winning the battle.

“You’re welcome, Bál Ásynja.”

Asher frowned before getting closer and telling me,

“Get some rest, for we will wake you when we think it best to leave.”

Well, I didn’t need to be told twice, I was out like a light. However, what I didn’t expect was waking hours later to overhear Tyr and Asher talking about me... or should I say...

The plans they had for me.

“We will have to leave soon if we are to make it to the portal back to the mortal realm,” I heard Asher say, making Tyr question,

“And what of the fact that her HellBeast isn’t there waiting for her?”

At this question I held my breath, wondering what Asher's reply would be.

“She won't like it, but that is our only goal here, to get her back to where her aunt and uncle can keep her safe.”

Well as nice as that sounded, they were in for a shock, and I woke up saying,

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“Yeah, there’s a problem with that, seeing as I am bound to this realm and can’t leave until I meet Hades, King of this Underworld.”

Both men turned to face me, their surprise easy to see, and I wondered if this was because they found me awake or because of what I just said.

“You might have mentioned that.”

“What...? Just like the way you guys mentioned about having no intentions of taking me to the Gate of Hermes... that type of mention?” At this Tyr opened his mouth to argue when a commotion caught all our attention from outside.

“BRING ME THE HUMAN OR WATCH THIS VILLAGE BURN!”

The second I heard the voice, I froze, because I would know it anywhere, making me turn fearful eyes to Asher and Tyr before saying,

“It’s Garmr...”

“He’s found me.”

9

BEAST OF A PLAN

“Oh shit!” I shouted as both men got to their feet from the table they were sitting at.

I too scrambled from the bed as we all made our way to the window. I pushed it open and gasped before Tyr and Asher took hold of me and put me behind them. But despite this, I'd had long enough to see for myself the trouble we were now in. There was no mistaking the army of HellHounds that were making their way down the streets coming from the other side of town. Nor was there any mistaking the sight of Garmr that led them, from dead center, in between his robed lackies, whoever they were. I couldn't see their faces, which I gathered was the point because Garmr was the same. Their cloaks all snaked around the ground like living shadows.

"What are we going to do?!" I asked in panic, making Tyr say casually,

"Well, this might be a problem."

"You think!" I shouted.

"Well, whatever we do, it's going to have to be fast, as look, they are making their way inside each home, and it won't be long till they reach the inn," Asher pointed out with a grit of his teeth. He was clearly the only one to take this situation seriously out of the two of them.

"In that case, time to go," Tyr said, picking back up his weapons, his axe soon going to his back.

Well, it looked like we would certainly be needing it. As for Asher, he rushed me out the door, just as we heard the snarls of HellHounds from down below as they must have already made it inside. The sound of screaming and yells of shock echoed through the floor, along with the crashing of furniture.

"We will have to break through to the next building," Tyr told us, after first looking one way and then to the next, only to find a dead-end because this hallway went to nowhere.

“Break through, how...? Oh...” I said as Tyr pulled his axe from his back with Asher leading the way down the corridor.

Demons opened their doors to look and see what the commotion was. But when I saw their horrified faces look behind us, I stupidly turned. This was just in time to see one of the HellHounds that had made it up the stairs and was now snarling our way from the other end.

“Shit, one found us!” I shouted, alerting the other two to the fact we were now being hunted. One had been bad enough, but now two were in pursuit of us because the second HellHound rounded the corner. It came through the arch too fast and slammed into the wall before shaking itself from the daze enough to add to the chase.

“Fuck! Now there is two of them chasing us!” I shouted, making Tyr say,

“Not for long!” Then he stopped to face them head on, and I was just about to shout what the hell, when he swung his axe over his head. And just as they got close enough to leap at him, he hammered his axe hard into the floor. The wooden boards cracked before crashing through to the floor below. Which meant all he had to do was take a step back out of reach, and the HellHounds had nowhere to go but down.

Both of them fell through the large hole in the hallway and down into what looked like the kitchens below. One howled in agony as it landed on the hot stove, setting ablaze instantly. The other one crashing into a massive clay bowl filled with soapy water that looked to have been used to clean dishes. It shattered instantly, making the HellHound slip and slide on the suds when trying to get back to its feet.

“Come on, we need to keep going before they catch up to us!” Asher said, and Tyr took his place in the lead.

When we got to the dead-end of the hallway, he used his axe again to smash straight

through the wall. And from where I was standing, I could see the way the runes and symbols etched into the gleaming steal all started to glow blue on impact.

Asher turned quickly to cover me, so the debris didn't fly back and hurt me. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me through the crude opening, making demons scream when we appeared in someone's bedroom. Their white and black patched faces were a shock to see, but no more shocking than having us suddenly burst into their personal space. The poor woman even covered up her breasts, that like the rest of her skin, one was white and the other black. In fact, there was something profoundly beautiful about her two-toned skin. Their horns were like curled ridges, also striped black and white.

"Er, sorry, just passing through... you have a lovely home," I said, feeling bad for them both and not knowing what else to say as we went running through their lives. Of course, we did this only to find ourselves in the same boat, as of course we had another wall in our way at the end of the house.

This time, however, when we smashed through, we ended up in a storage room for a shop or something. It was filled with crates and large pots full of flour. One of which Asher went tumbling into, and he was consumed in a white cloud before coming out of it with a cough, now covered from head to toe. He looked to Tyr and warned,

“Not a word.”

I couldn't help but smirk, despite our current situation. But hey, at least we had managed to outrun the HellHounds for the time being.

Asher shook himself and patted himself free of as much flour as he could as we continued to run through walls, with Tyr clearing the path. The stream of flour falling from Asher looked like he was running in slow motion, leaving behind silhouettes of his shape.

Like I said, it would have been more comical and left me laughing my ass off had we not been running for our lives. The next building was another home, but one that was thankfully empty. However, the second Tyr hammered his axe through that wall, I naturally took steps to run, when his strong arm stopped me. This was just before I could run myself right out to my death, as he said,

“Looks like it's the end of the road.” And he was right.

We had come to the end of the row of buildings until we were now facing the town square again. Only this time, from two stories up.

“What do we do?!” I asked in panic, making him actually wink at me.

“Time to jump,” he said, making me back up a step.

“I can't jump,” I told him, hoping he hadn't momentarily forgotten that I was human.

“Sure you can, and I will catch you,” he said with a cocky grin, and before I could protest further, he jumped straight out the hole like this was nothing. Although he certainly landed like a pro, it had to be said, he didn’t even lose his axe. One he now reached around and hooked at his back before holding out his arms for me to jump.

“Oh no, I can’t,” I protested, making Asher grab me by the waist and say,

“You can hate me later.” Then he tossed me out the window, making me scream all the way down until landing with a distinct,

“Umph!”

“Gotcha,” Tyr said, holding me against his chest, smirking down at me. I panted, trying to catch my breath and still my pounding heart that, for a second, was convinced it wouldn’t need to beat any longer.

“You can let me go,” I pointed out, now we were street level, and my brain had caught up with the fact I wasn’t an Ella-shaped pancake.

“Do I have to?” he teased before Asher followed, a cloud of white left in his wake as the remains of the flour finally left him.

“Shall we?” he said to Tyr, who let me find my feet, now taking my hand and pulling me with him as we started to run through the square. One that was now completely abandoned.

However, just before we could make it back to the gated entrance of the village, a black fog rose up in front of us. We all jerked to a stop just before the gates slammed shut. I swallowed hard, forcing myself to now turn around to find the cause. And there it was, one of the robed followers of Garmr was now controlling this shadowed entity. Doing so with his hands raised, and black smoke rising from his palms.

“Shit!” I shouted as I saw Garmr’s army of HellHounds now making their way down to cobbled paths from each side. Which meant that we had no place left to run to because every street that branched off the square was full of HellHounds. Then after they reached the marketplace, they started circling the village square we were trapped in. Each one snarled at us, some leaping to gain more distance and landing with a crunch on crates of produce. Fruits and vegetables burst under their black paws, and bloody red drool dripped down between rows of deadly yellow teeth. Their fangs were long and sharp enough to tear through flesh and bone.

Their sleek black bodies looked like they had been skinned before being dipped in crude oil, their joints cracking and showing glowing crimson flesh beneath. Eyes burning bloodshot and glowing with eager anticipation for the kill and fight ahead. And they weren’t the only ones, because Tyr and Asher readied themselves.

Tyr pulled his axe from his back before pulling his sword from its sheath so he could toss it to Asher.

“I hope you know how to use it,” Tyr commented, making Asher grin before spinning it around with speed.

“I think I can handle it,” he said as his hand turned demonic before he ran it down the length and ignited the steel in flames. At the same time, he lost his mortal shell, giving way to his true form. The form I remembered seeing that day at the arena. The one with four twisted horns on his head, decorated with hoops and gold bands. Dark hair flowing freely between them and his pointed ears. His face now showcased black lips, pointed teeth, a strong ridged nose, and a pair of eyes in reverse. The whites of his irises glowed in the darkness that surrounded them.

As for his body, this was an abundance of bare muscle, decorated with patterned lines of raised white dots that varied only slightly in size to create the elaborate designs. And it was clearly a form that Tyr had already seen because he uttered a word I

hadn't heard before.

"Asuras... by the Gods."

I obviously had no idea what this meant, and it wasn't like now was the time to explain. So, with a nod of acknowledgement, Asher took a fighting stance, prompting Tyr to do the same.

"Stay behind us," Tyr commanded, pushing me back with a hand to my belly. And damn it, if only I had my powers, then I could have evened the odds with my own army of souls. But I had let fear get the better of me once, and it had cost me the opportunity to have ended this. Because if I had only fought Garmr when I had the chance at the Gates of the Underworld, I might have beaten him.

"Ah, I see you found yourself an upgrade for protection," Garmr commented, sounding amused by my army of two.

"Yeah, she did," Tyr said, now spinning his axe and looking up to the sky as his eyes started to glow blue. And like Thor, instead of lightening transforming him, a beam of light came down and enveloped him in a heavenly glow. His tattoos all glowed with a blue power, as if feeding his veins, traveling straight to his axe, making it spark. And oh yeah, now he looked Godly.

"And you, Princess, where is your power, for as you can see, you are severely outnumbered," Garmr remarked making my mouth drop a little. Because this told me that he didn't know, meaning he hadn't sent that bird creature after all, just like Lerna predicted. But then again, he wanted me for my power, didn't he? So, did that mean I was now useless to him?

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However, I never got the chance to say a word in response, because Tyr hammered his axe down into the ground, cracking the stone as branches of power snaked out along the floor like lightening traveling the stormy sky. The ground shook enough for me to hold out my hands to my sides to steady myself. But I didn't take my eyes from the sight of it hitting out at the HellHounds in its path. The branches lashed out the second they made contact, encasing them in a glowing net that made them howl before they each set alight into blue flames.

"You were saying?" Tyr said, making Garmr snarl before holding his arms wide and giving his HellHounds the signal to attack, making them now all race towards us as one.

"BRING ME THE GIRL UNHARMED!" Garmr roared as they all continued to pass him, hundreds now heading our way. Each with their snarling teeth at the ready to tear into my protectors. Their paws pounded on the ground like some death drum signaling the end. Both men held their weapons firm, their stances ready for the onslaught of enemies headed our way.

"Take the ones on the left, I will take them on the right and ensure that none make it down the middle. We honor our vow..."

"...Or die trying," Asher finished, making me gasp.

I didn't want anyone's death on my hands.

They nodded to each other just before the first wave was close, and I held back a scream as they attacked. Tyr swung his axe around, taking out those closest by

cutting straight through the heads of five of them. Asher took a different approach, spinning his sword around one side and then the other, doing so fast enough that it looked like helicopter blades were on fire.

Both techniques were affective, but not enough to stop them from getting swarmed. Tyr hammered his axe down at the ground, this time creating a wall of power to turn those close enough to ash. However, one slipped through his defenses, and I screamed when it started to come closer.

Which was when a startling realization occurred, because just like the HellHounds I had encountered before, this one started to transform. The memory slammed into me, taking me straight back to that day in the forest. Back before Orson had saved me. Only this time, the HellHound's transformation was in reverse.

Its skin started to split, starting at its joints, making me swallow down the urge to vomit. The form of a person broke through the oily skin as its snout opened, like it was getting ready to roar. Only instead of stopping, its jaw peeled back on itself until the horrific face emerged. As if the creature had swallowed a man and it was now regurgitating its still-living kill.

The popping and snapping of bone were sickening sounds as its joints tore and the limbs of a man took their place. Its skin ripped away completely as it started to stretch, until its hind legs became straight. This was so it could rear up until standing, and it was like watching a werewolf transform into a half-man half-beast.

I started to stumble back the closer it got, still trying not to scream as its clawed hands reached out to me, with its demonic mouth full of razor pin teeth snapping at me and its eyes glowing a fiery red.

However, just before it could touch me, the sharp end of a blade pierced through its chest, making it cry out in pain. Then it turned to face the one who threw it, and I

watched as its head became detached from its body. This now left me with Tyr staring back at me after swinging his axe.

Then with a nod of his head to check I was alright, he went back to fighting off the next wave. Asher continued to do the same and with no stopping in sight, I looked to Garmr. The men by his side were all creating their own portals so their own creations could join up as one, making a swirling wall of darkness behind their master.

Then the true horror hit me as more HellHounds started to step through, ready to bring in hundreds more. It was like Lerna had said, they wouldn't ever stop coming. But then, if they didn't have my power to draw off, did that mean there would be an end? And what if it ended with my two protectors dead?

I couldn't allow that to happen, no matter what vow they had taken. And as if Garmr knew this, he shouted out to me,

“COME TO ME AND I WILL LET THEM LIVE, OR FIGHT IT TO THE END AND WATCH THEM DIE!”

I closed my eyes and shook my head, wishing I knew what to do. But then, as one HellHound got close enough to bite into Asher's leg and another to claw at Tyr's arm, I knew I had no choice. Because if they died fighting, then Garmr would get me, regardless. At least this way, I had a chance at saving their lives.

“DO YOU GIVE ME YOUR WORD?” I shouted back over the sounds of fighting, causing Tyr to look back at me and snap,

“Don't be foolish, girl!”

But I wasn't listening to him, I was staring straight at Garmr. Someone who clearly wanted me to see him, because he lifted his hood back, showing me his face that I

saw in my dream. Then I watched as he mouthed two simple words,

“I do.”

I nodded because, like last time, I had no choice. Whether it was to jump into a portal or walk toward the man who commanded them, I needed to save these men who were risking their lives for me.

So, I waited for my opportunity and before I could chicken out, I ran straight for the center, dodging Tyr and Asher enough that I slipped through. Garmr held out his arms, commanding the HellHounds to part and allow me through.

I looked back the second the two men shouted,

“NO!”

“ELLA, COME BACK!” Asher’s roar was the last I heard before he was forced to go back to fighting. The HellHounds that had given me space now closed rank behind me, encircling me, and herding me towards their master.

“That’s it... come to me, come to me and take your fated place by my side,” Garmr said, luring me forward, the red scars on his face glowing brighter with each step I took. But just as I was halfway there, suddenly the ground started to shake and, this time, it came with an almighty roar.

One I recognized.

But it wasn’t from real life experience. No, it was from a vision in the past. My past...the one I lost.

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But now it was back and it was one I welcomed, no longer scared of what I knew was coming. It was a sound of hope, making me look back at the gates to see them shaking, before suddenly...

They burst through, leaving me to glance back toward Garmr and tell him,

“He is here...”

“My HellBeast has come for me.”

10

THE HAND OF TRUST

The second my HellBeast King appeared, it was like the whole world stopped and not just for me... All the HellHounds snapped their heads towards the gates, now lowering their bodies as if they sensed the danger. The presence of something greater, more powerful than what they could ever dream to fight against.

“Cerberus,” Garmr seethed as the dust from the broken stone gates started to settle, giving us all the first sight of the mighty and true Guardian of the Underworld. The three huge heads were what my eyes were drawn to first, their jaws big enough to swallow a person whole. The spiked fur was just like Jared’s HellBeast I had seen in the mortal realm, it looked like clumps of harden stone, creating protective scales.

The deadly snarl echoed around the square, even making the pool of water ripple in the fountain. But then the second Garmr ordered,

“The girl, get her!” Those growls morphed into something truly terrifying. A roar so loud, that I had no choice but to protect myself. My hands covered my ears as the bellowing thundered around us, and the true form of Jared Cerberus fully emerged. Three heads all focused first on me, and then on the one he wanted to see dead. Drool dripping down from snarling lips, showcasing rows of deadly teeth that could have taken a chunk out of a building.

His paws crushed the stone slabs underneath, creating destruction with every step he took. But the second I felt myself being grabbed, I turned back to the threat, only to be left screaming as HellHounds were there, once again in humanoid form. Suddenly I saw a shadow overhead, like the clouds had swiftly overtaken the sun, veiling me in darkness. Then it started to fall, and I screamed as the one who had hold of me suddenly was dragged backward. I fell to the floor and into the shadows that seemed to be all around me until I realized what was happening.

The great beast, Cerberus, was now standing over me, keeping me protected. And the one that had tried to take me was now in pieces on the ground.

Another one tried to get closer, only to end up being knocked back again before being pinned against the fountain. Its body crushed against the stone sculpture from being locked in the jaws of Cerberus’s far right head. That was until it twisted its neck, violently crushing both HellHound and stone as its jaws came together.

Garmr must have realized he had lost this battle, and he shouted his finally command.

“Retreat! Fall back!”

Of course, most of them had already started to do this anyway, they could see they were no match for the powerhouse of a beast that could crush them under his paws. But then as Cerberus’ middle head opened its jaws, I felt heat begin to rise above me. I looked up to see the fire in his belly rise beneath the lighter fur. Like lava running

through the cracks of its scales, and when it became too much, I cowered down into a ball and covered my head. From my position, I still managed to watch the stream of flames that shot from his open mouth, like he had swallowed a volcano, and this was the fiery eruption.

This took out a line of about forty HellHounds, causing the ones out of range to run even faster to escape. They leapt into the portal, desperate to survive the attack. Meanwhile, Garmr sneered at the sight, before rising his cloak and promising,

“Next time, not even you can fight the army I have planned, for next time, I BRING THE END... FOR RAGNAROK IS COMING, HELLBEAST, AND YOU CAN’T STOP IT!” Garmr’s vow of vengeance was heard even after he stepped inside the portal, the echo of his hatred filling the square until Cerberus’s roar drowned it out.

“Ella!” The sound of my name being shouted made me look to see my sister, causing me to shout out,

“Lerna!”

Oh, thank God that she was safe, even if she was being held back by someone I couldn’t quite make out. Whoever it was had their back to me. But there were others, and I suddenly shouted,

“Orthrus, Marcus!”

However, my shout was ignored because with the last of the threats gone and the portal now closed, Cerberus had something else to focus on.

All three heads swung around to growl at those behind him. I watched as he started to move, having no choice but to move with him so I didn’t get crushed. But then I realized he was fully aware of me, as his movements kind of herded me through his

front paws.

“Easy, brother, it’s only me,” Orthrus said, holding up his hands in surrender, but it was no use. Jared was too far gone. I knew that when a demonic voice spoke.

“THE GIRL ISMINE!”

I heard Lerna’s gasp match that of my own as he refused to let anyone get near me. His heads snapped out at anyone who even tried. But then Tyr rolled his axe around in his hand and said,

“Enough of this!” Which meant I knew this would only end badly if I didn’t do something.

“NO!” I shouted, with my hand snapping up to tell Tyr not to try and get to me because either outcome would only result in bloodshed... or maybe worse for the God. His axe was powerful, yes, but even I didn’t see it being any good against Cerberus. Which meant if I had any chance at bringing my Jared back to me, I knew what I must do.

I had to tame the beast.

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Just like last time.

So, I stepped further from under his body to face him fully.

“Gods,” I uttered in fright and shock when I finally saw him in his entirety. Even my vision hadn’t prepared me for real life. He was a monster but, deep down, I also knew that...

He was my monster.

So being braver than ever before, I spoke his name.

“Cerberus, look at me,” I said, making him stop his growling before his heads all came back toward me. I stumbled back a few steps, scrambling over the debris of what was left of the fountain.

“I KNOW YOUR FACE,” he said, making me gasp in a breath.

“Ye... Yes, you do,” I stammered.

“I KNOW YOUR VOICE,” he said again, and tears started to form before becoming too heavy and falling down my cheeks.

“AND I KNOW YOUR SCENT.”

I nodded, my breaths heavy, making my chest rapidly rise and fall.

“Yes,” I agreed, forcing my voice to sound more even.

“FATED ONE,” he said in a slightly softer tone and finally, I lifted up my hand and held it out to his head. Just like in my visions, the same as past Ella had done, showing that I had been brave enough the first time and that I was brave enough now. And my reward was to feel his nose push against my hand, making me suck in a quick breath as he submitted to me. But then the second he rumbled,

“MY WILD ONE.”

I burst out crying even harder, throwing myself into the softer fur at the side of his head, holding on as I shuddered against him.

“Yes, always,” I told him, and after this was when I finally felt something happen.

A bright light forced me to close my eyes, and despite not wanting to let go, my fists lost his fur as it slipped through my fingers. But still I remained against him, now feeling a rippling sensation against my body as he started to change. Which meant I had no choice but to step away.

I squinted against the light as shadows at the center changed, growing smaller and smaller until finally the last time I blinked, it revealed my dreams.

It revealed the only man I had ever loved.

My HellBeast, the way I knew him best.

“Jared!”

“Ella!” he shouted as we ran toward each other, him getting to me first after first leaping over the debris in his way. Then I was in his arms as they wrapped around

me, picking me up so my feet were off the floor. My head was cradled to his neck as I breathed in deep. The scent of him like a soothing antidote to this whole ordeal.

“Oh, Ella... my Ella, baby... I’m here, I’m here now, it’s okay... never going to lose you... never again, baby.” He spoke these sweet words to me, smoothing back my hair and making me realize I was sobbing into his neck. Now barely able to believe we were finally together again.

“I missed you so much! I tried to get back to you, I wanted to but I...”

“Sssh now, it’s okay, it’s alright... calm for me, baby, for it no longer matters, not now we are together.”

I nodded into his neck before pulling back to finally look at his face. My hands needing to touch him, to prove to myself he was real, asking him again,

“You’re really here... this isn’t a dream?”

“No ,Ella, it’s not dream, for if it was, then it can take us both, for I never wish to wake from having you back safely in my arms.” More tears fell at that but then he said, “But just in case, lets prove it.”

Just as I was opening my mouth to ask how, he put me on my feet so he could frame my face and kiss me. My entire being came alive instantly as the emotions flowed from me in a whoosh of air. I moaned in his mouth as he deepened the kiss and I finally felt whole once again. As if a piece of me that had been missing was back, making my soul complete. The rest of this world just faded away and, with it, the reminder of how close I had come to giving myself up just so others could live.

“Fuck, I was so worried about you, baby,” Jared said fervently, as soon as the kiss was over, and he could once again hold me in his arms. I nodded as the emotions churning

inside of me wouldn't let me speak.

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“Are you alright?” he pulled back enough to ask, framing my face again and looking at me as if scanning for any injuries.

“I’m okay, you got here just in time,” I told him, making him shake his head.

“No, not soon enough, for you never should have spent even a single minute here without me by your side.”

“Jared, I know you’re most likely angry that I...”

He was quick to interrupt. “I am furious, Ella.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he got there first.

“But I know why, baby, I know that you didn’t have a choice.”

I released my breath with a whoosh, nodding and so relieved that he understood. Because I knew he would have woken from the fight hurt and angry and worried. The guilt I felt at what I was putting him through had been a constant regret eating away at me. But to know that he understood I did the right thing regardless, then it made it all go away. Like a dark cloud lifting.

“Now let’s get you out of here,” Jared said as he picked me up into his arms, carrying me over the rubble toward where I could now see the rest of them waiting. However, the second he put me down, Lerna came running and I, in turn, went running to her. Although at first, I thought that Jared may not let me, as his hand tightened on my arm before letting me go.

“Lerna!”

“Ella!” we both shouted before embracing. Her crying at my shoulder told me of her relief and as for me, I too had tears in my eyes.

“Did you get away?” I asked, making her shake her head.

“No, but I was rescued,” she said, looking back at the others, making me remember that Jared hadn’t come alone. So, when she let me go, I ran the rest of the way over to Jared’s brother, shouting his name.

“Orth!”

His smile was a heartwarming sight as he opened his arms ready for my hug and, this time, instead of my nickname, he muttered down at me in an emotional way,

“Sister.”

I melted into him, hugging him tightly, or at least trying to due to his size. But then I looked to my left and saw Marcus, who said,

“Hey Cookie.”

I reached out and grabbed him too, pulling him into my hug, so I was left half hugging them both.

“Whoa! Okay, jeez, we missed you too, little dancing girl,” he teased, making me smile. But then this was when Jared obviously hit his limit, framing my waist and pulling me from them both, complaining,

“Alright, Casanovas, that’s enough of that.” Then he tucked me right next to him,

with his arm around me. As if not prepared to let me out of arm's reach for long. However, this was also the point that the man that had faced my sister turned around and I gasped when I saw him.

“You!” I scowled at the man I knew as Koro and before anyone could stop me, I wrenched myself out of Jared's arms. Then I started storming toward him, stopping long enough to pick up a piece of metal bar that must have come off the gate when Jared's beast had burst through it. His eyes widened as he saw me coming at him, when suddenly Lerna shouted,

“Ella, no!” Then she launched herself in front of him, with her arms out trying to protect him. As for Jared, he was quick to hold me back, with his arms wrapped around me from behind.

“Don't you know who he is?! He is the one that tried to drag me to Hell the first time!” I shouted, making Lerna lower her head before telling me,

“No, he wasn't. It was me. He was just doing as I asked.”

I shook my head as if trying to make sense of it all. When suddenly, it finally it hit me.

“You have been working together all this time?”

“Not just working together, but we are...” She couldn't finish that sentence, so Jared did, telling me softly...

“They are married.”

PLAYING CATCH UP

Okay, so clearly, I had missed a lot.

Something that became truly apparent when Jared told me Lerna and Koro were married, causing me to drop the metal shard I had wanted to stab Koro with. After that, it was like an information bomb exploded, starting with me accusing Lerna of keeping this from me. Then she threw back about her wanting me to trust her. And then I threw back about trust starting with truth... or at least at the time, it sounded way more philosophical. Which of course ended with us both arguing and being separated by our men, giving us time to cool off.

This prompted words from them both like, 'it's been an emotional time', 'it's been a long day', 'we each just need to calm down'. Honestly, the next thing I expected was for someone to ask if we were tired and needed a nap! I felt like a child but then again, I suppose, technically, this was our first argument as siblings.

At least for me it was.

Which meant that I was left to hear of everything that had happened from Jared as we travelled to a place Koro assured us would be safe. But then, it wasn't just about what had happened since entering Hell for Jared, but more learning about what had started all that time ago. The parts I had been trying to get Lerna to tell me. The part of the past she had been cagey with me about from the start.

And now I knew why.

“I think she kept it from you because she didn’t want you to feel guilty,” Jared told me, making me throw my hands up dramatically and say,

“Too late for that!”

“Ella.” The sound of my name invoked a soft rumble from his chest.

“No, don’t you do that soft, tender name calling with me, I started this, I was the cause of what they did to you. I was...”

“Ella, stop, just stop, sweetheart,” he said, now coming to face me, holding my hands in his as I had been flaying them around in my melodramatic way. We had been traveling down an old looking road for a while now. Although, for me, it felt like ten minutes considering the amount he had told me. Most of which, I should have heard from my own sister, despite how hard it was for her to say anything.

“How can you be so calm... you, of all people?!” I exclaimed, making him smile down at me before saying,

“Because I have found peace with it all.”

“But how c...” At this he covered my lips with his fingers and told me,

“Simple, because it brought me you.”

I sighed before speaking with smooshy lips because he still hadn’t moved his fingers,

“Aww, Jwaard.”

He grinned before removing his hand to bury it in my curls and tilt my head back to kiss me. A kiss I noticed the second I opened my eyes, was witnessed by one angry

looking Viking. He stormed past us, looking halfway between chewing glass and wanting to rip Jared's head off. Meaning the harmful fun I had thought his flirting to be, might have been wrong, and Asher had been right.

Viking God had it bad.

Which meant, this was not good. Because if Jared ever found out, then let's just say this was one added drama in Hell we didn't need. Now as for telling Jared the very obvious thing he didn't know, I had yet to find the right time. I didn't think telling him I was pregnant as he was explaining how his fake wife, my sister, had orchestrated this whole plan just to save me from my uncle, was the best time.

Jeez, talk about fucked up families... this was something else. Although, according to Marcus, this was pretty tame compared to most Greek Gods and their family trees.

As for where we were heading, it was the ruins of Lúpe, which Jared told me was an abandoned town near the Cocytus, the river of sorrow. Something I was quick to tease,

"Sounds cheery."

He scoffed and informed me,

"Lúpe is no better, as it means sadness, unhappiness, and suffering in ancient Greek."

"Well not exactly the romantic destination I envisioned for our reunion, but at this rate, if there is a bed, then I will take it," I joked, making him laugh.

"Yeah, well when I get home, I am thinking about buying a fucking tropical island for us to get stranded on." Again, I laughed at that.

“Only if I can bring the snacks and sun cream... I burn like my skin’s been bathed in butter,” I told him, making him smirk.

“Then I will just have to keep you covered...under me.”He winked, making me giggle.

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“Although the sight of you in a bikini would be cause enough to want to sink my own ship and keep us there, with that being your only clothing to wear.”

I gave him a wry look, before keeping our easy banter going by saying,

“Yeah, and knowing you, one roll in the palm trees and you would tear it to shreds... and I would be left with nothing.”

“And you wouldn’t hear me complaining,” he added with a wink.

“No, but you might hear me bitchin’ when I keep getting sand in my ass crack.”

He burst out laughing, making Tyr glance behind him and sneer, something Jared didn’t notice, thanks to giving me all his attention.

“So, tell me more about this cheery place we are headed to?” I asked, looking around at the mountainous landscape and the old road that snaked through the valley.

“It is situated in the Vale of Mourning, where souls who died from heartbreak roam in search of their lost love.”

I couldn’t figure out whether to be sad for the souls or mortified that the ‘cheery place’ was in fact, not at all cheery.

“Jesus, yeah, not exactly selling it to me here.”

“You asked,” he pointed out, making me sigh.

“So, what, it’s a Vale of wronged lovers, bitter ex’s, and unrequited love of hopeless souls?” I asked, making him shrug his shoulders.

“It’s better than Tartarus.”

“And that is?” I asked, soon wishing that I hadn’t.

“A barren and unforgiving wasteland located far below the Underworld. It used to serve as a prison for the Titans and a dungeon to house the worst of the worst. A place to torture the darkest of souls and most evil that exists... that was until most of it was destroyed in the war thirty years ago.”

“Okay, forget what I said, the Vale of Mourning sounds lovely,” I conceded, making him chuckle, prompting him to lift my hand that was held in his to his lips to kiss.

“Tartarus is one of the oldest parts of any realm, and what grew from the heart of darkness was fair judgement.”

I frowned before asking, “What do you mean?”

“Hell is home to many souls, and not all of them what you would exactly class as evil to the core. Think of it like a prison, not all its inmates that are kept there have the same sentence. A child murderer doesn’t walk hand in hand with a thief, someone who steals bread to feed their child... do you understand?” Understanding took place of my questioning frown.

“Yeah, so Hell started off as a place for the worst and grew when the Gods realized that not every soul here should suffer the same eternal fate,” I assumed.

“Exactly, for you would have had to have walked through the houses of judgement if you made it through the Gate to the Underworld,” he guessed, because obviously he

knew his previous home well.

“Yeah, but it didn’t exactly look busy,” I joked.

“And nor would it, as not many believe in the Greek Gods any longer, for those ancient days are no more.” Now this surprised me.

“Wait, so you mean if no one believes in them... then what? Where do they go instead?”

“Honestly, I don’t have all the answers, as I can only speak for the realm I was born from. But new realms have to grow from something as belief fuels them, sparking their existence. As for the Underworld, there are enough stories passed down throughout the ages that keep it one of the most powerful still,” he replied, teaching me something I didn’t know and never thought to ask before now. But then again, it wasn’t exactly light and casual conversation to have over breakfast.

“It is?” I asked, prompting a nod from Jared before he went on to say,

“Now as for a Christianity’s Hell, it is why the Devil they call Lucifer or Satan is known as the King of Kings, for it is the most popular religion in the world. But then with over two billion followers, representing over thirty percent of the global population, then it is of little wonder he holds the title.” My mouth dropped, his knowledge nothing short of impressive.

“Wow, how did I not know this?”

“Not exactly what I would call first date conversation,” he teased.

“Yeah, but technically we only had one date and if I recall, I was a mute at the time.”

He laughed at that.

“Oh, the good old peaceful days,” he joked, making me punch his arm, that I had to say was barely concealed in his tight clothes.

I wanted to ask what his trousers were made of because it didn't look like any leather I had ever seen before, his tight T-shirt being the same. The black material molded to his frame and showcased his muscles perfectly. The sight made me wish we were there already.

“So, this place we are headed to, does that mean we are going to see wailing ghosts all over?” I asked, instead of voicing my thoughts and adding...and will there be a bed?

“We will soon find out, won't we?” he replied, nodding ahead at the giant stone arch that I could see marked the end of the winding road. One that had forests on one side in the distance, and mountains in the other.

“Don't worry, I will protect you,” he said with a wink when he felt me shiver at the idea.

“Oh, good at fighting ghosts, are you?” I teased.

“Well, it's true, I don't have a proton pack or brown overalls but...”

“Coveralls,” I corrected, using the American term, something he chuckled at.

“Either way, I think we will manage,” he assured me, and I had to say, his confidence gave me hope at least.

Although the sight of that entrance didn't. It looked like it was made up from grieving souls all twisted together and carved in pale stone. But at the very top was a hauntingly beautiful woman who was reaching out with her arms to what looked like carved waves beneath her.

“That's Phaedra.” he told me, now seeing where my gaze was focused.

“Who?”

“A famous tragedy in Greek mythology, she was a princess and daughter to King Minos of Crete, becoming later a queen, as she married the famed hero Theseus, the King of Athens.”

“And let me guess, he broke her heart?” I said wryly, but he surprised me.

“No, she broke his when she fell in love with her stepson, Hippolytus.”

I gasped.

“Oh no, that's bad... and icky.”

Jared laughed at my childish choice of words.

“Yeah, wasn't the best of ideas,” he agreed with a smirk.

“And what about him? Hippo... er... whatever his name was, did he love her back?” Again, Jared laughed, something his brother seemed to grin about as he looked back at us, no doubt pleased to see his brother happy again.

“Phaedra was infatuated with Hippolytus, but he was devoted to Artemis, the goddess of chastity.”

I snorted a laugh.

“Well, she doesn’t sound like much fun.”

Jared pulled me closer and growled sexually,

“No, not at all, not like my own Goddess.”

I giggled and said,

“Why, Mr. Cerberus, are you just trying to get in my pants?”

“Always.”

I snorted a laugh, blissfully happy we were back to being this way with each other again. Despite all that had happened these last few days.

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“So, what happened next?” I asked as we approached the arch, making me look at the female in a new light.

“I see you like my story telling.”

“Well, that’s what I get for falling in love with a biker HellBeast who reads,” I said, reminding him of our time in bed when I woke to find him reading *The Great Gatsby*. The second I said this, his features grew tender, before he stopped me, pulling me close and burying his face in my neck, growling,

“Fuck, but I can’t wait to get you alone to show you just how much I love you in return.”

I shivered, feeling his words shoot straight to my core. However, I still wasn’t ready to give up our banter.

“Aww, you gonna make me a daisy necklace?” I teased, making him bite my flesh until I yelped, before he soothed the sting with his tongue, quick to warn,

“Behave, Red.”

“Now where is the fun in that?” I questioned with a wink.

“Well, if you don’t mind having an audience, then neither do I, so come on, drop your pants, love.”

My eyes widened in embarrassment, making him burst out laughing.

“I am teasing you, Red,” he said, before taking my hand in his and pulling me alongside him.

“So come on, my educated Beastman, finish the story.”

“Where was I? I seem to have got distracted, in the best way,” he asked winking at me.

“Goddess of chastity,” I teased in return.

“Ah yes, well she was also the Goddess of hunting, wild animals, the moon, and a patron of childbirth.”

“Ironical that,” I muttered, making him chuckle.

“But Hippolytus’s love for Artemis was why he rejected his stepmother’s advances. Something she didn’t exactly take well.”

I groaned with a shake of my head, asking,

“Oh no, what did she do?”

“She became the villain in this story, because in her anger, Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of attempting to rape her.”

“Oh no she didn’t!” I shouted, outraged.

“She did, something that backfired greatly and cost her love his life,” he replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Oh my God, so her husband killed him then?” I guessed.

“Of a sort, yes, as Theseus believed his wife and therefore cursed his own son with the help of the God Poseidon, who sent a sea monster to kill him.” I gasped at this and the poor man’s tragic end.

“That’s awful... and what happened to the spiteful bitch and evil stepmother?” I asked, needing to know the end of the story.

“She committed suicide.”

“Oh,” I muttered, looking up as we traveled through the arch, and I could see now what it was she was reaching down for. It wasn’t the waves like I first thought, but instead it was the man’s arm sticking up out of the waves stretching up.

“Baby,” he said in a sweet tone.

“Hmm?”

“You looked like I just kicked a wolf pup,” Jared said in a soft voice.

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“I think I need to get you some happier reading,” I told him, making him smirk.

“I hear smut ends happy,” he teased, making me burst out laughing. Something that ended abruptly when I saw where we were, or should I say...

Who was waiting for us.

12

WORRIES STRIPPED BARE

The second we saw the small army up ahead, Jared instantly put me behind him.

“What is the meaning of this, Koro?” he asked, all flirty teasing now replaced by a hard tone.

Koro, who was ahead of us, raised his arm up to the army, making all the soldiers lower their weapons as one. Men dressed in what looked like armored robes made from large scales of interlocking black plates. As if these pieces had been made from real life dragons, that at this point, I couldn't say didn't exist. Not after I had encountered so many unbelievable things since being down in Hell. And these guys were no exception, because it was like stepping into a dark fantasy novel.

I couldn't tell if they were Elves or not. But with the way they dressed, each one matching in black leather and with their gleaming curved swords at their sides, they made an incredible sight. And let's just say I wouldn't have been surprised if they pulled back their hoods and I saw pointed ears.

As for the one who obviously led them, Koro turned back to us and made his way over.

“Be at ease, HellBeast, these men are loyal to me and also serve the Bloodstone Covenant. They are here to see us safely to my camp.”

Jared nodded, because clearly, due to whatever had happened before coming to save me, he now trusted Koro enough to nod his head. Of course, Jared had explained most of it, although I had no idea what the Bloodstone Covenant was.

But then, I wasn't sure I needed to at this point. All I needed to know was that Koro was acting as a double agent and wanted to see Garmr's end just as much as we did. That, and he obviously loved my sister.

As for Lerna, I hadn't spoken to her yet, as I had needed time to process everything Jared had told me. Because naturally, it was a lot. And with the amount of nervous glances she had sent me when looking over her shoulder, then I think it was easy to say that she knew this. Part of me felt guilty for not just letting it go and speaking with her. But the other part of me felt hurt by all she had kept back.

After this, we continued on and I had to say, by the time the camp came into view I was ready to collapse in the first bed I was shown. From a distance, it looked like a ruined town that had been taken over by gypsies, and I suppose that was exactly what it was. Crumbling buildings, with entire walls missing, had been pieced back together with large sheets of colorful cloth. These half tents were pinned to the stone floor, half covered in rich green moss.

Huge squares of patched material hung like sails across broken roofs, offering protection from any chance of rain and wind. And I had to admit, it offered a certain charm to the place. It brought color to what would have been a lonely, lost, and forgotten town. One that had looked like it had been a casualty of war, because I

could still see the arrows sticking out of the ground that littered the surrounding fields.

Obviously, my fatigue started to show the closer we got, and Jared suddenly swept me up in his arms and carried me.

“You don’t have...”

“Quiet, Red, I’m carrying you and that’s that,” he stated firmly, making me close my mouth because, in the end, I sighed in relief as I relaxed in his hold.

I soon felt my eyes closing, the comfortable sway of his walk easily luring me to sleep. Something that couldn’t have been more than ten-fifteen minutes tops. And the next time I opened them again, it was when I felt myself being lowered onto something soft.

“I’m awake, I’m awake,” I said, making him chuckle when I jolted as if my alarm had just gone off telling me to get my ass ready for work. However, one look around the place and I knew I was as far from my trailer as I could get...literally.

Although camping still seemed to be on the agenda... it was like I suspected from a distance, they had used tents against what had remained of the town. Which meant that the inside was a mix of half stone walls and lengths of red material that covered the rest. Poles were used to keep the tent part in place, with a flap that worked as a door.

As for the sturdier side, it became obvious that this had once been someone’s home. Some of its features were still on show from whoever used to own this house, like the fireplace. There were even stone shelves built into two corners of the room, that still held jars and urns on top.

The rest of the furniture had likely been brought in and added after, and there was a wooden framed bed, big enough for two against the stone wall. There were also trunks, a small table and chairs, and a few comfier looking seats next to the stone fireplace, telling me it was most likely still functional.

“Ssshh, it’s alright, just go back to sleep, love,” Jared cooed down at me gently. But then when he straightened back up, I quickly reached for his hand.

“Please stay,” I urged, making him look down at me tenderly.

“I am not going anywhere, Red, just getting you more comfortable.” Then he sat on the edge of the bed and started to remove my boots. However, the second he did, he hissed,

“For fuck sake, Red, you’re bleeding!”

“Am I?” I asked in a sleepy voice.

“Yes,” he gritted out, now taking my bare foot in his hands to look at my blistered feet.

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“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have carried you the whole fucking way here!” he snapped angrily, making me sigh.

“Didn’t want you to worry.”

“Gods, Ella, I will always worry about you, baby, but this, this here was not out of my control to prevent,” he said, making me feel bad, which was why I tried to pass it off as nothing.

“Oh, but that started ages ago. I’ve been walking... er.” I stopped when he snapped his head up to glare at me.

“You wanna finish that sentence, sweetheart?” he asked in a serious tone.

“Not particularly,” I confessed wisely.

“Good answer. Now how are your bones, any aches, feelings of your illness?” I winced before telling him,

“No.”

“Is that a definite no or the type where you’re just bullshitting me so as not to make me worry more?” he asked with a pointed look. One I knew not to poke at.

“The first,” I replied, making him release a heavy sigh.

“Alright, love, well either way, it won’t matter for long.” His statement made me sit

up straighter, although he wouldn't let my foot slip from his hands.

"Why not?" I asked with a frown.

"Because I am going to give you my blood and heal you," he stated, making me reply with a small,

"Oh."

"Oh?" he repeated in question with that sexy raised scarred brow of his.

"Well, I just thought now we were here and alone and stuff, that it would... you know..." I rolled my hand around, hoping he got the hint from that.

"Would what?" he asked, telling me the hint whistled right over his head.

"Happen more naturally."

At this his eyes turned tender before he said a simple,

"Baby."

"But it's okay if you don't want to, I mean, it's been a long few..." At hearing this he was on top of me in a second, effectively shutting me up now his whole body was just barely held over me. Then he groaned into my neck after first kissing me there.

"Baby, you're killin' me here."

"What?" I asked, confused as to what prompted this.

"Quit being so damn cute before I lose my mind," he replied, making me frown.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I didn’t say anything.”

“Ella sweetheart, I have thought of nothing but being in a bed with you, holding you in my arms, knowing you’re safe, and making love to you.” Ah... so clearly, I had missed the hint.

“Oh... erm, so what’s the problem?” I asked, making him groan again.

“The problem is that I am trying to be a Godsdamned gentleman here and you’re making that impossible with your fucking cuteness,” he told me with a frustrated growl to his words.

“I am?”

“Yes, sweetheart, you are,” he reaffirmed with heated eyes before shocking me to my core when he added, “Damn, girl, but I have even been having fantasies of getting you pregnant.”

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At this all the air left me at once.

“What?” I asked in astonishment.

“I know we never talked about kids, and thank the gods it hasn’t happened yet, as fuck only knows how worried I would be if I had two of you to worry about...” I naturally tensed in his hold at this, something he didn’t notice as he continued on with his fantasy.

“...but when everything is settled and we manage to actually get past all this shit, then yeah, let’s just say it’s a conversation I wanna have.”

My mouth opened but no words came out. All I could now focus on was the main part of that statement...

When he thanked the Gods it hadn’t happened yet.

Part of me felt utterly crushed, despite knowing he obviously wanted kids with me and would be happy when the time came. But clearly...that time was not now. And couldn’t I blame him, absolutely not. Because he had been crazed with worry over me. Which meant if I told him now, then that would only mean doubling that fear. And I couldn’t do that to him. Because he would need to focus, make the right decisions, and what if telling him about the baby now changed that? What if it ended up putting him in danger?

No, I couldn’t chance it.

And besides, if the worst were to happen and something caused me to lose this baby, I didn't want him to blame himself. I didn't want him to carry that pain or that guilt that he didn't do enough somehow. That wasn't fair on him.

"Baby, what's wrong?" he asked, jarring me out of my inner dilemma.

"Wrong?" I feigned, making him frown down at me.

"Got an expressive face, sweetheart, and I know my woman."

I released a sigh and told him,

"It's just a nice dream to have, you know? You and I having a family one day," I told him honestly, because I didn't want to lie.

His eyes softened, and he wrapped me in his arms.

"Yeah, it is, baby, and one day I promise, we are going to make it happen."

I internally whispered to myself...

You already did, Beastman, you already did.

"Now let's get you back to your perfect self," he stated, now letting me go.

"Perfect self?"

"Your feet are a mess, babe," he replied, making me look down at them over his shoulder to see as I lifted one up. Torn skin and dried blood covered most of my toes.

"Don't suppose you would have a foot spa in this tent, do you?" I joked.

“Nope, but lucky for you, I have magic blood,” he replied with a wink.

“And here was me thinking you had magic hands,” I teased, referring to when he used to have to wash my hair for me.

“That too, now once again, quit being cute while I slit a vein.”

I chuckled at that.

“Wow, I think that’s the sexiest thing anyone ever said to me,” I joked while fake fanning myself. In response to this, he sat up and playfully teased,

“Smart arse.”

I laughed before he started to pull me up to sitting.

“I’m going to spread my legs...”

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“That’s what she said,” I joked, making him groan before continuing on.

“...So you can sit between them and lean back on me.”

I grinned before nodding, letting him shift his big body behind me. This put his back to a part of the stone wall that was left. Then once in position, he wrapped his arms around me before tugging me close.

“Oh, but I think you can get closer than that, Red,” he hummed in my ear.

“Any closer and I will be sitting on your...”

“Dick? Yeah, I don’t have a problem with that, love.”

I laughed, wiggling my bum against him and making him groan.

“Quit being a tease and open your pretty mouth ready for me.”

Well, that was an offer if ever I heard one, making me comment,

“Now that sounds like you wanna put something else in there.”

“Not helping, Ella,” he groaned, making me grin.

“Waiting, Beastman,” I countered, making him tear into his wrist and bring it around to the front of me. The blood dripped on the bed, before it could then drip down my chin. A fact that made me latch on quickly, moaning the second I did.

“That’s it, drink me down, baby, take all you need,” he cooed as the first taste of his blood filled my mouth. The thought of which might have turned my stomach at one time, but that was before I met him and had my first taste. Because it wasn’t the tangy metallic flavor I would have once believed it would be. No, it was something else. Something solely unique, and it was all Jared.

And of course, there was the magic that started to happen that he spoke of. The blissful feeling of pleasure that started to rise within me. Oh God, it felt like it had been so long ago, it started to make me almost dizzy with the intensity I knew was going to hit.

“Just let it go, baby... I’ve got you...I’ve got you,”he told me softly, stroking back my hair with his free hand, making me feel treasured.

“Jared, I...”

“Come for me, baby,come for me now.”As soon as he said this, it was like a switch had been flipped, and I came screaming around his torn flesh, blood spilling from my lips.

“Keep drinking through it, come on, Red, I know you got more in you,” he challenged and he was right, as I continued drinking only to bring on the next one, making me suck him down harder this time. He groaned in pleasure behind me, the length of his cock hot and heavy at my back.

I could take no more as I pulled my lips from his wrist and begged him,

“Please... please, Jared... I need...”

His hand gripped my hair and pulled my head to the side, then he spoke right at my ear.

“What, baby, what do you need?” he asked with his voice thick and hoarse.

“You... I need you,” I told him, making him breathe me in deep.

“What part of me?” he asked against my neck, his tone full of masterful want and thick with lust. So, I braved to tell him,

“Your cock, I need your cock.”

“Good girl,” he praised before tapping my thigh and telling me, “Climb off and stand before me.”

“Why?” I asked in confusion.

Then I felt his lips back at my ear, shocking me as he told me exactly what he wanted...

“Strip for me, baby.”

OBSESSIONS

“Erm,” I said nervously, making him chuckle before whispering against my neck,

“Come on, tough girl, show me that beautiful body of yours.” Every word he spoke made me blush, something that deepened when he admitted, “I crave you.”

This enticed a shiver from me. So, I swallowed hard and shifted off the bed onto my newly healed feet. Then with my back to him, I reached up and pulled the length of leather from my hair, releasing my messy curls.

“Mmm,” he hummed approvingly. Then I started to undo the tunic jacket, before stripping it from my shoulders and letting it drop to the stone, mossy floor. His rumbled groan only spurred me on further. So, I hooked my hands in my waistband and pulled my tight pants down, bending when I did this and showing that I had no underwear on as I presented him with my bare ass.

“Fuck, baby,” he groaned, making me brave enough to kick them aside, looking at him over my shoulder while I was still bent over. Then I winked at him, grinning when seeing the way his eyes flashed silver as he took in the sight of me. The want and need for me was nothing but a turn on. Especially when he ordered in a dark tone,

“Turn around.” Something I did, now standing in front of him naked and this time, the beast in him peeked though, turning his eyes a flaming red. I sucked in a quick breath, the length of him straining against his pants, making me say,

“Your turn, HellBeast.”

He smirked before running a hand down the length of his body without making contact. This caused his clothes to suddenly melt away like magic, making me gasp as, inch by inch, his incredible body was revealed. Then he crooked a finger at me, telling me,

“Your HellBeast is waiting...come here.”

I did as I was told, and the second I made it back to the edge of the bed, he bent forward and framed my waist with his hands. His impressive strength was shown when he picked me up with ease, before sitting me on the bed so I was now straddling him.

“Gods, Ella, how badly I need you,” he told me, the head of his cock teasing at my entrance, one wet and beaded with precum. As for me, I was soaked enough that when I lowered myself all the way, he slipped in with ease. An action that caused us both to gasp. His hands locked to my hips as if afraid I would snatch this blissful moment from him. Something I wouldn’t have done for all the world...his and my own.

“Now I am home,”he growled after placing his forehead to my own, and it was such a profound moment, I felt tears threaten to rise.

“Home,”I replied softly, making him sigh in relief before he started to rock me slowly, his hands leading my movements on top of him.

“Gods, Ella, you feel so fucking good,”he told me, making me nod in agreement because he felt amazing inside me.

I felt so full, so owned, so treasured.

Pleasure built rabidly for both of us, it had been too long since we had done this. Which was why I couldn't help but ride him in earnest, lifting myself up and dropping down on his full length, letting every inch glide against my nerves. The action hit my G spot in all the right places and made me grip his shoulders as my orgasm quickly reached its peak.

"Yes, baby, come on my cock, ride out your pleasure," he said, making me do just that.

My nerve endings were on fire as he took my breast and lifted it to his mouth. Then he bit down around the nipple in a blissful way. Something that stole my orgasm and made it from his own doing.

"YES! FUCK YES OOOH FUUUCCCK!" I wailed, making him grin around my nipple as I shuddered along his length. My whole-body twitched as the aftershocks carried my release on for longer. Then he left my breast and told me,

"My turn, baby." Which was the only warning I got before I was suddenly on my back, with him on top of me.

He pounded into me, fucking me hard, and I arched my back into him as the next orgasm started to take hold of me quicker this time. Making me say in a desperate tone,

"I am going to come soon... keep going... don't stop, don't you dare fucking stop." To which he chuckled.

"I ain't going to stop fucking, my Goddess, not until I hear you screaming my name," he told me, pistoning his hips into me, pounding me harder and faster now he knew I was close. Which meant the second I came, I did as he asked by screaming his name.

“JARED, YES!”

This tipped him over the edge as he too roared, and the sight wasn't one I wanted to miss. Gods he was so fucking beautiful. So raw and untamed.

Every muscle tensed above me and the sight had me transfixed, but no more so than the look on his face. A look somewhere between pain and pleasure. Pure ecstasy gripped his features as he came, flooding my pussy with his cum that dripped down to my ass because it was too much for me to keep inside of me.

After this, he half collapsed on top of me, making me sigh dreamily with the feel of his weight. He held his forehead to the pillow next to me, breathing in deep as he caught his breath.

“Fuck, baby, Gods how I missed every inch of you.”

“I missed you too, Beastman,” I told him softly, rubbing my hands down his back in what I hoped was a soothing way.

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He lifted his head enough to kiss me, making me moan in happiness against him.

Then once he pulled back, he went about cleaning up the mess he had made, using the corner of my jacket to do it and making me tease,

“I guess I am not wearing that tomorrow.”

He winked at me, and said,

“Maybe this Beastman wants to mark you as my own, so no one dares think otherwise.”

“I think they know, love,” I answered, and I could tell that he liked hearing the endearment.

“Hmm, I don’t know about that, as that Viking God spends more time staring at you than I like.”

I froze before damning the man for never missing a thing. Which forced me to keep my tone casual when I told him,

“It’s nothing, he’s just a friend.”

“Yes, well as long as the blonde bastard knows that, then we don’t have a problem.”

His hard response prompted me to say,

“Yes, well even if he didn’t, we wouldn’t have a problem anyway... because I am yours, remember?”

“Like I would fucking forget, damn near obsessed with you, Red,” he said, making me smirk before teasing,

“Near obsessed?”

“Okay, fine, I am obsessed... happy, my smug little dancer?”

I grinned wide, pulling him back down next to me and turning my body side-on into his. Then I leaned over to kiss him, telling him,

“Would it help if I told you I was obsessed first?”

His grin now matched that of my own.

“Yeah, it does. But now it’s time I get my beautiful obsession to sleep.” To which I replied with a yawn.

“I’m not tired.”

He laughed.

“Could have fooled me, sweetheart.”

I grinned and snuggled in close, laying my head in that nook under his arm and half on his chest. The sound of his easy breaths and rhythmic heartbeat soon lured me under. But before I fully fell asleep, I felt him kiss the top of my head and tell me,

“Sleep, my love.”

His soft voice was the last thing I heard, yet this wasn't all he said, as soon as I gave him the rest of my weight, telling him I was asleep, he told me,

“Can't wait to make you my wife.”

14

ALWAYS ONE TO RUIN THE PARTY

“Well, I have to admit, I didn't expect us to be doing this,” I said.

We were now sitting around the large fire pit as people danced to music that was being played by Marcus. In fact, seeing him with his violin once again, reminded me of being back in time, when I was on stage as he played.

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As for the camp, this turned out to be more than some temporary place the small army of Koro's had set up as a place to sleep for a few nights. It looked more like some pop-up village. Clearly, there were other people that lived here that weren't geared up to fight. But instead, they seemingly kept the place running smoothly.

Both woman and men were here that cooked, cleaned, and made weaponry. Whether they were demon or human or something else, I didn't know, but it amazed me to see how they all interacted with each other like there was no differences between them at all.

"I think we could all use the respite," Jared said, with me sitting in between his legs with my back against him, just like when he had been feeding me his blood.

As for the rest of our group, Orthrus was drinking with Asher by a tent that was set up like a makeshift bar. Marcus was, of course, invested in playing his violin, and Lerna was dancing with her husband Koro, with other locals that had joined in the fun. She looked so carefree and happy, it was heartwarming to see, making me comment,

"It's nice that she's so happy." But then I realized what I said, or more like who I said it to, making me quickly add, "I'm sorry, that was insensitive."

Jared groaned behind me as he squeezed me tighter.

"Ella, baby."

"It must be painful, especially after so long and then learning that she wasn't dead

and..." I tried to explain when he ordered gently,

"Baby, stop." Then he went on to tell me, "Your fears are unwarranted."

"They are?" I asked, surprised, because I knew how much all of this should have been affecting him. But then he surprised me.

"I don't feel that way about your sister, even with our past... I actually don't feel anything at all about it."

"You mean, not even when seeing her with Koro?" I asked, my shock evident.

"No, especially not that. Ella baby, you are the only one for me, and where I might have once thought myself to be in love with her, I now know the difference." At this my heart started hammering faster in my chest.

"The difference?" I dared to ask in what I knew was a hopeful tone.

"Yes, sweetheart, as what I had with her is nothing like what I have with you. It doesn't even come close and now that I know what true love feels like, I realize that what I had wasn't real. Not like with you and I... this, Ella...this is what is real,"he said, squeezing me again to emphasize his point and making me sigh into him.

However, this was when I noticed that one person was watching this interaction between us with great interest. Tyr was standing by where they served the ale, not far from Orth and Asher, yet his eyes were firmly set on me.

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Jared said, obviously noticing where my gaze had landed.

"Then perhaps you need to make it more obvious that I'm yours."

He scoffed.

“I doubt we could make it any more obvious than what we did earlier,” he said, as we had slept for a few hours before the music and laughter had woken us up.

The noise had prompted me to ask if we could join them, because it was like Jared had said, we all needed the respite. So, he had amazingly conjured me up a black outfit made from the same material he wore, making us match. It was also similar in style to what I wore before, but the jacket wasn't as long and had ties at the sides to pull in so it fit better. It also came with a hood and wide sleeves that also tied at my wrists.

He had told me how the material was fire resistant and what creature it was made from. I had asked him how he managed to just make it appear, and he told me it wasn't a supernatural skill he was very good at, which was why the design was more function over style. I didn't care, it was comfortable, warm, and protective, so I had praised him for doing a good job, making him grant me a warm 'baby' before kissing me.

“What do you mean?” I asked in response to his comment about what we did earlier.

“Half the walls are made of cloth, Ella, what do you think I mean?”

My hands flew to my lips, and I gasped.

“Oh God, do you think people heard us?”

A woman serving ale paused by the demons sitting near us and said,

“Yes, we did... oh, and next time, just so you know, things echo quite loud down the length of this valley.” Then she winked, making me mortified, while Jared just

chuckled as I gasped.

“Hey! This isn’t funny.” I smacked his arm after first twisting in his hold to face him.

“I beg to differ, as I think it’s very funny,” he argued with a smirk.

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“But everyone heard us!” I cried in outrage, glancing off to the side and seeing those same demons nodding with a grin. Which by the way, was sooooo not helping!

“So?” he asked like it was nothing, making me snap,

“So? So? Are you serious right now?!”

“Well, it’s a little hard to be serious when you look so adorable in your pouty outrage.”

Again, I hit him, making him grin even more, then he teased, speaking in a louder voice.

“What is this? You wish to take me back to your tent and ravish me some more?!”

“Jared!” I hissed, looking around and seeing people sniggering. To which he burst out laughing, pulling me close before tipping my head back for me to look up at him.

“Chill, sweetheart, nobody gives a shit about hearing us.”

“I do,” I told him, making him frown.

“Why?”

“‘Cause what we do is private,” I whispered, making him smirk some more.

“And what we did was private. Now if people hear how fucking amazing we are

together, then so what?" he replied with a shrug, making me chew on my bottom lip.

"I guess," I said, still not entirely convinced, looking away and unsure.

"Hey, come on, give me those pretty eyes of yours."

I did, which prompted him to say,

"You mine?"

I nodded, but when he gave me a pointed look, I knew he wanted to hear me say it.

"Yes."

"And am I yours?" he asked next, and this time I was quick to give him my answer.

"Also yes."

"Then that's all that matters, because nothing or no one is going to stop me from enjoying my girl or giving her pleasure. So, fuck the camp and fuck this echoing valley!" he shouted this last part, making it indeed echo.

"That's a lot of fucks. I mean, I know you've got a stammer but even that's a little excessive... and how would you even fuck a valley... hmm?" I stopped when he gripped my chin and pulled me closer.

"Time to shut it, funny girl." Then he kissed me, making me moan into his mouth as his tongue dominated my own.

"Technically, that was the opposite to shutting it," I pointed out, making him bite my lip playfully.

“Ah ahh ah,” I said as he applied pressure before he eased off, now soothing the sting.

“Oww,” I complained, making him grin and tease,

“Baby.”

After this I let our loud love making go and went back to watching others dance, something I admittedly was eager to do.

“Come on then,” he suddenly said after I had spent the last ten minutes swaying in his arms to the beat.

“What?”

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“Come on, up you get,” he prompted, tapping on my hip.

“We leaving already?” I asked, surprised seeing as we hadn’t long since joined everyone.

“No, but we are dancing,” he informed me, making me grin and ask in a hopeful tone,

“We are?”

“Yeah, before you self-combust.”

I laughed.

“Was I that obvious?”

He chuckled as I got to my feet before he did the same, his actions far smoother than mine. Then he took my hand and led me to where the others were dancing, my sister included. The fire blazed in what looked to be a walled flower bed, one that hadn’t seen anything natural growing in it for quite some time. It seemed like the main part of the camp used for entertainment was once a courtyard to the biggest house in the town, and one that looked to have received the most amount of damage.

“You really don’t mind?” I asked as he led me to an opening in the group. My sister and Koro stopped dancing so someone in a cloak could speak with him.

“Wouldn’t be here if I did, and as long you don’t expect any fancy shit from me, then I think we are good,” he told me, taking my hand and twirling me into him.

“Right, so no dirty dancing lifts... gotcha,” I teased.

“Not sure about the lift part, but if you wanna go dirty on me, then I am all for that, baby.”

I laughed as I placed my hands on his shoulders, and his own went to my waist.

“So, what you’re saying is you want me to use you as a pole.”

His grin was bad to the bone.

“Well, you did fucking fantastic bouncing on it a few hours ago, so if you want to repeat that performance, then consider me your willing slave, sweetheart.”

I laughed, shaking my head when he winked at me.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Well, how about this...you’re the only girl I ever want to dance with,”he told me on a soft growl, making me melt into him, hugging him close as we swayed.

“Oh, Jared.”

“Of course, I draw the line at the cha cha,” he added, making me throw my head back and laugh, quickly getting lost in this blissful night with him. Of course, I should have known it was going too well.

“Can I cut in?”

I froze, knowing this wasn’t going to go down well. We both stopped moving and I looked up to see Tyr grinning down at me. Of course, he was the only one doing this,

as I looked to Jared who looked like he was chewing on broken glass.

“No,” Jared stated firmly, spinning me away from Tyr, and turning his back to the persistent God. Which was when he did a stupid thing in return... Tyr put his hand on Jared's shoulder and said,

“I was speaking to the woman.”

“That's my woman and if you like that hand of yours, I would remove it before you lose it for good,” Jared warned, making me groan.

“Jared,” I warned, which of course, went by unnoticed.

“Then if that's the case, you won't see anything wrong with me dancing with her, unless of course...you're worried she wants to be someone else's woman.”

At this, Jared lost his shit and turned around so quick, even the Viking was shocked. Especially when he found a Hellish looking hand wrapped around his neck.

“Wanna say that again, asshole?” Jared threatened in a demonic voice, making me rush up to him and say,

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“Jared, let go of him.” Something he snarled at me for. But then the Viking grinned, now glancing down and making us both look to see a blade in his hand with the tip against Jared’s gut.

“Tyr! Put down the blade!” I shouted in panic.

“Why don’t you run along and let us men handle this,” Tyr replied, making me gasp in anger.

“What the fuck! What are you, from the Middle Ages?!” I snapped angrily.

“Walk away, Ella, and let me deal with this,” Jared warned seriously, making me scoff.

“Jesus Christ, you’re both idiots! Tyr, you helped me and protected me, and I really appreciate that, but Jared’s my man and that isn’t going to change. But of course, me saying this isn’t good enough for either of you to act like grown ass men, is it?!” I said, and when neither man backed down, I just lost my shit even more.

“Okay, fine, you want to beat the crap out of each other, go right ahead, but clearly, neither of you actually gives a shit about how I feel, oh no, you’re both just too wrapped up in proving whose dick is bigger!” I shouted, walking off while still ranting.

“Meanwhile, I have been through enough shit to last me a fucking lifetime but hey, you guys want to do this now, fucking go ahead but while you’re at it, know that... I DON’T WANT TO DANCE WITH EITHER OF YOU!” I screamed furiously, now

stomping back to the tent because I was seriously pissed off. However, the second I stepped inside, I soon had something else to be pissed off about.

Like the sight of a black figure lurking over our bed with his back to me. But more than that...

It was the hand that was quickly held over my mouth as I was dragged backwards...

Into the night.

15

THE, IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME SPEECH

"Ssshh, stay calm, I am not here to hurt you." The second the voice spoke I tried not to gasp in his hand, because it was a voice I recognized. But this wasn't all, I then saw Koro approach and when he saw me locked in another man's arms, he didn't even flinch. Instead, he walked closer and asked,

"Where?"

"Inside their tent."

Again, I wanted to know if my mind was playing tricks on me, making me desperate to turn around and face him. The next thing I knew, was that there was a commotion coming from inside our tent before Koro emerged, dragging out the hooded figure. But then I spotted what else he had in his hand, making me shriek when the hand was lowered from my mouth.

"Is that a dead snake?!" But then I quickly turned around and snapped, "Orson, what the hell are you doing here!?"

His handsome grin was his only reply.

“He is working with me,” Koro informed me.

“Yeah, I know, he’s your brother,” I stated, folding my arms as I waited for my explanation.

“He’s not my brother... wait, why does she think that?” Koro asked, the lengths of material that bound his hands now tightening on the prisoner’s neck.

“Because she overheard my phone call with you when we were searching for her in the mortal realm, which was what made her run from me at the gas station,” Orson replied in an exasperated tone, making me close my eyes, shake my head, and lift my hands up to say,

“Wait, wait, wait... so let me get this straight, neither of you are the bad guy?”

“No,” Orson stated firmly.

“Then what about him?” I asked, pointing to the hooded figure trying to struggle his way free of the much larger Koro.

“Well yes, he is,” he replied, making me look back to Orson.

“But you’re not?” I asked, making him grin down at me once more.

“No, I was sent to protect you and if anything was to go wrong, I was to get you to your sister... but then you stole my truck and my wallet and took off to fuck knows where,” Orson said, recalling the last time I saw him.

“Ah yeah, sorry about that,” I said sheepishly, because yeah, I had totally done all

that.

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“After that, I searched for you, but the next time you popped up on anyone’s radar was when you were back home in Nelson and you had a HellBeast in your trailer, so I gathered you were protected enough at that point,” Orson said, filling in the gaps. Speaking of which, that same protective HellBeast came storming our way.

“YOU!” This next roar of anger came from Jared, who walked around the corner and found this little scene playing out right outside our tent. And well, clearly the dick measuring had finished and both men were still breathing, as Tyr also came striding around the corner.

Both men had various injuries to their faces, telling me that they had kept it as a fair fight. As for me, I groaned, not only at the sight of bloody lips, black eyes, and broken noses that were thankfully already starting to heal, but more the fact that one look at Orson standing too close making Tyr snap,

“And who the fuck is this guy!?”

“Seriously, Coffee girl, do you just go collecting overprotective men or do you post an ad somewhere?”

“Ha, ha,” I muttered, rolling my eyes before both men approached.

“You stay out of it!” Jared snapped back to Tyr, before turning his attention back on Orson. “And as for you, you got some fucking nerve turning up...”

I stood in front of the bear shifter and bellowed,

“STOP IT! Enough, both of you!”

This reaction finally got them to listen because I had finally hit my limit.

“Orson works for Koro, and what he is doing here is saving me from that guy!” I said, thrusting a hand out and pointing a finger at the bad dude Koro still held. “You know, the threat I had waiting for me in the tent that you two let me storm off toward because you were too focused on tearing into each other, regardless of what I wanted or how I felt!” I shouted, prompting Jared to first scowl at the threat before then trying to calm me down.

“Alright, Red, that’s enough, you made your point,” Jared said, making me snap,

“Did I? Oh goodie, well you can think about that fucking point as I go sleep in my sister’s tent!”

“Er, I...” Koro began, but I pointed a finger at him and said,

“Something to say, gypsy boy? No, I didn’t think so!” I argued, before walking off once more, this time to find Lerna so I had someone to rant to. However, in true HellBeast fashion, I didn’t get far, and I heard him growl,

“Tie that fucker up, as I will torture information out of him myself!” After this, I then felt Jared’s arms go around me from behind.

“Ella, just stop.”

I squirmed in his arms.

“Why? You going to stop being an assh...” My curse was cut off because for the second time tonight, I found a hand covering my mouth.

“I know you’re pissed.”

“Mou ink!” I shouted, my words muffled into his palm.

“I should have listened.”

I huffed and mumbled, “Mmo on.”

“You were right, you’ve been through a lot, and you don’t need my jealous shit on top of that.”

This time I didn’t try and say anything, instead letting him carry on.

“But gotta tell you, babe, just knowing that Viking asshole has been there for you when it should have been me, is riding my beast hard.”

I huffed again, telling him what I thought of this excuse.

“And I know you think it’s just an excuse.”

“Ingo,” I muttered, still unable to speak properly, because he was clearly reading my mind.

“But I’ve been going out of my fucking mind with worry and now I’ve just got you back, I didn’t need that fucking Viking trying to...”

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At this I pulled my hand from my mouth and faced him.

“Trying to what, Jared? Steal me away...? Do you really think so little of the love I have for you, that all it would take is a handsome man to...”

“Not helping,” he growled, and I promptly ignored that, with nothing more than a warning finger pointed his way.

“...to take me from you. You think I am that weak? That my words mean nothing?” I threw at him, making him stumble for a response.

“No, I... I just...”

“You just didn’t trust me,” I snapped, turning to walk away again, only for him to grab my hand to stop me.

“That’s not true.”

“Then prove it,” I stated, snatching my hand back and folding my arms across my chest.

“How?” he asked with a shake of his head.

“By watching me handle it and not saying a fucking word or taking one step to do anything,” I tested.

“Ella.”

“No, Jared, which is it...? Because you either trust me, or you don’t?” I asked, pushing him for an answer.

“Fine,” he gritted out.

“Fine,” I repeated, now walking back over to the group of men who looked as if they had just finished tying up the prisoner and getting ready to integrate him.

“Hi, me again. Sorry to interrupt,” I said, even nodding to the prisoner who shrugged against the pole he was tied against. Then I walked straight to Tyr and said, “Can I have a word?”

Tyr gave me a smug grin, that I had to say wasn’t helping matters.

“Sure, Bál Ásynja.”

Jared didn’t let the endearment slide, and he yelled,

“Fire Goddess, really, Ella?!” To which I shot him a look and drew a finger across my lips, telling him to be quiet. Something he, again, gritted his teeth at. Then once we were out of earshot of the others and within ear shot of Jared, I turned to Tyr and said,

“This should work.”

We were next to a ruined house that was in too bad of a shape to use for anything. The dead charred tree leaning against it, told me that it had been set on fire at one point.

“What do you wish to talk to me about, little...?”

“Yeah yeah, little human, mortal, princess... whatever. Listen, Tyr, I really appreciate you protecting me and saving my life,” I said, making him grin.

“You are welcome, for it became my vow and I will continue to do so.”

“Great, thank you, that’s erm, nice of you.”

He winked, making me shake my head to get myself back on track.

“The thing is, you’re a nice guy and all, but I am not interested.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, clearly surprised because obviously his ego hadn’t expected this.

“Being as honest as I can be, it’s not you, it’s me,” I said, and I swear it was like this was the first time he had ever heard these words uttered from a girl... and well, to look at him, I couldn’t say I was all that surprised.

“I’m afraid I am not following.”

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I resisted the urge to groan and decided... fuck letting him down gently, because clearly, Viking boy needed it spelled out. Something I started to do in a very obvious way, making sure Jared could hear every damn word and therefore proving my point.

“That HellBeast over there, he means everything to me. Yeah sure, he’s growly, broody, can be a total pain in my ass, and talk about slow on the uptake when a girl likes him...”

“Ella...” Jared warned, making me sigh.

“But the point I am getting at here is, I love him. I’ve always loved him. Even when I didn’t think he loved me, I knew I still did. I fell in love with him the very first time I saw him, and nothing is going to change that. Not if thousands of other men lined up to meet me, not even if a Viking God as good looking as you saved my life, would I ever love another.”

“I under...” Understanding dawned over his features, but I wasn’t done.

“I would even go as far to say as I am obsessed with him. Dream of him every night, dance in the meadows, sing at birds type of sappy love,” I said, still not willing to leave it at that, and I was quick to interrupt him once again,

“Yes, I think I am getting...”

“Like our love is the type that poets write sonnets about, I even considered naming my vibrator the HellBeastanator, but in the end I just went with Bob.”

“Er...?”

“Now of course, I don’t need one because my man is mind-blowing in the sack and can do this thing with his tongue that rolls around sort of like this...” I started trying to show him, which was when Jared finally got the point, making me squeal when I was suddenly flipped over his shoulder.

“Alright, that’s quite enough of that,” he stated, making me chuckle before lifting myself up to wave at Tyr and say,

“But I think you’re a great guy and deserve to meet a great goddess someday!” To which I received a smack on the ass.

“You made your point, love,” Jared said, making me grin in victory. He put me back on my feet and in a new vacant tent, and I was still smiling.

“Oh good, which means next time you will what...?” I asked, rolling my hand around, making him groan.

“Next time?! Fuck, but just how many Gods are you expecting to...”

“You will what, Jared?” I said more forcefully.

“I will let you deal with it,” he conceded in a dry tone.

“Damn right you will!” I added, and when I turned to face the bed, fully intent on being in it for longer this time, I felt his arms go around me and his lips came to my ear before he said,

“Sorry, baby.”

I released a sigh before telling him,

“Yeah, well there is one way you can make it up to me.”

“Yeah, and what’s that, sweetheart?”

I looked back at him over my shoulder and granted him a wink as I said...

“By doingthat thing with your tongue.”

16

BAD TIMING

JARED

Fuck but it was good to have my girl back.

I was so damn happy I could have easily forgotten where we were. But of course, there was always some fucked up way to remind us of the shit we faced, our argument being no different. Or should I say, the reasons for it. Because the second that fucker Tyr, God of arseholes, had the nerve to want to dance with my girl, I had lost my shit.

Shit Ella hadn’t appreciated me losing.

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Of course, I could understand it. As like she pointed out, she had been through a lot, and having me acting like an animal, marking my territory, hadn't helped. Not that this meant I could stop myself, fuck no, the guy was getting punched regardless. And like men, we had fought without using our powers to aid us. The big bastard had even got a few good hits in, making me spit out blood and grin like some crazy fucker at him.

In fact, the only thing that stopped the fight was Lerna, who had shouted to me that Koro had found an intruder in the camp. My panic at letting Ella storm off, quickly replaced my rage that had been centered on the Viking. Making my head snap up and call her name.

I felt like a fucking fool when finding that, once again, her protection had been left to others...and that fuck Orson, no less. Something she had every right to be pissed at. Oh, and didn't my girl let me know about it, not putting up with my shit for a second.

But then this was one of the many things that I loved about her. That she wasn't afraid to call me out on my shit and pull me up on it. She didn't fear me when most did. Something that proved incredible when I had turned into my true self, allowing her to see the real beast...Cerberus.

Her bravery had been astonishing, as most would have run screaming at the very sight. But not her. No, she had trusted us both and tamed that side of me like no other.

The second I had heard the battle in the distance, I had lost that piece of myself that made me human. Not a shred of it left, apart from my mind locked behind the bars of my Beast as he took over completely. Which left me with no control and barely

anything more than an outsider looking in.

His eyes, like a window to all that was happening around me, just left me feeling helpless to do anything but worry for the woman I loved. But as the HellHounds escaped our wrath, the fuck Garmr, with them, I was then left waiting for her to emerge from beneath us.

The sight of her would have brought tears to my eyes before I was allowed back into my mortal vessel. The magic that bound us, reversed so as he disappeared back to the soul of me. A simple touch was all it had taken, and I was there, finally able to pull her into my arms.

And now...

I just had to find a way to keep her there.

Starting with torturing information out of a prisoner. Which was why, after I did as my Fated had requested, enjoying every second I got to make a meal out of her, I left her sated and asleep. My brother was already with Marcus, waiting outside for me.

“Guard this tent, allow no one inside, I won’t be long,” I told them. My brother nodded and replied, “We got this, go.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder as I passed, headed to where the prisoner was being held. Asher, Tyr, Koro, his sorceress Sorina, and now fucking Orson were all there watching him.

“What have you discovered?” I asked, seeing now that the prisoner had been moved to a cell made from one of the buildings that remained intact. It was just minus a roof, but with the prisoner chained to a metal hoop on the floor, he was going nowhere. A glance through the bars showed me he had already been beaten, making me grit my

teeth. I wanted to be the one to hurt the fucker!

But then, I also wasn't going to complain at how I had spent my time. Not with Ella's naked body writhing beneath me, with my lips locked to her sweet, delicious pussy.

"It's not good," Koro replied, making me tense.

"His intent was to use a snake bite to sedate Ella so as she wouldn't be able to fight back in the oncoming battle."

Once again, I gritted my teeth so hard, I could have bitten through metal.

"Garmr doesn't know she lost her powers?" I asked, making him shake his head.

"And what of this battle?" This question was aimed at all of them.

"It's true, as on my way here I saw his army headed in our direction," Orson added with a grim expression.

"Fuck! But this is not giving us enough time," I bit out.

Koro's face said it all. His light olive eyes darkened as his lips thinned in an expression of concern.

"What are their numbers?" I asked Orson, as clearly, the fucker was on our side now.

"Far greater than our own," he replied, his own brown eyes narrowing when glancing back in the direction they would hit us from. It was the same road we had taken to get here, which had open fields on each side and would provide the ideal battle ground if we had the numbers. Something we didn't have.

"Then I have no choice, I am going to have to try and get Ella away from here, as we

can't let him take her," I stated, my hard expression showcasing my resolve.

"I agree, and if Garmr knows she is no longer here, he will retreat as he will want to conserve his numbers for the greater battle ahead," Koro agreed, giving us insight to what type of leader Garmr was. Some would say strategic. I, however, would call it cowardly.

"Yes, but without first knowing where this great battle will take place, we can't amass our own numbers, as we need to let the other Kings know so they can bring their own forces," I pointed out, thinking of Dom and Lucius who would have their own legions to aid us. And we also needed Clay here, who might have a chance at reclaiming his own army back, and therefore leaving Garmr with nothing but his HellHounds.

"Then I suggest we take the fight to Garmr when the time is right... once we know where in the realm he is hiding," Koro suggested, making me nod.

"Any ideas where that is likely to be?" Tyr asked, making the gypsy sigh in frustration.

"I have a few ideas, yes, but that doesn't help our current situation," Koro replied.

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“Sorry if I am pointing out the obvious here, but why can’t we just get Ella back to the mortal realm, in the one place we know Garmr can’t cross over to?” Orson asked, as clearly, the bear shifter had some catching up to do.

“Ella has been bound to this realm and can’t leave,” I told him, clenching my jaw.

“But Garmr doesn’t know this,” Koro added.

“That might be so, but it still limits our options,” I gritted out, knowing that the one place we could have taken her to ensure her safety had been her sister’s temple. As much as I fucking hated the idea, it would have at least given me the chance to chase this fucker down and kill him whilst knowing Ella was safe.

“Asher and I will get her to safety,” Tyr said, making me snarl,

“No fucking way.”

Asher released a sigh whilst Tyr just shook his head.

“You saw what happened back at the village of Ananke in the Asphodel Meadows. We all saw how the HellHounds responded to you. You are an army all by yourself, Jared, but you can’t fight the whole time with her beneath you, for she could easily get hurt,” Koro pointed out, making me shake my head.

My voice coming out hard and even as I told them,

“I am not leaving her.”

“Then we are left to fight without any chance of winning, which in the end, will all be for naught if she is taken after our deaths,” he replied, making me want to punch him. But not because I knew he was wrong...because I knew he was right.

“And if we win, only to find we have failed if she is taken regardless of our victory, what then, Koro?” I threw back, the very idea near too painful to even think about.

“Then at least we all live so as we are in the fight to get her back. But she has no power, which means whatever plans he had to use her, will give us time to amass the army we need to aid us in retrieving her,” Koro replied, making me shake my head again, telling him once more,

“I can’t leave her.”

“But you must.” This came from a voice behind me, and I tensed, knowing what I would find when I turned around.

“You should be asleep,” I accused, glaring now at Orthrus and Marcus who had obviously had to chase her here, as there was no stopping the woman when she got something in her head.

“And you should be including me in my own future,” Ella threw back in return.

“I am not leaving you, so there is no discussion,” I stated firmly.

“Answer me this, do you have more chance at winning this thing if Jared stays and fights as his HellBeast?” she asked everyone, like I wasn’t even fucking here.

“Ella,” I warned, that admittedly did fuck all.

“Yes, we do,” Koro replied, making me shoot daggers at the gypsy fucker.

“I am telling you, it’s not fucking happening!” I snapped before storming off, no longer able to listen to this shit without losing it completely. Meaning this time, it was Ella who ended up chasing after me.

“Save it, Ella, I am not listening to it!” I warned, seething.

“So, I don’t get a choice, is that it?” she argued, making me whip around to face her and say,

“No, you don’t!”

“Ah, so it’s alright for you to save me but I can’t save you and everyone else... is that it?!” she argued, making me roll my eyes.

“Now she’s getting it,” I muttered sarcastically.

“Jared, wait!” she shouted when I continued to walk away. “We have to talk about this,” she tried, making me shake my head and keep walking.

“No, we don’t,” I told her, trying not to verbally lash out at her in anger. But she wasn’t making it easy.

“If this is because it’s Tyr, then...”

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I slashed a hand down, cutting through the air and hitting her with the truth.

“No, this is because of being out of my fucking mind with worry this whole time being without you and now...”

“Now what?” she asked softly, but I stopped myself from admitting the reason...

That I wasn't strong enough to cope.

“Tell me, baby,” she said, now taking my hand and talking to me so tenderly that I swear it was like being weaved in fucking magic.

“Now I can't go back to that, okay? It nearly fucking broke me, Ella, and I am not doing it again. Too many fucking times have I nearly lost you, too many times I have had you taken from me!”

Her expression gentled, her beautiful big green eyes looking up at me in that way was nearly too much to bear.

“But this time I have not been taken from you. This time you will know where I am and that I am safe,” she argued, making me turn my face from hers, unable to withstand the power of her soft gaze anymore. Not without caving and giving her anything she wanted. Anything she asked me for. Because she was my one weakness, and I would do anything in my power to make her happy...

Anything but give her up.

“And how the fuck can I be assured of that, Ella?” I asked, walking away from her once more. But not before I saw her wince, because she knew as well as I did, that she couldn’t promise me that. Which was when she made the painful point,

“And how can you be assured I will be safe even if I do stay?”

I paused in my steps, wincing internally as I closed my eyes, thinking back to trying to fight against all those HellHounds in the cabin.

“It’s like they said, you can’t fight as Cerberus with me tucked in between your legs the whole time, and there are too many of them to fight without him. Your beast is needed in this battle, Jared, and I will just be a distraction. You will be too focused on me to fight the way you would with me not there.”

I had no response to this, as anything that came out of my mouth to argue against it would be a lie. Because she was right.

I would only be focused on her.

Which is why I turned and quickly grabbed her to me.

“I can’t let you go,” I told her, my emotions making my voice thick and hoarse. I felt her hands in my hair, holding me to her.

“But you’re not letting me go, baby,” she told me softly, making me sigh into her. Because I knew she was right, and I fucking hated it.

“I only just got you back,” I told her, squeezing her tighter because I couldn’t help myself. The idea of being separated again was too agonizing to bare.

“I know, I know,” she whispered, framing my face and kissing me as tears filled her

eyes. Something that told me I wasn't the only one struggling with this, as I knew this wasn't easy for her. But she wanted to do the right thing and I couldn't help but admire her for that.

I was so fucking proud, I just wished I had the time to show her. Yet I knew the army was on their way, and it was far bigger than the one I had faced as Cerberus. I knew this, or Garmr would have used his summoners to create portals to bring them here instantly.

But I also knew that this would have drained their powers significantly and wouldn't have been sustainable for long enough to bring through all his HellHounds. Which was why we hadn't found ourselves fighting their collected souls. They couldn't do both, and the souls wouldn't have been able to get to Ella. Not when he still believed she had her powers. Because the myth had been that the Summoner Queen could control all. Which meant fighting with them would have only added to Ella's own army. And after seeing Ella in action, I could believe it to be true.

Because of course, Garmr didn't know what we knew.

But surely after today's fight, he would soon start questioning why she wasn't using her powers. Which was when I made my decision, hoping... no, fucking praying... that it didn't backfire on me.

"Alright, let's get you somewhere safe," I finally forced myself to say, making her pull back and look at me from where she had her head against my chest.

"I don't like it, but you're right, with you here I won't be myself in a fight."

She nodded as the first of her tears fell, making me wipe them away with my thumbs. Gods she was so beautiful, she made my heart ache just looking at her.

A heart that I knew would soon become...

Incomplete.

WHEN BLOOD IS SPILLED

ELLA

Saying goodbye to Jared was one of the hardest things I had ever had to do. Because this wasn't like it had been when jumping into the portal to save him. This wasn't one of those split second decisions I had been forced to make.

This was planned.

It was the uncertainty. It was the unsure promise we made to each other. The way we gripped on to each other tighter, just for those few precious moments longer. It was the last bittersweet kiss goodbye, not knowing if we would ever get another. It was the last words of love uttered between the two of us.

It was the heartbreak we both had no choice but to endure.

"I will come for you, I swear this," he had told me fervently, making me nod in his arms because I couldn't stop my tears from falling. My hand held onto his as long as I could before I had no choice to let go as I was ushered to leave. The pain in our faces was easy to see by all as Koro told me gently,

"It's time."

So, I had let myself be led away, knowing I was doing the right thing, no matter how hard it was to leave him. And he knew it too. Because without his beast there to fight, the battle would have been near impossible to win.

Which brought us to now, as Koro led me and my sister to somewhere he knew would be safe and far from the battle, because the moment that Koro was seen fighting for the other side, then his cover would be blown. I had even asked him whether it looked odd with him not there to fight for Garmr. But he assured me that he had been sent on a mission to try and find my sister. This so as Garmr could once again use her to get me to do whatever he wanted me to. To use her as a tool to manipulate me. Because of course, he had been the one to hunt her down in the first place, assuring Garmr that he could do it again.

As for who else joined us on our journey, they agreed Asher and Koro's sorceress, Sorina, would be enough.

As for Tyr, Jared convinced him that his skills at fighting would be needed in battle, something he was happy to hear, because well...he was the God of War after all. Which basically meant he was born for fighting.

The fight began not long after we left, and my worry only grew the second I caught sight of the army making their way towards the town. One I could see more clearly the further up the valley we travelled. It was like a shadow had fallen on the land and was floating across it as the thousands of HellHounds all ran as one.

As for us, we made for a mountain pass, leading us up toward a forest area, where Koro told us of a network of caves that we could hide in until the battle was over.

"I am sure he will be victorious," Lerna said to me, putting her arm round me and making me lean into her. This was the first time we had spoken since our argument, one that seemed pointless now with what we currently faced.

I nodded in her hold, dreading the moment the trees swallowed us up and I lost sight of the town completely. Like my last connection to Jared would be severed. It was as if my body was just going through the motions as I left my heart behind.

So, with the forest only steps away, I looked back down to the valley below one last time, my panic taking hold the moment I saw the two sides finally collide. The sight of Cerberus being bigger than anything else on the battlefield at least gave me the hope and encouragement I needed to continue. To know that I had done the right thing. Because now he could fight without having to worry about me being there with him. He would have no distractions to do what he was born to do, and from the realm that powered his beast.

To protect. To guard. To fight.

“Come, for we have much ground to cover,” Koro said, making Lerna take my hand and pull me softly, gently forcing me to leave the sight behind. So, with tears in my eyes, I said,

“Soon, my HellBeast.”

They were the same words I had told him before leaving, along with making him promise to be safe. His answer being,

“Only if you do the same, my love.”

Of course, we said the words but neither of us knew the future. With one glance at Marcus and I knew the same could even be said for him, his face had been a mask of worry. Not a usual sight, which gave everyone cause to be anxious because it was clear he had no clue, for once, what the future held.

So, as we left the sight of the battle behind, stepping into the forest, the echoing sound of the fight also became ever more distant. Until soon, there was no trace of what we left behind at all.

“I am sorry about our fight,” Lerna said after long moments of silence, no doubt

trying to keep my mind off the uncertainty I had.

I squeezed her hand and told her,

“I know, and I’m sorry for blaming you for not telling me. I understand now how hard it would have been.”

“That’s no excuse as I should have explained... it’s just... I wanted you to trust me, and you were so angry with me when you first appeared through the portal that I... I was afraid you would hate me,” she admitted, making me stop long enough to pull her in for a hug, one we both needed.

I then looked up to find Koro watching us, before nodding at me in what looked like appreciation. It was obvious he cared deeply for her, and it was like I had told Jared, I was glad that she had found a love of her own.

Because if seeing all those visions of the past had taught me anything, it was that Lerna also deserved to fly free. She deserved to live and love and see the world she didn’t know. She had lived in fear too long and what became obvious now, was lifetimes waiting for the chance to be with the man she loved. Something I knew would only come once the threat was over and Garmr was finally dead.

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Something I could definitely relate with, because I knew that until Garmr was stopped once and for all, then Jared and I could never truly start our lives together. Ever since the beginning, it had been one thing after another. A constant threat looming over our heads. Making me wonder what life would finally be like once it was over. For starters...

We would have a baby.

“How are you feeling?” Lerna asked me, obviously knowing where my mind was at because I was subconsciously rubbing my belly.

“I’m okay, a little queasy every now and then but then I think it helped having Jared’s blood.”

“What did he think? Was he happy when you told him?” she asked, making me wince.

“You mean you didn’t tell him!” she exclaimed, making me shush her.

“Tell him what?” Koro asked as we had caught up with the three of them. Something that made us both say at the same time,

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

To which Koro smirked, then he walked away muttering lightheartedly,

“Twins.”

We both looked at one another and chuckled. Because I kept forgetting that not only did I have a sister, but a twin at that. Yet, I guess it was easy to forget, seeing as we were polar opposites, and not just in how we looked. Even her outfit was a pale grey to my jet black. Her hair near-white blonde to my flaming red. It would have been like looking at a good twin and a bad twin, and well, I guess I was the one who got us in to all this trouble to begin with.

And all for the love of a HellBeast.

Not that she blamed me, I knew this even without her saying it, which she had many times already. But it did make me wonder about Fate and whether everything that had happened so far was according to their plan. Or were we just making this shit up as we went along?

I didn't know anymore.

“Oww!” I yelled, as I wasn't looking where I was going and therefore got a nasty scratch on my hand from a thorn bush. I looked down to see the red line along the outside of my fingers, now dripping with blood and falling on the forest floor.

“What happened?!” Lerna asked, stopping me to have a look.

“It's just a scratch,” I told her, making her sigh in relief, however the second she looked down and saw it on the floor, the next statement she made had me on edge.

“They keep finding you.”

I frowned in question. “Lerna?”

“How do they keep finding you?” She looked up at me and her face made dread start to coil in my belly.

“I... I... don’t know,” I admitted slowly.

“What is it?” Koro asked, coming back to us once he noticed we had stopped, my bleeding hand now held in her own.

“At the village of Ananke, did you bleed? Or in the camp we just left?” I shook my head, telling her no, but then a memory hit me.

“My shoes... they...”

“What, Ella, tell me?” she pressed, her voice strained and slightly panicked.

“My feet, they were in a bad way from walking so long. I started to bleed, and I guess, it could have soaked through to my shoes,” I told her, making her eyes grow wide.

“We have to go...Now!”she said desperately, her worried gaze going to Koro.

“But wait, I was scratched by one of the guards, in the woods just before you ran. Tyr saved me from him, but not before the demon scratched my skin,” I said, hoping this was ground enough to ease the worry she had.

“And the blood, did any of it fall to the ground?” she asked, making me tense before answering truthfully.

“I don’t know.”

“Think!” she shouted as alarm gripped her.

“It was on my shoulder, so I don’t think so,” I told her, this time making Koro’s features harden before he agreed with my sister.

“We need to run. Sorina, burn the blood.” The sorceress ran over to us, her long braided white hair swaying behind her.

Her demonic eyes began to glow as her white irises homed in on the blood. The strange red skin on her forehead looked darker under the canopy of the trees and became a stark contrast to the pale white on the other half of her face. A pair of crimson horns coiled around the sides of her head and the symbols that looked etched into her skin also started to glow. Doing so the moment she clicked her fingers, causing the place I had spilled my blood on the dry leaves to ignite in flames. Now burning it to ash in seconds before it was out again.

My hand was then taken by Koro, who used his bindings to snake out from under his sleeve and wipe the rest of the blood away. I would have flinched at the sight of them moving like they were alive, but it happened so fast, I didn’t have time to react. Besides, now was not the time to freak out.

No, we now had much bigger problems to deal with. Because I knew why trouble followed me wherever I went. Which meant, I was the cause of the battle happening now.

Garmr had followed my blood.

The spell he had put on me was still in place.

Meaning when a portal started to open up from behind us, I knew that I had, once again, led them straight to us! Which meant that I had no time to react other than to push Lerna away from me. Her scream of horror was too late to save me as she fell into Koro's arms, at the same time I was grabbed from behind.

Because I couldn't let them take her too.

So, I let myself fall backward into the weight of the person who held me, Lerna's face the last thing I saw before...

My world went black.

18

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HELL

Waking up this time, I knew instantly that I was in a world of trouble. My memories told me this even before my new surroundings did. Running through the woods, feeling the swirling power emerge from behind me... The chill like an icy wall at my back before hands had gripped me... Before I had then been pulled under what felt like a blanket of suffocating night.

And now I was waking up to this room. One that looked like I was in some dark fairy tale, and I of course was to play the unwilling princess. Walls of dark, jagged stone surrounded me with mounted horned demonic skulls and black crests carved into the rock. Chains, that looked to connect with some kind of strange door above, also hung down from the walls. As if I was in some tower room that had a trap door above.

Making me wonder if I pulled on the chains, would it open?

Perhaps this was the only way to let in some natural light, because there were no windows in this room. The only light came from the candles flickering in the crude, curled iron candelabra above. That and the sconces that held gothic holders for pillars of wax.

As for where I lay, this was all black, with sheets like suede flowing off either side of the large bed that rippled along the floor. This matched the curtains that were draped down the back of the bed, framing the elaborate headboard. One carved from black wood with what looked like a story being told of Norse mythology, if the Viking looking runes were anything to go by.

A side table held more candles, and a glass bottle of what looked like water with a fancy crystal glass goblet next to it. All of which I could see, along with my reflection staring back at me, from the large seven-foot mirror that took up most of the wall opposite. One framed in a gothic style that matched the rest of the dark, ominous décor. A huge armoire stood against the wall to my left and wooden screens sectioned off part of the room to my right.

However, my eyes snapped to the only door that looked thick and heavy, with very distinct bars at the latch of a window. One that obviously allowed a jailor to keep an eye on the prisoner. Speaking of which, I froze when I heard the voice that haunted my dreams.

“Is she awake yet!?”

At this and the sound of a metal scraping against metal, I lay back down and quickly pretended to be asleep. My nerves were so on edge and my heart beating so fast, it was hard to keep my breathing even enough to fake being asleep. It was especially hard not to react when I heard the door opening followed by footsteps as someone

stepped inside.

I even found myself holding my breath altogether when I felt him approach the bed. The sound of the bed covers shifted against the stone floor as if to give way to the new masterful presence. Then I felt his weight sink into the bed next to me as if he had sat down.

“Mm, finally back to where you belong, my princess,” he said, making me struggle trying not to shiver at the words. But then, when I felt his fingers brushing back the hair from my face, I couldn’t help but flinch at his touch.

“Now why don’t you stop pretending and open your eyes, pretty girl,” he said, making me suck in a quick breath before doing as he asked.

Because I didn’t see the point any longer, not if he knew I was really awake.

His face was one I had now seen thanks to his last dream he had forced upon me. The scars on his skin now calm and nothing more than crimson jagged lines cut through the flesh. His once handsome face was a mixture of curiosity and calculating.

“There she is, my Anástasi,” he said in a tender tone, and when he reached out to touch me again, I sat up quickly and shifted from his reach.

“My name is Ella,” I told him firmly, making his hand fist before dropping to the bed.

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“So even now, your memories are lost to you?” he asked as if saddened by this.

“I know everything I need to know.”

One of his brows raised in challenge.

“Is that so?” he asked in gentle mocking.

“You kidnapped me, brought me to wherever this Hellish place is, and intend to use me like some kind of weapon!” I threw at him, making him smirk.

“My, my, what pretty webs they have weaved around you,” he replied, now looking at his long black nails, like talons from a bird, sharp and deadly.

“Oh, so it’s not true then? Well if not, then I will just be on my way,” I said, getting up out of the bed and walking to the door to, indeed, find it locked. I looked back at him, to see him grinning.

“Needs must, my dear.”

“Your needs, you mean,” I replied, making him shrug, and without his cloak, I could now see his muscular frame dressed in an old-fashioned suit. As if he had just stepped out of a gothic ball to speak with me.

Every inch of him was dressed in black, his pale grey neck visible with the shirt he wore unbuttoned beneath his waistcoat. This showed the same scars that snaked down his face, reaching his cheeks, telling me they were most likely all over his body. His

hands, however, were black, as if his skin had been soaked in ink. This was a glaring contrast to his shoulder-length white hair that had been pushed back from his face.

“Let us not quarrel, for tonight is a celebration of victory.”

I took a step back, my hand going to my heart.

“You won the battle?” I whispered, making his jaw harden for a moment before his features smoothed out. His mask of ease once more slipping back into place.

“It was never a fight I intended to win, merely a distraction.”

“To get to me,” I guessed, causing one side of his lips to curve upward.

“Although I have to admit, I was surprised to see the HellBeast had let you out of his sight. Your idea, no doubt,” he said, making me grit my teeth as I stayed silent. “How selfless of you.”

“Don’t mock me! At least I have a heart!” I snapped, making him suddenly move before I could react.

I was quickly pushed up against the door with his hand around my neck. I gasped as I was pinned in place, him looming over me with his much greater height. Then he ducked his head closer to my ear and told me,

“Oh, I have a heart, human Ella...a heart for taking pleasure and a stomach for inflicting pain... I suggest you not forget it, or you will find out which I choose to favor, when you are in my bedroom.”

I swallowed hard, hating that I’d slept in his bed and wishing I had the strength to fight him. He tilted his head at me, as if assessing me once more, before letting me go

and taking a step back, allowing me to breathe again.

“Now I am here to escort you to the celebration, for we have a kingdom that wishes to welcome their Queen’s return,” he told me, making me shake my head.

“I am not going anywhere with you!”

“Of course, as your King, I could command it of you. Oh yes, I could make a spectacle out of you in front of them all, show them how well I...bring you to heel”,he said, suddenly in front of me again, inches away from my face, making me flinch back as his cold breath hit me.

“Although I am surprised that you haven’t tried to fight me using your powers, nor have you tried to bring forth the book of souls. Is that because they told you not to, told you what would happen if you even tried?” he asked after giving me space again, making me say nothing. Because I didn’t know what would happen to me if he knew I had been stripped of these precious powers he craved so much.

“It matters not, for soon you won’t have a choice. Now as for your homecoming, let’s pick out something more fitting, should we?” he said, now walking over to the large armoire that was at least eight feet tall.

I was left standing by the door watching him in shock, as he opened the double doors and ran his fingers along all the dresses in there. All of which were dark colors, and he paused at an emerald-green one.

“Ah,, your favorite color of late perhaps... no, let us go with something more suited to my own attire,” he said, pulling a black and grey ballgown down from the rail and holding it out for me.

“Yes, this will do nicely. Here, go put it on,” he said, nodding toward the wooden

screens in the corner, that like the headboard, held scenes of a story, and now I could see it better, it looked more like a war depicting Hell on Earth.

“I am not wearing that,” I told him.

“You can change by your own free will or I can do it for you, it is up to you, as I assure you, only one of those choices would I find entertaining,” he replied, making me shiver at the thought.

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And because I really didn't want him touching me, I stormed over to him and snatched the dress, making him look amused. Then I stomped my way toward the screens, seeing a pot there to do my business in and a bowl for me to wash. Both of which I needed to do, seeing as the last time was in our tent before the whole snake incident.

Gods but what would Jared be thinking right now? The thought was such a heartbreaking one. I knew he would be devastated. He would be furious, worried out of his mind and hurt that it had all gone wrong. His biggest fear had come true.

The one I had convinced him wouldn't.

"Is there a problem?" he asked when he didn't hear anything, because I had stopped dead as the pain of this had struck me. Making tears come to my eyes as I fought myself on trying to keep it together. I wiped them away angrily, not wanting to give the villain of this story the satisfaction of my pain.

"I need to pee," I forced myself to say, hating the way my voice wanted to break.

"I think you will find the means to do that, my dear," he replied calmly, making me glance around to find him now sitting in an armchair looking comfortable. The smug bastard once more looked at his claws before picking lint off his pants.

"I can't pee with you here! You need to leave," I demanded, making him chuckle.

"I have all evening, Ella, does your bladder?" he asked, making me sneer at him and again, he found my hostility amusing.

With a huff, I had no choice but start to undress, using the undignified ‘pot’ to pee in, making sure not to sigh in relief.

Then after I did this, I pushed it back under the hole it was meant for and started to put on the dress, keeping on the boots Jared had conjured up for me. Ones he had purposely made with a thicker, fluffy lining so as not to hurt me this time.

In fact, it made me feel better, because at least I had something of Jared still on me, as well as my engagement ring. But then, one glance at the man forcing me into this dress, and I knew that I was better off hiding it.

I was afraid that if Garmr saw it, he would take it from me and destroy it. So, despite hating to be parted from it, I pulled it off my finger and hid it in the pocket of the clothes I had been wearing, before folding it on the chair.

As for the dress, there was a lot of layers to the thing, making me huff and puff my way into it. The material was one I had never seen before, like thin translucent paper, its natural creases flowing downwards. As for its color, or should I say, lack of it, it gave off an ombre effect. As if the lower half had been dipped in black dye, letting it creep up as it soaked into the light grey.

The design made it look as if some dark entity was taking over my body, with intricate black lace around the edges of each layer. This continued curling upward from the darker bottom of the skirt, first to the shorter layers that gave the skirt volume. Then the pattern continued after first coiling around my waist in a swath of black and up to my breasts, like two lace tentacles had found their bounty. This emphasized the sweetheart neckline of the strapless of stress.

“Having difficulties, my dear?”

I shivered at his voice.

“No, I am fine thank you very mu... hey!” I shouted when he was suddenly there, making me hold the back pieces together because I was yet to tighten the ribbon that would hold the dress together.

“Turn around,” he said, twirling his finger and making me narrow my eyes at him.

“You will cut me to shreds if you come near my skin with those claws!” I protested, making him grin before purposely holding up both hands and flipping them around, at the same time, his nails disappeared back into his fingers. This left just the ends so they weren’t half as dangerous looking.

“Now turn around,” he said again, giving me no choice, and I didn’t see the point in fighting this. Not when I knew he would only win by force. Something he admitted he would enjoy, so I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. Which was why I turned around, giving him my back.

“This is new, so many curls...so soft,”he said as his hands first came to my hair, grasping it all and twisting it up out of his way. Then with one hand holding it all in place, he brought his other hand to the front of me. This was so I could watch as he produced a delicate black glass flower attached to a hair comb. It looked like a delicate rose in full bloom.

“Is this to your liking?” he asked me, and I had to clear my throat first because it was unexpected that he would even care what I thought.

“It’s beautiful,” I admitted, because anything else from my lips would have been a lie and I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of that either. So, he slipped it into my hair, effectively keeping it up in place as my curls spilled over the top of the twist.

After that, he put his hands on my shoulders, this time making me tremble because it reminded me of all those dreams he had forced upon me.

“Mm,not as beautiful as you,”he told me softly, and I closed my eyes against the compliment because coming from him, it meant nothing. I continued to keep them closed, trying to hold myself ridged and still as he started to tug at the corseted back.

“Relax, you’re so tense,” he told me, making me want to snap at him, ‘I wonder why!’ but like before, I held my tongue.

Instead, I focused not on his hands as they brushed against my bare skin, but on the way the dress kept getting tighter and tighter, wishing for the whole ordeal to be over with.

“There, all done,” he said, now stepping back and giving me room to turn around. His eyes glowed a brighter crimson the second I did, his gaze traveling the length of me, the sight giving him reason to grin.

“I knew it would be perfect when I had it made for you,” he said, again surprising me, making me look to the rest of the clothes in the armoire. Of course, he followed my gaze and told me,

“I had them all made for you, knowing you would soon return back to me.”

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I felt my jaw tense at this, but again, I didn't want to provoke him further by lashing out. So, I remained quiet, despite how hard it was to hold my tongue.

After this, he held his arm out for me to take, something he knew I was hesitant to do.

“Take my arm, Ella,” he ordered in a darker tone, making me do as he asked. “Our people await,” he said, now unlocking the door with his mind and leading me from the room.

It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the dark, giving me no choice to grip on to his arm tighter. But then I tripped, and he turned suddenly to stop me from falling. His strong hands moved to my waist as my own hands went to his chest. His breathing at the contact deepened, and I felt his muscles tense under my palms. His hands tightened at my sides and the second I lifted my hands from him, he reluctantly did the same, ensuring I was steady before doing so.

I was forced to continue to let him lead me, the slight glow of his red scars being the only thing I could see. But then came the rhythmic pounding sound, one getting louder and louder the further we travelled.

“What is that sound?” I asked, because it became near deafening.

“You will soon see,” he told me in a knowing tone, and again because I had nothing else, I tightened my grip on his arm, unable to help myself.

Suddenly, doors must have opened because light flooded the hallway, making me close my eyes against the brightness of outside.

We continued to walk forward, forcing me to blink against the light until suddenly I could see him leading me toward an open balcony. The sight made me gasp.

“Oh God.”

Something he chuckled at as my mind tried to make sense of what I was truly seeing.

An army of not just HellHounds... but legions of different demons and creatures all spanned out, covering the vast land below. There wasn't just thousands of them, but what looked like hundreds of thousands! All there, in formation, in different ranks, at the ready for war. One that now looked like...

We would never win.

“ON THIS DAY WE REJOICE, FOR OUR SUMMONING QUEEN HAS FINALLY RETURNED!” Garmr bellowed, his voice traveling out across the immense space and reaching the ears of everyone.

I felt my hand being lifted as my arm was thrust up in the air, causing the army to all shout as one. The cheers were again deafening, making me snatch my hand down and cover my ears to save myself. Garmr glanced down at me before holding up his own hand and shouting,

“SILENCE! FOR NOW IT IS TIME FOR A DEMONSTRATION OF MY QUEEN'S POWER!”

I swallowed hard at this, taking a step backward and wanting to run. However, my hand was snatched up in his once more, yanking me back by his side. The balcony looked to be cut out of the side of a colossal wall carved out of the sheer drop of a mountain side. The sides concaved into rows of giant dark grey spikes traveling as far as the eye could see.

“Now it is time to show them what will really win this war and what will MARK THE BEGINNING OF RAGNARÖK!”

At the bellowing of this statement, the army went crazy again. Roars, snarls, growls, all merging together to create an ear-splitting sound.

“It is time, my dear, for you to truly emerge,” he told me, squeezing my hand and not letting me escape.

“No... I... I won’t,” I said, trying to pull back and yank myself free, when he gritted his teeth and threatened,

“If you do not do so freely, then I will force it upon you and it will be painful, Ella.”

I shook my head, telling him that I wouldn’t.

“Very well, I had wished to do this without causing you pain, but needs must,” he said, sounding truly regretful which surprised me. But then, my mind didn’t have long to focus on asking why, as he brought up his hand. This before it became engulfed in a green flame as his fingers started to slowly make a fist.

He was trying to pull out my powers as if they were attached to strings and he was the puppet master. Just like he had been in my nightmares once.

But when nothing happened, his eyes glowed dangerously, and he snarled as realization hit him...

“You have no powers!”

CRUEL, CRUEL FATE

JARED

The battle was won.

But I knew the war was far from over. As we may have been victorious this time, but I still hadn't been able to crush their leader between my jaws like I had intended to. That was because the coward had kept himself back, leading his armies from afar, and not as a true leader would at the head of the fight. But that was because he knew he couldn't beat me.

The fucking coward!

The battle hadn't been without its losses, as Koro's army had suffered. But no more so than Garmr's side, as once more it seemed as if the fighting had only just got underway before he was ordering his HellHounds to retreat. Something we didn't allow for long, as we chased them further away from the town, keeping the people at the camp safe.

The ones closest to us had tried to run but were easily killed, despite us having no choice but to let the ones furthest out of reach go. My beast and I were eager to get back to Ella.

Koro had spoken of a cave in the mountains he was taking her to, and not for the first time in my life, I wished for wings.

"Well hopefully that fuck will think twice about challenging us in battle," Orth said, after shaking himself free of his beast. Mine, I had managed to take control of, now there was no threat to Ella.

“Yes, but did you notice how Garmr ordered the retreat a little too soon?” Marcus said, for once not being vocally cocky about the victory, which instantly put me on edge.

“He’s a coward, that’s what they do,” Orth replied with a shrug as we made our way back to the camp, Tyr and Orson both doing the same.

“He could see he was going to lose and wanted to cut his losses,” I agreed, but Marcus shook his head.

“But so soon?”

“What you getting at, Marc?” I asked with a frown, giving him a sideways glance.

“How did they even know we were here? How did they get here so quickly?” Marcus replied as obviously, this was playing on his mind now the threat was over...for now.

“You think it was planned in advance?” my brother asked, as he too was allowing doubt to worm its way in.

“Well for that, they would have had to have known we were here as soon as we arrived, or...” Marcus stopped his flow of words, as something must have come to him and from the looks of things, nothing good.

“Or what?” I pushed, wishing the cagey bugger would come out with it already.

“They had managed to track us somehow,” Marcus replied, making me snap,

“And you’re telling me this now?!”

“Hey, I only just thought about it, but now after the way they retreated so soon, it was

almost like...fuck.”

“What... what, Marcus?!” I snapped, stopping to grab hold of him, as his eyes were wide with panic. Not even a good fucking sign from the smug bastard.

“What if it was only ever meant to be a distraction?”

At this my eyes widened, and one name slipped from my lips.

“Ella!”

Immediately, we all took off running the second I said her name, even Tyr and Orson, who, it fucking pained me to say, had both been instrumental in winning the battle. Telling me the God had literally been born to fight and Orson’s demonic bear had enjoyed the freedom of his rampage.

What I didn’t expect to see was the sight of Asher, Lerna, Koro, and Sorina making their way back to us. My eyes quickly searched for Ella and I found myself fucking roaring when I didn’t see her! In fact, the only reason I didn’t burst into my HellBeast that very second was because of my need to know what had happened. To know if she had been hurt or if my biggest fears had come true...

She had been taken.

“WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE!?” I roared when they were close enough. The sight of Lerna crying was my first indication that something had gone wrong and whatever it was, it was bad.

“Her blood... her blood...” Lerna sobbed, making me grit my teeth so hard I thought they would shatter. This making me unable to lash out verbally.

“She cut her hand, her blood fell to the floor...” Koro told us, now holding Lerna to his chest, consoling her.

“The spell, it led them straight to her,” Sorina said.

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At this my world started to unravel.

“But I thought it was only in the mortal realm that shit worked,” Orth asked, and my growing rage still wouldn’t let me speak.

“As we all did,” Asher said, his tone as somber as the rest as he continued to say, “A portal opened up behind her, she pushed her sister out of the way before she was grabbed from behind, we couldn’t stop it.”

The realization hitting me in the fucking chest like a God’s fist, making me suddenly erupt.

“FUCK!” I roared, dropping to my knees and pounding the ground with my fists until they were bloody.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I repeated over and over before the curse became my girl’s name.

“Ella... Ella... Ella baby.”

My head hung as this agony wanted to tear me apart. Because I had failed. I had failed to keep her safe, regardless of the decision I made.

I had failed us both.

“Brother, come on, not all hope is lost,” Orth said, now kneeling down next to me, no doubt prompting the others to give us a moment alone.

“Every fucking time, Orth, every fucking time, she gets taken from me or something happens to split us up!” I yelled bitterly.

“Yeah, and lucky for us, we know how to stop it.”

I looked up, not giving a shit about the tears he could see clinging to my eyes.

“But how?” My voice was strained, a hopeless shell of what it was moments ago.

“We do what we do best, brother... now let’s go kill that fucker and get your girl back!” he said, standing and offering me his hand. One I slapped my own into to let him pull me up. Because he was right, wallowing in my own self-pity wasn’t going to get her back.

But killing that fucker would!

“So, what’s the plan, boss?” Marcus said once he saw me back on my feet.

“First we need to find out where he took her,” I forced myself to say, despite clenching my jaw.

“Well at least we have two things in our favor, as one, she no longer has her powers so he can’t control her and two, she is bound to this realm, so there are only a few places the fucker could be hiding her,” Marcus stated.

“Any ideas?” I asked, making him suddenly grin before telling me,

“No, but like last time, I know who would.”

I looked to Koro, who was still consoling Lerna.

“Not him,” Marcus added, making me frown in question.

“Then who?”

He winked and without answering, he walked over to Koro and asked,

“How far is it to the outskirts of Tartarus?”

Koro frowned before answering.

“It is a week at least on foot, but there is a portal about a day’s ride away... why?” Koro asked, frowning, no doubt wondering what in Hell would take us there. I looked to Marcus, now knowing where his head was at and answered menacingly.

“We have an old friend we need to talk to.”

“Then you will need the Horses of Ares,” Orson said, and I narrowed my gaze at this.

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“But how? Only a God can summon them.”

Suddenly we all looked around to the only God we had in present company.

“But he is of Norse lineage,” Lerna said.

“It is of little matter, for if they are of a God’s making, then the call of a God can summon them, I merely need to speak their names,” Tyr said confidently.

“Aethon, Phlogios, Konabos, and Phobos,” Koro told him, making him nod.

Tyr unsheathed his hammer and placed it on the ground, kneeling in front of it. Then as he started to utter the words in ancient Greek, his axe started to glow. The runes and symbols all glowed brighter as he used his power to summon them, calling each by name. And as if an electrical charge had fired, blue sparks flew from his weapon and snaked across the ground.

“Look! Over there!” Lerna shouted, pointing a finger to where the battle had not long taken place. A bright glow appeared in the distance before four horses started to emerge through the fallen cloud of light. Their speed was incredible, making my brother grumble next to me,

“Fuck, but something tells me I am not going to like this.”

“No, but they will most likely like it even less with your fat ass,” Marcus replied.

“Funny fucker,” Orthrus muttered under his breath.

And speaking of fast, incredibly, they had crossed the vast space in minutes, speeding through the debris of dead bodies that were being collected up ready to burn and honor the dead of the fallen of Koro's army.

As for the four horses, they were astonishing beasts. But then, they were immortal horses of the Gods, so it wasn't surprising. Each were distinct by their color. The first was white as the freshly fallen snow, a complete contrast to the one beside it, which was black as night. The third was a deep red chestnut, and the last a bluesish grey. Their manes flowed like spun silk, with their matching tails reaching only an inch off the floor. The muscles on their powerful bodies rippled with their movements, the hair on their bodies glistening with a reflective sheen that made them look unearthly. They were also an incredible size and had we been mortal men, we would have all struggled to mount them, let alone ride them.

I took the black one, reflecting my dark mood. He seemed to be the most unruly of the four, which suited me just fine. I was just thanking the Gods for the saddles that came with them, as each one matched the color of its graceful owner.

My own, a high black glossy leather, with its reins seemingly woven from gold thread, the horn on the front of the saddles represented each horse with its name. Mine being called, Aethon.

Tyr was the next to mount, and he took the white one. As for Marcus, he mounted the red chestnut and was far more graceful doing so than my brother, who was left with the blue-grey.

"Fuck, but I knew it was too good to be true the day the car was invented and we hadn't needed to use these anymore," he grumbled, as he had always hated riding. Which was why I told him,

"Think of it as a bike."

He scoffed before I steered my stead over to Koro.

“Where is the portal?”

“There is a mountain pass to take, before you reach the forest, follow the sound of running water and it will lead you to it. The portal is at the base of the mountain road. You will hear its call.”

“Yeah, just follow the sounds of wailing tortured souls,” Marcus commented dryly.

“I will remain here and try and get word to the others of our plan,” Koro told me, prompting me to ask,

“The others?”

“Those of the Bloodstone Covenant will need time to cross the borders into this realm. As well as my master’s army... I believe you made a deal with him,” he stated, making me grit my teeth, because yeah, I had.

The deal to find his mortal Chosen One and deliver her to what she would no doubt class as a nightmare. A large chunk of my soul knew I had the life of a girl on my head, for the use of his armies to win this fucking war and prevent the end of the world. Which was why I nodded, telling him that I understood.

“Then I hope you are successful but if not, then I will cast my net further and send more spies to see what they may find,” Koro replied, making me nod in respect, before doing something I never thought I would ever do...

“Thank you,” I said, and he looked taken aback for a second before bowing respectfully.

After that, we took off in the direction Koro had given us. Of course, when the horses started to gallop, we were all left holding on for dear life, making my brother bellow in fright. And despite how funny it was, I still couldn't find it in me to laugh. For there would be no more smiles.

Not until I got my girl back.

Thanks to our new transport, we reached the portal to Tartarus in no time at all. We didn't have to question the portal being the right one, as like Marcus had said, the moans of pain and agony called out from within it.

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I remembered Ella's face when telling her of it, purposely leaving out the most frightening parts. And how as the Underworld's most powerful guardian, I would only end up drawing from its power. This thanks to it not only being the birthplace of the realm, but more specifically...

The place Cerberus was born.

20

WHERE THE WILD ONES LEAD

Stepping through the portal had been just like when I first arrived back in the Underworld, only times that by ten. In fact, it had been a challenge to hold onto my mortal vessel as every cell of my supernatural being had wanted to change into my HellBeast. Cerberus fought at me for control and the only thing keeping him locked down was the mission.

The mission to get our Chosen One back.

He knew, as well as I did, that I was the only one able to achieve it, for we had to be of sound mind to plan our next move. Which meant he needed me to lead us both through the wasteland of Tartarus, to find who we were looking for.

Of course, it had changed since the war, no longer the colossal Mount Tartarus that was forever a viewpoint, no matter where you looked, for it was long gone now. And with it, the immortal resting place of the Titan Gods it once held captive in the belly of the prison.

And all thanks to Keira, who saved the world that day.

Not that I went into detail when telling Ella of its brief history, as well, it was one story that wasn't mine to tell. No, I would leave that mind bending story to her aunt, if she ever wished to regale her with it.

As for where we were now, Koro had been right, as the portal brought us to the outskirts of Tartarus. Which thankfully, was far tamer than its core of evil. But that didn't mean it still wasn't home to the worst and most vile souls. Meaning that we would keep our guard up for any trouble.

I think my beast was even looking forward to it, as any excuse for him to break free of my control. Something that was far easier to do than in the mortal realm, as this place only fueled his need for dominance over me.

But this change hadn't just taken me, but my brother too, as he looked to be struggling the same Fate as I. His skin looked close to splitting and his eyes were a constant amber glow, with his hands curled into demonic fists. A pair barely able to hold onto the reins that would have sliced in his talons. Even the horses looked unsettled by the change in their riders. However, Tyr and Marcus stayed the same, for they, unlike us, they weren't born of this place.

The river Cocytus ran alongside Tartarus, separating the two lands by a river mile-wide, and a mountain in between. This crossed paths with the River Phlegethon, which was a literal river of fire. The land created was known as the steam craters or Hell's basin, as the locals called it.

An uncrossable expanse of land that would flay men alive should they step in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was where sections of the Cocytus River branched off into Phlegethon. Doing so underground and creating pockets of dangerous steam to burst through the crusted earth.

As for where we were headed, Koro had been right, it would have taken us a week on foot to cross over. Which was no doubt why a portal still existed between the two lands, as it was a far quicker way to travel. Of course, only those not imprisoned here for their crimes could freely come and go. Most of which were used by bounty hunters, returning escaped prisoners. Or those bound for this place as further punishment for crimes committed within the realm.

One such place was where we were headed now, as it was a prime location for these hunters to pick up their bounty owed for jobs completed. The town of Kakía Topoi wasn't far, its meaning in Ancient Greek translated into Evil Place, as most towns were named in the literal sense, just like in ancient earth.

The town gates could be seen at the end of the road and with the speed the horses rode at, we were there in minutes. A row of wooden poles each spiked three stories high, as most towns in the Underworld were surrounded by walls for a reason...to keep out those who are unwelcome. Which was why the moment we stopped, town guards appeared, instantly drawing their weapons.

“Who goes there!?” a voice shouted from the battlement above, their bows drawn ready to fire.

“We seek business at the inn,” I shouted, making him scoff and test us.

“At the Black Claw, you say?”

“No, as that is the inn at Gods Hallow,” I replied, knowing of one of the other towns on the other side of the river.

“I speak of The Devil's Hoof,” I added, making the guard take pause, which was when Tyr intervened, pulling his axe from his back and said,

“We come to this town peacefully, but being Tyr, God of War and Justice, I always welcome a chance to use this, for I assure you, this gate would take little effort for my axe.”

“Subtle,” Marcus muttered, making me reply,

“Isn’t that our specialty?”

His grin said it all.

The guards muttered some more and said,

“We want no trouble with outsiders.”

“And you will get none as long as you don’t keep us from our business, now open your gates, for we will not ask again!” I shouted, losing patience, something that was evident in my tone.

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“Alright, we will open up!” they shouted back, and soon enough the gates opened.

We rode our horses through into the medieval looking town with its crude buildings of mortar stone, mined from the quarry nearby. It was a red rock that would bleed when wet, the minerals weeping from inside, giving it the nickname red tear stone. Even the cobbled road had been made with the off chippings of the bricks made. Bricks that had been used to construct most of the buildings in these parts.

The town appeared ominous with the street lanterns reflecting off the walls, making it appear as if the town had a constant red hue. The sinister glow led us forward, where the guards tried their luck by ordering,

“All weapons stay here.”

To which my brother outright laughed, and Marcus scoffed.

“Not bloody likely mate.”

“What he said,” Tyr added.

And this wasn’t surprising, seeing as the guy always travelled with an arsenal of weaponry on him. But the guards weren’t all fired up to try and arrest us, so we continued on down the narrow street without them harassing us.

Our horses traveled in single file until the road started to widen near to where the inn was. Of course, the second I saw the black demonic looking horse, I knew we had found him.

“You two stay with the horses, my brother and I will go inside,” I told Tyr and Marcus, who agreed with a nod. As for my brother, I swear he nearly jumped from the horse, muttering,

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”

We both walked inside the Devil’s Hoof and I spotted him instantly but then again...he wasn’t hard to miss. And of course, he was gambling. As clearly even after being shot in the head holding a dead man’s hand wasn’t enough to put him off the game. Which was why I waited for him to gather his winnings after beating some newcomers to this town, as all the locals knew better than to play against him.

“I smell trouble brewing,” my brother commented.

We continued to watch from a few tables behind, as I was curious to see if he still had it in him. And just when the outraged big bastard of a demon pulled a dagger from the sheath strapped to his thigh, the gambler whipped his gun from his holster and pointed it at the demon’s head in the blink of an eye. The whole room froze, as if they knew what the foolish demon had just got himself into.

“Now, way I be lookin’ at this, is you can be a dumber dang boot-licker and try your hand at throwing that knife before one of these here plums hits you between the eyes, or you can walk from this table with your life and spare me the coin it will cost me to clean up all your blood... now what’s it to be, Corncracker?”

The demon snarled and left the table, putting his weapon away and thinking better of it.

“Damn but I forgot how cryptic this son of a bitch was,” my brother commented under his breath.

“Now are you boys gonna stare at the back of my hat all night or sit your saddle warmers down?”

I smirked, knowing that without even letting on, he had spotted us. But that was my friend, sharp as the shooter he was.

“Wild Bill,” I said, sitting opposite him and taking the place of the sore loser who was now nursing his losses at the bar with a tankard of ale.

“Big Bug.”

I gritted my teeth as he knew I couldn’t stand that shit, even if it did mean he was calling me boss man. But then, that was Bill, he may have gotten with the modern mortal times by exchanging horses for bikes, but as for the lingo, he had never let the 1800’s go.

“Now what brings you boys to my local waterhole, I wonder?” he asked, straightening his brown top hat by running his fingers along the rim. His long dark, curly hair hung over both shoulders, his trademark brown cowboy jacket, folded over the spare chair.

“You mean this shit hole? Ah we just love it here,” Orth said, making Bill give him a pointed look before reminding him,

“Why do I have to remind you boys about cursin’?”

Oh, and that was another thing about Bill, you never heard him swearing. But then, half the shit he said, I didn’t fucking understand so it didn’t much matter.

“Well, you’ve been gone a while, Bill, so a lot has happened,” I told him. His metal heeled cowboy boots tapped on the wooden floorboards.

“Yeah, so I hear... don’t look so surprised, son, we get plenty of folks that could spin yarns for hours down here as well as up top.”

My brother nudged me and said,

“Spin a what now?”

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“He means gossip,” I replied as if my natural in-built Wild Bill translator had just clicked on.

“Then you might have heard other whispers from the bottom of the barrel,” I said, another nickname used for Tartarus, as it was literally the lowest part of any Hell there was.

“Oh, I heard me some whispers alright, and I was just waitin’ on you boys showing up is all,” he replied with a grin, one that caused a dimple in his cheek to appear. And fuck me but I couldn’t wait to see what Ella made of him. The thought nearly made me smile until reality seeped back in like the cruel fucker it was.

“What did you hear, Bill?” I asked, getting myself back on track.

“Oh, loco fella so mad that he could bite himself. A big bug who likes collectin’ himself Summoners, so I hear. In fact, had one of those squirrelly fella’s in here the other day,” he said, making me lean in.

“Yeah, what did he have to say then?”

“Ah, he be bellyaching about getting out of the Vale of Thanatos, after the Death Gods Mountain fortress was taken by siege.”

I shot a look to my brother before back at Bill. Who was now rolling a gold coin in between his knuckles and shuffling a deck of cards with his other hand. His fingerless leather gloves cracking with the speed of his movements.

“Is that so?” I said in a knowing tone, as I knew there was more to come. But talking to Bill was like waiting for the adverts to end in the middle of a good movie.

“Talked about angering the Gods, a war be comin’, that type of chatter. Amassing a big army that got a lot of those realm ruler’s noses outta joint. So, I said to myself, I wonder on my own King, and how long it be until he’s down here again. And wouldn’t you know it, here you be.”

“That’s good, Bill.”

He tipped his hat, at the same time slipping his coin back in the leather band around the rim. His midnight blue eyes gleaming with promise of adventure or should I say, a reason to fire his gun.

“Well don’t go praising me yet, as I still haven’t found that young filly you been searching for,” he pointed out with a shrug of his shoulders.

“You wouldn’t have found her after all,” I admitted with a sigh, something that certainly got his attention, seeing as this had been his sole mission all these decades.

“And why’s that, she up in Heaven?”

“No, she was in the Elysian Fields, a hidden place, one that’s forbidden to enter,” I informed him, making him nod as he no doubt suspected as much. Especially considering he had pretty much scoured most of the realms in hell to find her.

“Then I be guessin’ you found her?”

“Yeah, but turns out she wasn’t who I thought she was,” I said, wondering why we were going into this shit now. But then that was the thing with Bill, he was an old soul, yet he also wasn’t. Calling me son had been a habit, as well as Big Bug. But the

truth was, I was actually a fuck load of years older than him.

“No, how so?”

“Because I found my Chosen One and it wasn’t her...it was her sister,” I confessed, my tone exasperated, as it was still a mind fuck of reality to swallow.

“Well now that’s something. But it’s like I always say, if you climb in the saddle, be ready for the ride. Still, that must have plum near knocked you from Sunday, yeah, I reckon so,” he replied with a whistle, making me mutter,

“You could say that again.”

“Well, I guess that’s our cue to be leaving then, time to vamoose.”

I stopped him by laying a hand on his arm.

“This isn’t your fight, Bill,” I warned, making him smirk.

“Nope, but it is yours and that vow of mine ain’t gonna complete itself by sitting on my spurs, yearning me some coin. Besides, you will be wantin’ your little lady back, am I right?” he replied, and his tone told me I was missing something.

“Wait, what have you heard?” I asked, making him grin as he got to his feet.

“That she be in the castle of Thanatos,” he told me, shaking out his long jacket before putting it on.

“How do you know that... she was only just taken?” I asked dumbfounded, looking first to my brother and back at Bill. As I had expected him to know something but not the exact location!

“She be needin’ clothes and those girly things right?”

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I frowned at this before muttering,

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then there be a merchant on his way now and he be missing a few coins at that, thanks to a royal flush I hit him with. But more than that, guess what else that Lickspittle dropped?” he said, and I swear I was ready to half throttle him/half kiss the cryptic bastard!

“What?!”

In response his smirk was more demonic than anything else, as he tipped up his hat and said,

“A map inside the castle.”

21

NIGHT AND DAY

ELLA

After this bombshell had been dropped on Garmr, he unleashed some of his own power over the army. A demonstration that ended up creating a green dragon that grew in size as it flew below over them all. This seemed enough to appease his people, because I noticed he made it look as if it had come from me. Which was when I had to question, would there have been a mutiny of some kind if he hadn't

given them what he had promised them?

I didn't have too long to think on the answer, because he gripped me by the arm and walked me back into the hallway. This led straight back to the room I had first woken in, and I could see the doors still open. I could also see the arches in both sides that obviously led to different parts of the castle I was being kept in. But clearly, Garmr had only one place in mind for me, because he all but tossed me through the door to the room.

"Hey!" I complained as I stumbled to the bed, saving myself from falling. I flinched then when the door slammed shut, and the locks sliding into place were ones I could hear but not see. He then held his body against the door, with his palms flat to the wood and his head hung as if trying to get his temper under check before facing me.

"Now, you are going to tell me exactly what happened to your powers," he said in a threatening voice, all niceties from earlier long gone as his dark tone shadowed all else.

"They were taken," I stated, folding my arms because I didn't want to show him how my hands shook. I honestly didn't know what he might do now I was useless to him.

He swung his head around to face me with his stance remaining the same.

"How?" he seethed, looking back at me, making me swallow hard.

"I don't know exactly..."

He moved, coming at me and making me take quick steps away from him, my hands out in front of me to protect myself.

"You don't know?" he asked disbelievingly.

“Something took them, a creature,” I told him quickly.

“What creature?” he asked with barely contained anger, as he persistently followed me around the room, making me continue to try and keep my distance.

“I don’t know what it was called,” I admitted, making him growl.

“Try.”

“Look, I am not exactly up to date with my Ancient Greek, okay!” I snapped, unable to help myself, which was when he finally took a breath and started to calm slightly.

“Describe it to me,” he said after releasing another heavy sigh, finally pausing his chase of me.

“I don’t know, some creepy bird guy.”

He snarled, whipping his head to the side as if speaking to the door.

“Damn that bitch Persephone, meddling in my business again!” he yelled, now turning to punch a fist into the mirror that cracked on impact. One that, at least, didn’t shatter completely and remained in the frame.

“What exactly did it do to you?” he asked, his dark tone pulling it out of me because I didn’t exactly want to feel how that mirror had. So, I told him,

“I was asleep, my dreams were manipulated, he made me eat...”

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“Pomegranates...fuck!”he guessed, making me jump at his next lash of anger.

“Yeah, then I woke and found that I had no powers left,” I finished again, making him sigh.

“It was a creature known as Epiales, master of Melas Oneiros.”

“Yes, that was it,” I said, remembering Lerna telling me now.

“I had wondered why you didn’t even try to fight me at the village of Ananke,” he said, making me grit my teeth at the memory, knowing that I could have ended this then and there if I’d had them.

“Well now you know, I am obviously useless to you,” I said, making his head snap up as he growled.

“Oh, you think so, do you?” His mocking tone instantly put me on edge.

“I er... well yeah, that’s what you want me for, isn’t it?” I asked nervously. Once again, he started to stalk me, only this time I was backed up into the bed. Which meant that as soon as the back of my legs hit the edge, I went falling back onto it. Leaving me feeling far too vulnerable because I couldn’t get away before he began lowering himself down over me.

“Oh, my dear girl, my sweet scented, foolish girl... if only you knew all there is that I want from you,” he purred, making me shake my head.

“I don’t... I don’t understand,” I told him as he lowered his weight further into me, one hand next to my head while the other came to stroke back my hair.

“For I want it all, you see,” he whispered, leaning toward my ear, making me hold myself deathly still.

“All you have left to give and more,” he told me, this time making me shudder against him as he put his lips to my ear.

“I want every inch of you,” he told me, fervently kissing me there at my neck, making me turn my head away. Something that clearly angered him, because he gripped my chin and forced me back to look at him. He snapped his growing fangs at me before letting me go and grabbing on to my hair.

“And I will have you!” he growled, before suddenly removing his hand. Doing so by pulling the glass rose from my hair, now holding it as he lifted himself off me. Then he walked to the door and paused long enough to tell me the shocking truth.

“Just like the last time you begged me, Ella.”

“No... No...” I denied over and over again.

“You will beg me again, beg me...to make you mine,” he promised, before crushing the rose in his hand and letting the tiny shards fall when he opened his fingers.

I could take no more and I turned away from him to cry, not wanting him to see my tears. In fact, I had expected him to just leave in his anger, but he seemed to linger for a few moments. Then after my shuddering sobs had eased, I finally heard him leave... he no doubt wished to enjoy my pain for longer.

I honestly didn’t know.

In fact, I couldn't be certain I knew anything anymore. And worst of all, without my memories, I didn't know if he was telling the truth or not.

Or was I now...

Just lying to myself?

* * *

I didn't know how much time had passed, but after my frustrated tears had run dry, I had torn myself free of my dress and put back on the clothes that Jared had created for me. The feel of his ring firmly in my pocket was one comfort I needed right now.

By the time I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was a tray of food waiting for me at the end of the bed. But even more confusing wasn't that I hadn't heard anyone come in, no, it was the sight of the glass rose back to being perfect and sitting on the tray next to my plate.

"He fixed it... but why?" I asked myself out loud, as if hearing my own voice was also a comfort. As for the food, I knew that starving myself wouldn't achieve anything either, because well... I didn't think going on a hunger strike would make any difference to my current situation. Not when I had my baby to think about. Another life I had every reason to fight for.

So, I grabbed the bread that I now recognized as the same type I had eaten in the tavern with Tyr and Asher. Two people I hoped were okay, along with everyone else I had been forced to leave behind.

Of course, my mind kept going back to Jared and what he must be going through, while he was no doubt trying to plan ways for getting me back. Which was also why I knew I needed to be ready for when he did. Keeping up my strength being one of

them.

When my door unlocked again, I had just finished everything on my tray. Even draining the glass of water twice, as it came with a jug to refill it. I tensed as the door opened, expecting once more to find Garmr entering the room. However, what I didn't expect was the guard who wouldn't step foot over the threshold. A demon that once upon a time I would have no doubt found terrifying. But since entering Jared's world, I had honestly seen too much to be scared right now. Even of the dark grey demon that had wrinkly hard skin, a jaw full of too many jagged teeth, and twisted gnarled horns that looked like pieces of a dead tree. His eyes, like Garmr's when angry, were a glowing red and deep set under high arched, over pronounced brows.

"The King requests your presence in the throne room," he stated, making me repeat a single word of that sentence.

“Requests?”

“Commands,” he corrected, making me huff.

“I thought so... and if I don’t?”

“I am not allowed to use force,” he replied, surprising me, because that was the first threat I had been expecting.

“Then I think I am good here, thanks,” I replied sarcastically, making him growl.

“I would not advise this, as he will be angered if he has to come and get you himself...and he is allowed to use force,”he added, making me sigh because I didn’t exactly have many options. And who knew, maybe it would offer me a chance to escape. Which was why I swung my legs off the bed and walked toward the door.

“Then, I guess, lead the way,” I said, making the demon huff, with actual steam coming out of his large nostrils.

At least I was doing this on my own terms. I had made a point of getting out of that dress, knowing he would likely be angry about that. I wondered if it was the thing that would actually send him over the edge and lash out at me. Because strangely, up to now, he hadn’t hurt me, something I still couldn’t wrap my head around. Other than manhandling me a bit, he had remained, for the most part, surprisingly gentle.

Something I knew couldn’t last.

The demon led me through the dark hallways, that were easier to see thanks to the lantern the guard carried on a pole. We also walked through one of the arches this time, and I knew straight down headed back to the balcony.

The castle seemed like a labyrinth of doors and archways leading off in all directions. Telling me that if I ever did manage to escape that bedroom, then I would only end up lost. I could also tell, with the lack of windows, that this castle must have been at least half built underground. Perhaps inside of the mountain I had seen glimpses of when on the balcony.

I also then wondered if Lucius's castle was like this, because Amelia had explained it had been built inside of a mountain he owned. But then, with how uninviting and creepy this place looked, I couldn't exactly see my cousin being happy living there if it was.

The place didn't change much until we walked through a pair of ornate doors. And just like back in my room, there were battle scenes carved in the panels of black wood, with the metal handles coming out of the picture. These were two hands, outstretched from the burning souls below, as a rain of fire came from the winged demons above. Again, totally creepy and not exactly where anyone that wasn't evil would want to set up home.

And speaking of demons that lived here, the guard opened these doors for me to walk through, into a room that made me gasp. It was vastly different to the rest of the castle I had seen. This space looked like it belonged in a fairy tale, it was like walking from night into day. A great stain glass window created a kaleidoscope of colors to play and dance on the pale marble floor. The light streaming in through the arched window depicted a scene of heavenly grace, as Gods and Goddesses sat in golden thrones watching those below. All around them a garden of Eden grew, that created most of the color in the piece. One that took up nearly the entirety of the wall that must have been at least four stories high.

There was nothing else in this huge space, one that was big enough you could have fit fifty of my trailers in here stacked like Jenga and still have room for fifty of my trucks. I felt like whistling, just so I could hear the echo. But then my guard alerted me to the fact that opposite this incredible window was another door.

Although there should be another name given for a set of doors that enormous. This time there was no carved scene, just panels of arched black wood with curled iron fixtures.

Everything was bigger, with the ceilings reminding me of English cathedrals. In fact, the space we were in now, looked as if it had been made with giants in mind, making me wonder if this was Garmr's castle or one he had simply taken by force.

Of course, one look at the grumpy guard and I didn't think asking was a good idea. The very last thing he looked like he wanted to be doing was escorting me anywhere.

Two guards stood either side of the colossal doors that must have been the same species of demon, because they looked very much the same. But then again, I wondered if the same thing could be said about humans, in their eyes.

This random thought left me as the doors opened up, after the two guards each pulled the lever at their sides at the same time. The sound of wheels turning as some great mechanism was being used made it echo throughout the enormous hall. And speaking of enormous rooms, I ended up leaving one colossal space for another.

The vast space was lined with Greek style columns, this time carved from a lighter grey stone that made them stand out in contrast against the bare black, rock walls. In front of each column stood stone plinths with each holding a large golden bowl that was filled with flames. As if lighting the way down to the main feature at the end, one that made me shudder when finally looking that way.

For there, sat on a very demonic looking throne was Garmr and like always...

He was waiting for me.

22

SUMMONING THE COURAGE FOR REVENGE

The sight of him sitting in that massive throne made me shudder. I wanted nothing more than to just run from the room.

The back of the chair rose up in a collection of giant dragon-style wings all interlocked together. Ten sets of them, at least, all fanned out, creating a huge backdrop that took up most of the wall behind. Each one tipped with deadly looking horns at multiple points, with the bottom of the chair like stone tree roots coming straight from the ground, anchoring it in place.

This was situated on a raised platform with a fan of steps leading up to it. Behind, were swathes of soft black fabric that hung from the arch behind, similar to what was in my room by my bed. Either side of the throne, were two doors tucked close to the corners of the room. Each framed in its own carved stone arch with keystone above.

The room was big enough to have held thousands of bodies, yet there looked to be just me and him. I didn't know whether this was worse or not, because I was left to walk the entire distance toward his throne alone. The long length of black carpet leading the way to what seemed to be my doom. My footsteps were barely heard because my nerves were that shot, that one sound and I might have taken off running.

Which meant that by the time I got to the foot of the stairs of the raised platform I had to fist my hands by my sides just to stop them from shaking. As for theoh mighty kinghimself, he looked eager for me to get there. The gleam in his eye told me that he

had something planned and whatever it was, it would not bode well for me.

And I was right.

“Ella, my dearest, I have guests I would like you to meet.”

I kept in whatever snarky remark I would have liked to give, watching as one of the doors in the corner opened. Then in walked what I would have easily classed as being a real Queen.

She wore a long, dark red dress, that was edged in gold and fell off her shoulders into long sleeves past her hands. The style was similar to that of some medieval fair maiden. Her waist was cinched in by the thick gold under corset, that was glittering with jewels and coils of golden rope keeping them in place. This matched the crown she wore, which was deadly gold spikes decorated in rubies and diamonds. Her long black hair hung down in waves all the way past her waist.

As for her face, her haughty expression gave her an air of arrogance, and she looked down her slim nose as if everything displeased her. Her dark brown eyes held a cruelty to them that instantly told everyone around her that this woman could not be trusted. The regal way she moved told me she had most likely spent most her life as royalty, oh... and she wasn't alone. In walked another woman, this one dressed as if she were ready for war. Both women sneered at me the second they saw me.

The second women's armor was strange and made from what looked like a delicate filigree of painted black metal. The chest piece was molded to her tall frame, covering her from the top of her shoulders all the way to her hips, making me wonder how she even got in that thing. Long, black, sheer gauze material floated down from the edge of the metal, acting as a skirt. Her skin was so pale she looked half dead and

with her black eyes void of any emotion, I could have well believed it. Her hair was worn loose, like the queen's, with white streaks running through the black, matching her own crown. One far less gaudy and extravagant than the queen because it looked to be made from stark white bone fingers.

"Your Majesty, how good of you to come so quickly," Garmr said without rising from his chair.

"Yes, well when your messenger told me what you have for me, then of course I came, for I have been waiting to kill my husband's bastard children since that harlot Nymph tricked him into bedding her."

At this I nearly lost my shit, knowing now she was talking about our mother, which would mean this was...

"Persephone," I said her name with distain and through gritted teeth, making the woman who had accompanied her fly at me in rage. She was so quick that I had no time to react as she back handed me hard enough that I not only hit the floor, but I went skidding along it!

The jarring hit made my ears ring as well as making me taste blood in my mouth. The pain of it made my eyes water, and I could only hope she hadn't broken my jaw!

"Silence, half-blood!" she snarled, coming at me again, only this time, Garmr intervened. He was by my side in a second, grabbing her arm and preventing her from striking me again.

"I believe we have business first, for you know the deal!" he growled angrily. Making me spit out blood to the floor, as I tried to get up, hoping and praying to the Gods that the baby was okay after that fall. The woman, who I was guessing to be Persephone's daughter, Melinoë, yanked her hand free and snapped,

“Then let’s get on with it!”

“Yes, please do, for my daughter, Melinoë, has been quite eager for the chance to torture this one... and better yet, I get to watch... it is, however, just a shame my husband won’t be here to witness it,” the queen said cruelly, but Garmr didn’t seem to be listening because he helped me up from the floor, making me snatch my hand away from him. He gritted his teeth before forcing me to look his way, now gripping my chin and assessing the damage.

The blood on my split lip was dripping down my chin, as well as from my nose, making him snarl back at Melinoë. Then after running the back of his fingers down my burning cheek, he pulled piece of black fabric from his suit jacket pocket and handed it to me so I could hold it to my bleeding nose.

“And what of my end of the bargain?” he asked, his voice now hard and void of earlier pleasantries.

“Yes, yes, you may have my legions to fight in your silly war, I care not, for all I want is the girl’s head. Shame, though, you don’t have the other one.”

I gritted my teeth at that, knowing that she was talking about Lerna.

“This is the only girl that concerns me, for she is all I need,” Garmr said, his eyes on me, before turning back to face the queen.

“And had you possession of them both, then you could have bargained for much more,” she countered, making Garmr scoff.

“Ah, but I think you misunderstand me, Persephone.”

“That is Queen of the Underworld to you, Geryon,” she snapped, making me wonder

why she thought he was called that? Was this what Jared had been talking about when mentioning this name?

“But you see, that is not my name at all,” he replied, now dropping all pretense and revealing his true self.

I had a feeling that this had all been a set up for the queen. Because even I knew now, that Garmr didn’t want me dead. Even without my powers. Which could only mean that he needed the ones who had stolen it to begin with.

That he needed them here.

Oh no, this was bad.

“I... I don’t understand, you shouldn’t be here, not in my realm,” the queen stuttered, as if realizing that she had been played.

“Soon to be my realm, my dear, and speaking of which, I would like to introduce you to my Queen...” He held his hand out to indicate me, making the other two glare at me in shock.

“How dare you! I demand to know the meaning of this!” she shrieked in outrage, making Garmr grin. One that stayed in place even when her daughter ran at me, a dagger pulled from her back now in hand. A dagger that was about to kill me. But then just before she could get close, she suddenly froze in place like a statue half running. A green fog started to hold her suspended in place, swirling around her like unseen shackles had gripped her.

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“Ah, ah, ah, Melinoë, I can’t allow that. Now you see, you have something that belongs to me or should I say...belongs to my queen.”

At this Melinoë started to scream as if something was being ripped out of her. And well...it was.

I looked to Garmr to see that he was drawing her powers from her, pulling and pulling as if handling a thick phantom rope in front of him. The coiled green ribbons of smoke were dragged towards him and, piece by piece, they were yanked away from her.

“What do you think you are doing?! Stop it, stop it at once!” the queen shrieked, trying to stop him, but Garmr used a free hand to backhand her, just as hard as her daughter had done to me. Something that made her go falling to the floor, with her crown now clattering on the stone as it rolled from her head.

Then Garmr started walking closer and closer to Melinoë, pulling harder and harder, making her scream in agony until her knees buckled and hit the floor. She tried clawing at her metal covered chest until suddenly, it released her completely. This as the last remains of my power left her. She fell forward, now scrambling along the floor, trying to chase the power like loose threads she desperately wanted to cling on to.

It made me wonder why it hadn’t hurt like that with me when that creature had taken it? Had it been because I had unknowingly given it up willingly? I looked to Garmr, who now had the book of souls floating next to him like this was the true core of my power.

“Come here, Ella,” he ordered gently. I shook my head and started walking backward.

“Ella, there is no escaping this,” he told me as I started to move faster. His voice now echoing the louder he became.

“There is no escaping your fate!”

I turned and started running down the center of the room, desperate to make it to the doors. Desperate to escape. But it was like he said, there was no escaping this. Not when a green portal suddenly opened up in front of me, making me scream. Because I had been running too fast to stop in time, and I slammed into him. His strong frame made me bounce back a step before his hands went to my waist to stop me from falling.

“There is no escaping me,” he growled demonically, making his eyes glow crimson, and the darkness around them grew outward along his face. Then he forcefully took my hand in his cold grip, making me try and fight him. But then, when he made the book appear right next to me, I knew what he was going to do.

“No! No, I don’t want it! Please stop!” I shouted, knowing what would happen the second I touched it. Because it wasn’t just about getting my powers back, it was about what he would make me do when I did. And I was soon to find out.

I could only fight him for so long before he slapped my hand to the book. The second I made contact, I gasped, as every single soul came rushing back to me.

And then just like last time...I was screaming.

The power of it coiled up around me as if trying to consume me whole. That same vortex of souls all swimming around me, this time forcing me to grip onto him, as if I

needed the anchor. Which was when he wrapped an arm more firmly around me and said,

“Just let it happen... that’s it... let it consume you, let it consume us both, my queen.”

I forced my hands to grip him tighter, holding on as a bright green light blinded me. The overwhelming feeling of rage and hurt and pain hit me all at once, compelling me to control it.

So, I did.

But the moment I gave in to the temptation of dominating the power, I started to lose myself. I felt myself falling under, unable to resist the power from taking me over. My mind was getting lost in an abyss, like falling down a well and gripping the sides, desperate to stop myself. Until I finally landed and when I did, I knew my body and mind was no longer just my own.

I wondered for a moment if this was what it was like for Jared when in his HellBeast form. Like an outsider peering through the window with no control over our own body. I was conscious and could see everything my body did, but I was no longer in the driving seat.

I was a prisoner.

Which was when I discovered the truth. Garmr had been right. Because the moment the Summoner power took over and changed me, I became someone else. I blinked through the last remains of the switch, before looking to Garmr in a new way. And he too looked down at me, as if I was finally back.

“My love?” I heard my voice speak but it wasn’t my conscious self that had spoken.

“Yes... finally,finally, my love, you return to me,”he said fervently, as if it overwhelmed him as he crushed me to his body, holding me tight. Then he pulled back, taking my face in his hands and I wanted to scream, “NO!” I wanted to pull away when he started to kiss me. My cry of pain only came out as a deep, passionate moan, as if the Summoner part of me had waited an entire lifetime for this.

At the same time, I heard the queen and her daughter call out in anger. Making myself and Garmr part enough to look their way to see a mother consoling her wicked daughter.

“YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS, GARMR!” the queen screamed, making me look to the man whose arms still held me in his tight embrace. Then, a voice that sounded like me asked,

“And you brought me things to play with?” The question made me wince inside the prison of my own mind.

“Yes, a gift, for your return.”

“A gift?” I asked in what sounded like bewilderment, making me scream silently, ‘don’t listen to him!’

Garmr then took me by the tops of my arms and turned me to face them so he could speak behind me, right by my ear.

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“Yes, for they killed your mother, your dear sweet, Leuce... they took her from you and your sister.”

I heard myself gasp, then a strange sound I have never made before rumbled from me. I snarled at them both, feeling the rage building. Doing so until it unleashed in the form of green flames now licking down my arms, all the way to the tips of my fingers.

But then this nightmare wasn't over yet, because this was when the true horror began, starting with an order from Garmr.

“Kill them, Anástasi, make them pay for what they took from you.” At this, my other self needed no more to release her powers. The serpents of green smoke whipped out, her souls all rising up around them.

After that, I was forced to watch as she...

Slaughtered them both.

23

THROW A HELLBEAST A BONE

JARED

Getting into the castle now that we had a map was a far easier task than I thought it would be. As it turned out there was a tunnel system that led merchants safely inside

without the chance of them being attacked by thieves on the road. Which meant it was a direct route in.

Of course, the first thing we'd had to do was make it back to the camp, and thanks to our horses, who seemed more than eager to return, it seemed like no time at all. Which meant before I knew it, we had the map spread out on a table in the largest tent in the camp. And we needed the space because everyone joined in as I told them the plan to get Ella out. We all agreed that this would only work if just one of us snuck inside, which no one argued, would be me.

However, the others were going to accompany me to the tunnel system in case Garmr had soldiers there keeping guard. The plan was not to draw any unwanted attention as we didn't want anything able to tip him off. Because we couldn't risk him moving her again, which meant this was our only shot.

I couldn't fuck it up again.

The one good bit of news was that Koro had managed to get word to Dominic and the other Kings. Asher had the foresight to include our own side in this. Ensuring Koro's messenger reached the Gate of Hermes with our own instructions to follow.

Now as for our way in, this was through the cave of Hecate, beyond the temple entrance, one built in the Goddess's honor. She was known best for her magic and witchcraft. Most of which her knowledge of herbs, poisonous plants, necromancy, and sorcery was the same magic passed down today. For she was the mother of such power in this Realm. Even a lot of the Summoners magic could be related back to her. But she was also part of the Fates too, for it was said that like the God Janus, she was known to be a tripartite Goddess. Something which allowed her to see in multiple directions all at once and was a protector of all between. Whatever that truly meant, I had no fucking clue.

The map showed that this cave system led straight through, as it bordered the castle of Thanatos, who was the personification of death. Although this wasn't as grim as it sounded, for he represented a non-violent death, which was vastly different to his counterpart. His sisters, known as the Keres, were the spirits of diseases and slaughter.

Now that was one fucked up family tree if ever there was one, but then again, wasn't everyone in this realm of Hell. Well as long as none of the fuckers got in my way, I didn't care, for I would use this cave to my advantage.

Speaking of which.

"The temple of Hecate, is up ahead," I told the others. We still had the use of our horses, as Tyr had not released his hold on them yet. A good job too or this journey would have taken far too long without a portal to aid us.

Honestly, I hadn't even understood how Garmr had managed it. Summoners weren't well known for their skills in creating portals to use instantly. I had only ever known the likes of Niniane, and she first had to create a link to travel from place to place. An anchor of a kind. Yet Garmr had managed to discover a way to stretch those powers to creating large enough portals to sustain vast life to travel through.

Just another reason to be wary now, as I knew the enemy could arise at any minute should we tip them off. But then it was like Bill had said, no one should know of this route. It wasn't common knowledge, or why else would a map be needed for the merchant to complete the job?

As for Bill, he had stayed behind, as I knew too many of us would only draw suspicion as we traveled. So, like before, it remained the four of us, but once entrance into the castle was found, I would then go in alone. Something my brother had wanted to argue against but it was no use, my mind had been set.

The square front of the temple held six large Greek pillars, that continued around the sides of the long rectangular building. At least forty steps led up to the huge structure, meaning we had no choice but to leave our horses behind. The triangular top, just under the tiled roof, was carved with the Gods and quite honestly, looked like a million other Greek temples in this place.

Inside, however, held nothing more than a giant statue of the Goddess at the very end. The marble floor like mirrored glass, reflecting our own images as we made our way across the large space. Arched coves cut into the walls held smaller statues of various deities. The whole room was floor to ceiling pale marble and was as tall as the statue ahead, being at least five stories high.

“They were never very subtle, the Gods,” my brother said, making Marcus scoff.

“About as subtle as their egos.”

And well, he wasn’t wrong there. But then when you gained your power from the belief of others, then I suppose it came with the territory. As for my brother and I, we were born from the belly of this realm, which was what fed our own power. One that would only falter should the Underworld collapse and be no more.

Something I never thought I would have to worry about until talk of that fucker Garmr actually bringing about Ragnarök.

“I don’t see a door, do you?” Orth said as we reached the end and he was right. This gave Tyr the excuse to head straight to the wall behind the statue and pull his axe down from his back,

“Then let’s make one,” he said and before we could stop him, he started hammering into the walls with his axe. The marble gave way and cracked with ease, only to show nothing but bare rock beneath. Then he would move further along and do the same,

until eventually, he stopped when there were five door-shaped holes and not a single one became an actual door.

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“Or we could try this,” Marcus said after using his brain and reading an inscription he found hidden on the wall. One only shown once he brought his staff up to glow next to it. This was because the writing was white etched into the pale marble. This made it only visible when light was held a certain way against it. Along with the hidden panel to press that made the entrance to the hidden cave open.

“Ah see, there it is,” Tyr stated with a smirk, making my brother laugh before slapping him on the back, saying,

“I am sure had you knocked the temple down, we would have found it at some point.”

Tyr took this as lighthearted jest, making the temple echo with his laughter. One that was thankfully abandoned, or this mission would have been over before it even begun.

“After you,” I said, prompting Marcus to go first, seeing as he was the one with the light source. As well, I didn’t think it would be quite as effective lighting up the tunnel with my eyeballs glowing red like pointless fucking headlights.

“I swear if there is one fucking rope bridge, I am going back,” Orth complained, making me scoff.

“Yeah, well any shit like last time and I will be throwing both your arses over the edge.”

“Do I want to know?” Tyr asked, making all three of us say at once,

“No!”

“No!”

“No!”

To which he held up his hands in surrender.

We continued on through the tunnel, one that would open up wider in parts before narrowing again. However, the next time it started to get bigger, it continued until we were facing a cavernous space. As if someone had hallowed out part of the mountain and what we found was...

A fucking tomb.

“Fuck me, that’s a lot of bones,” Orthrus said, and he wasn’t fucking wrong. There must have been hundreds of thousands, all piled up in pyramids that almost reached the top. Hell, there looked like it could have been millions of pieces of bone, making me wonder how many creatures that would have made?

“Hey, J, do these bones remind you of...” Marcus started to say, making me finish,

“HellHounds,” I said the second one of the skulls rolled towards me. One I ended up stopping with my foot.

“What the Hell?” Orth muttered in awe.

“Right choice of words there, what the fuck are all of these doing here?” Marcus asked.

“I wish I knew but whatever the reason, someone went to a lot of effort to bring these

all here,” I said, making my brother frown in question and prompting me to point out, “Well think about it, they couldn’t have all died down here, could they?”

“But then why would anyone be stock piling bones?”

I shook my head.

“I have no clue, and I don’t really ever want there to come a point where I find out,” I said, as for whatever the reason, it wasn’t going to be for anything good.

Speaking of not good, Marcus stopped long enough to find a different type of horned skull, picking it up and telling me,

“It looks like these aren’t just all HellHound bones after all, this looks like a Chimera offspring.”

I frowned at that, while my brother snatched the skull and said,

“Nah, it looks more like an Erymanthian Boar.”

“Are you fucking blind, caveman? It looks like a Chimera!” Marcus argued, making me roll my eyes.

“Yeah, I wonder how it would look if it was stuffed up your ass, we could call you asshorn for the rest of your life,” my brother retaliated.

“Would you two quit it, we are supposed to be doing this quietly,” I growled back at them, making my brother toss the skull to the pile, before he kept walking.

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The only problem with this was that it disturbed the rest. Making the first few bones come rolling down as we all turned to watch. We sighed in relief when it only caused a slight disruption but then, some more bones followed it. And then before we knew it, a fuck load more followed those, until there was a fucking avalanche of bones, all coming down behind us!

“Oh shit! RUN!” Orth shouted. I looked back in time to see a fucking tsunami wave of bones coming straight for us, ready to bury us alive as the mountain floor rumbled around us.

“FUCK!” Marcus shouted, as my eyes scanned the area looking for any way out of this shit.

“UP THERE, ON THE LEDGE!” I shouted above the thunder of movement behind us as wave after wave began to fall. As it was like the domino effect, it wasn’t just one pyramid, it was them fucking all! A sea of bones coming at us, ready to crush us and bury us alive.

“I SEE IT!” Marcus shouted.

“BE READY, BROTHER, TYR, MARCUS, JUMP FOR IT ON MY MARK... ONE... TWO... THREE!” I shouted as the ledge became at its lowest point for us to leap on to. As for Marcus, he made it easily, jumping up after Tyr and I. However, this time, it was my brother who needed to be saved, and Marcus quickly grabbed him and pulled him in... T-shirt intact, the lucky fucker.

Of course, we were higher up now, but this wasn’t going to save us, as the bones just

kept getting higher and higher as more pyramids fell. We continued to run up the higher platform, leaving me praying that not only would we make it out of this alive, but that we were heading the right way. As the mountain floor we had been walking on was now completely covered in meters of bone.

Bone that continued to chase us until we could finally see a doorway cut into the rock up ahead.

“RUN!”

“I AM FUCKING RUNNING!”

“THEN RUN FUCKING FASTER!” I yelled at my brother who was last.

I watched as Tyr made it, then Marcus, then I waited for my brother being chased by the wall of grey bone coming at him. I reached out and yanked him the rest of the way. Only just making it there myself before the doorway instantly became blocked, as it filled up with bone. Doing so tightly enough that it created a barrier for anymore to follow.

We all bent over to catch our breaths and when Marcus and Orth were about to speak, I held up my hand and snapped,

“Not a fucking word!” Then I stormed off, snatching Marcus’s glowing staff from his hand and using it to lead and light the way down the tunnel.

Because now I was left with an even bigger problem after finally rescuing my girl. A question that left me asking myself...

Who would rescue us?

THE CASTLE OF THANATOS

Wisely, no one spoke after this, because in a nutshell, we were fucked! As not only had I intended to do this quietly, but I had also planned for us to have a way out. But as it was, unless we found another route, then this rescue was going to go one way. I was going to save Ella from one Fate before potentially throwing her straight into another. Oh yeah, we would be together, but unless we had some Romeo and Juliet kind of bullshit ending intent on dying together, then this was not going to plan at all.

The tunnel didn't branch off anywhere, which also didn't bode well for us. Meaning that by the time we walked long enough to reach the castle entrance, I still didn't have a fucking clue how I was going to get us out of this one.

Because there was only one door.

Our only shred of luck was that there were no guards to contend with, and when I say luck, I meant that in the barest sense of the word...like, no bigger than fucking ant sized. Surprisingly, the landslide of bones hadn't even alerted anyone to our presence, despite causing a fucking avalanche big enough to shake the mountain.

"Now I am going to go in there and by the time I come out with my girl, I want a fucking plan!" I barked at my brother and Marcus.

"Er..." both of them said, looking at each other like naughty fucking schoolboys!

"I am serious, this plan is properly fucked if we can't get out of this place," I told them.

"I think I..."

“Not now, Tyr,” I snapped, as I continued to give my brother and my best friend a piece of my very pissed off mind.

“I don’t care if you have to try and claw your way out of this fucking place...”

“HellBeast...”

“I said not now!” I shouted at Tyr, who instead of going the fuck away, grabbed me by the shoulder. I was about to punch him in the face, but he grabbed mine first and forced it back.

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“Or we could just use those steps,” he said, making my eyes widen as he let me go. Because he was right, there was, in fact, a staircase built into the stone that lead to the top of the mountain above us. One that daylight was pouring in from. I sighed in relief, something mirrored by the other two, as this had thankfully got them out of the shit.

“You lucky sons of bitches!” I said, now looking back at them, making my brother shrug as Marcus leaned against the wall, looked at his nails, and said,

“No biggy, I knew that was there.”

“Ha, like fuck you did,” Orth scoffed.

“Now I am going in there and no matter what, I don’t want any of you to follow.”

“But...” my brother tried to protest like I knew he would.

“I am serious, Orth, anything happens, get your arses out of here and alert the others.”

At this my brother’s shoulders lowered in defeat.

“Fine. But for the record, I don’t fucking like this plan,” he stated gruffly.

“Yeah well, it’s the only one we got, so it’s tough shit. Now wish me luck,” I said, now facing the door, breaking the lock, and stepping inside.

I knew my brother didn’t like letting me do this alone, his expression told me as

much. But in all honesty, I couldn't risk it. I was already trying to break out the love of my life, the last thing I needed was potentially losing my brother too.

Plus, it was like I said, it would be easier to stay hidden this way. Something that was proven when I started to hear voices, making me put my back to the wall, keeping to the shadows. Guards were obviously making their rounds, and they spoke of the upcoming battle. I listened in, knowing that any information I could obtain was only going to be useful later on. However, the second I heard talk of their Queen's return, I had a job to keep my breathing even.

I waited for the voices to trail off before stepping from the wall and making my way through the hallway once more. There was no natural light, as this castle had been built inside a mountain, one very similar to Lucius's home in Germany.

It was a catacomb of tunnels and hidden rooms that I knew I could easily get lost in. But thankfully, the map had shown exactly where to go, one I had memorized. As there was only one place a merchant providing dresses and material needed to go and that was the bedchamber. A place I hoped they were keeping her, as the anger at thinking of her in some damp, dark jail cell somewhere had me even more on edge.

But then, I also had to question Garmr's need to get her dresses in the first place. Knowing I would also lose my shit if I found out he was keeping her in his own bedchamber. I swear if he laid a finger on her, then nothing would stop me from bursting into my HellBeast.

I tried to push these murderous thoughts down as far as they would go, so I could concentrate on finding her. I walked through an open arch and looked both ways, to find only one door that looked like it could belong to a bedroom. So, I made a left and after checking there was no one standing guard, I tried the door, surprised when I found it unlocked.

I almost gave up before looking, as I knew he wouldn't have chanced her behind a door that wasn't secure. As surely, Ella would have tried to have run. However, I was glad when I did, as the second I saw her red hair against the pillow, I swear my heart nearly stopped.

I had found her.

I stepped further inside, making sure to close the door behind me quietly, so as not to alarm her enough to scream out. I walked softly to the bed, briefly taking note of the gothic room, making me grit my teeth, hoping it had only been used for her.

The second I got to the bed and saw her start to stir, I quickly covered her mouth with my hand, lifting my finger up to cover my lips when she opened her eyes. They were wide with a moment of shock before narrowing furiously, making me frown. I removed my hand slowly and told her on instinct,

"Ella, it's me." However, the second her eyes started to glow green, I knew the awful truth...I was too late. This was proven when she suddenly grabbed me by the throat and was strong enough to force me backwards as she rose to sitting.

"E...ll...a," I choked out as her grip tightened before she suddenly tossed me backwards, her strength shocking... her aim even better, as I crashed into a pair of wooden screens. Damn it, but she almost winded me, making me rub my throat and try again.

"Ella... it's me... fuck."

"My name is Anástasi!" she roared at me, thrusting out her hands and making me move from the walls as streams of her power started circling the room. I rose to my feet, panic beginning to take hold. She was wearing a green night dress, flowing around her as if she was her own energy source, manipulating even the material she

wore.

“No! Your name is Ella, and I am Jared!” At this she shook her head a bit, making me watch her like a hawk.

“Silence!” she screamed, banging her head with the palm of her hand, as if my girl was trying to break out.

“ELLA, PUSH THROUGH IT!” I shouted.

“NO! She is no more! There is only I, the Summoner Queen!” she bellowed, flicking her wrist and making her power lasso my hands and my arms, holding me prisoner.

“That’s not true, I know she is in there. Ella, you have to try!” Again, she shook her head, making me try harder to tell her.

“I am your HellBeast! I am Cerberus!” I shouted, making her sob suddenly, covering her mouth with both hands and releasing me of her power.

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“No... No... he left me! He left me to die!” she shouted, making me jerk my head back in shock.

“No! Baby, that’s not what happened, the battle, you wanted to leave...”

“Enough!” she screamed before suddenly she was in front of me again, this time pinning me to the wall, before snarling,

“My HellBeast is dead!”

I started choking, having no choice but to try and pry her wrist back to free me, something that prompted her to toss me across the room once more. This time I crashed into a wardrobe, making clothes come spilling out. The outfit I had created for her was torn on the floor, just like her memory of me. Because Garmr had done something other than just giving her back her powers.

He had changed her.

I held my stomach as I coughed through the pain, broken pieces of wood around me from the destroyed furniture. I staggered back to my feet, knowing now that it was no use. She was too strong, and I couldn’t fight her.

I wouldn’t fight her.

Although I could stop her... She flew at me, her fist heading towards my face, and I grabbed her hand, catching this time as part of my HellBeast. Then I told her,

“Your HellBeast isn’t dead, sweetheart!”

At this her eyes widened as she looked to my hand in shock. A flickering of recognition made her glowing eyes simmer down, before she spoke a single word, enough to give me hope.

“Cerberus?”

I closed my eyes as relief flooded through me. But then, the moment was quickly stolen from us, as Garmr entered the room.

“I see we have found ourselves an intruder,” he said, snapping Ella back into her controlled state, the Summoner in her blazing forward as she grabbed my neck and actually lifted me from the ground. This was before slamming me back against a broken mirror. Then she stepped away, her powers taking her place and effectively keeping me pinned there, as she was now free to walk up to Garmr.

“You’d get Ella to fight me, you fucking coward!” I growled, making him sneer at me.

“But this is so much more fun, for I did offer your head on a platter as a gift for my Queen. But I must say, I didn’t expect you to deliver it yourself,” he replied, making me snarl.

“Fight me!”

“I think not, no, this is far more fitting but before your end, I wish you to see who she truly belongs to... show him, my dear,” he said, and I was forced to watch as my Ella wrapped her arms around him and kissed him, pouring everything into it. Her fingers fisted in his white hair as she pulled him closer. The sight was one of the most painful I’ve had to endure, and one that had me trying to fight like a madman against the

power of her souls.

“Mmm, delicious, my love,” Garmr cooed.

“You controlling bastard! What have you done to her!?” I snarled, making him grin.

“I did nothing but show her who she was always meant to be, her true self, with no HellBeast mongrel holding her back!” he snapped, making her suddenly jerk back a little.

“HellBeast?” she questioned, making Garmr grit his teeth.

“It is an expression, my dear,” he told her, making me narrow my gaze at them both. As it was true, she believed I was dead. Whatever version of Ella this was, it was like time had reversed. As if this was the Ella Garmr had first taken.

He must have made her believe I had left her to die, that I myself had died because Cerberus wasn't at the gates. I knew this when my own beast wined inside of me, begging to be let out. But I couldn't, not here, because if she attacked us, then I didn't know what he would do. She could accidentally get hurt. Which was why I had to try and reason with her.

“He lied to you! Ella... Anástasi!” I said her name, making her gasp. But Garmr gripped her chin and pulled her face back to his.

“He lies, he is not who you think he is, he is an intruder trying to kidnap you, to steal you from me again!” he told her, making her growl demonically.

“No! Anástasi, you need to listen to me, he has manipulated you!” I tried but it was no use. I could see Garmr's red eyes glow as he held her gaze, then what he said next fired ice into my veins.

“You love me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, and it was like being shot in the fucking heart, but no more so than when she replied to his next question.

“Then kill him for me.” To which she looked back at me, her eyes lost once more to the darkness inside her.

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“Yes,” she said as she started to walk towards me. I tried to fight harder against the power she held me with, but it was no use. So, I did the only thing I could do...pleaded with her.

“Ella, fight it! Try, baby, I am begging you!”

“Ella is lost to my queen, your pleas are useless and nothing but entertaining,” Garmr said laughing. But I ignored him and focused instead on Ella.

“You are being controlled, you have to fight it. Everything he told you is a lie!” I tried. Finally, she reached me and with a tender hand placed on my cheek, I thought I had finally broken through. Tears filled my eyes as she gave me a curious look.

But then, she thrust her arm back and suddenly I was in agony as she stabbed me with a piece of broken wood straight into my gut. I roared in pain, and all at once I fell to the floor as her powers released me. My hands went to the stake in my stomach, my blood soaking the stone as my strength left me, making me collapse. My eyes focused on the blood as it traveled through the cracks between the slabs.

But then, there was a glistening of something else, as I saw it rolling towards me. A ring...Ella's ring.

The one I gave her.

So, with the last of my strength, I reached out and grabbed it, clutching it to me as if it was the last part of her I could hold on to. Because I had failed to save her. And in the end...

Love had killed us both.

Which is why with my last breath, I spoke the words that I could only hope somewhere deep inside her, she could hear...

“I love you, Red, Ella, My love...my wild one.”

After that I finally let go, feeling myself falling into the abyss of death as my world...

Ended.

25

BETRAYAL

The moment I became aware that I was still breathing, I woke with a start, only one name slipping past my lips like many times before.

“Ella!” I called out in the type of desperation only true love could speak of. I bolted upright, the pain in doing so only proving to me that I wasn’t dead yet, and this wasn’t my own brand of Hell. Although without seeing her here now, it felt like I had been sent there.

“Easy, brother.” Orth’s voice was the only anchor I could cling onto as Ella’s voice became a haunting memory.

“What... what happened?” I asked, feeling my head spin, as if I had lost too much blood and most of it now went rushing to my head.

“We saved your ass, or should I say, the Vampire did.”

I frowned at that, knowing of only one vampire he could mean.

“Lucius?”

“In the flesh,” the man in question replied, making me focus on where it had come from, seeing him standing by a door and not one I recognized. Just like the room I was now in. One where the walls looked as if they were made from giant shards of Obsidian. As for the bed, this too looked to have been carved out of the stone, with very little else in the room.

“Where is Ella?” I asked, despite my mind already screaming this at me...she was gone. I looked first to the one who wouldn’t answer me and then to my brother, who looked like he did want to.

“She... she...”

“She what?” I snapped, as even in my weakened state, I could feel my anger building.

“She tried to kill you, Cerberus,” Lucius answered, clearly knowing that my brother didn’t have the heart to say it.

“No... no, she...” This denial quickly trailed off as memories started to assault me. First with waking her up, to then having her fight me. And then, her tender touch, just before... before...the pain.

“She is lost to you,” Lucius told me, making me shout,

“No! It wasn’t her! It wasn’t my Ella. She was being controlled, manipulated. Her power, it’s controlling her, and Garmr, he is controlling it.”

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Lucius released a sigh and told me,

“That may be so, but without a way to free her from it, then we must plan for the war to come.”

I shook my head, my brain scrambling for the right words to argue against it.

“He needs time,” Orthrus said.

“Unfortunately, HellBeast, time is one thing we may not have,” Lucius replied before walking away, leaving my brother and I alone.

“Don’t listen to him, we will get her back, J, I promise you, we will find a way.”

I nodded, my emotions too raw to speak, as all I could see was the memory of her trying to kill me. A memory that played on a cruel loop, like my own personal torture. That was until my brother pulled me out of it, by taking my hand and putting something in it.

“Here, when they brought you through, you were clutching onto this.”

I opened my palm to see the blood-stained ring, the one I had given her when she agreed to make me the happiest man alive. Obviously, the irony wasn’t lost on me.

“Her engagement ring,” I muttered, my tone void of hope.

“And it will be on her finger again soon, don’t lose hope, brother, there must be a

way.”

“But how... you heard the Vampire, she tried to kill me. She would have succeeded had I not been saved.” I swallowed the thick lump down, one that consisted solely of bitterness and heartache.

“Lerna and Koro found a way once, maybe they know,” he suggested, which was enough of a spark that it gave me cause to nod, telling him,

“You’re right. You’re right, they did, which means they must know something.” His grin in return gave me strength.

“There he is, the cunning bastard brother I know and love... come on, time to get your ass out of bed then, you lazy git.”

I chuckled, my arm going to my stomach before telling him,

“It fucking hurts to laugh, so stop trying to make me feel better.”

He laughed before helping me up, and I swear the last time he did this was over a hundred years ago. And back when I got my drunk arse shitfaced on devil’s rum.

I also discovered as I stood that I was wearing loose fitted black pants and nothing else, but the thick bandage wrapped around my waist spoke volumes. One scar she had given me that I was most definitely going to let heal, as it wasn’t exactly a memory I wanted to hold on to.

And speaking of healing, I knew I would only need to give it a few more hours and I would be good as new. Still fucking devastated and heartbroken, but at least I would be able to fight. Although clearly, Ella was one person I couldn’t fight against. Which was why we needed to get her back to the Ella I knew and out of Garmr’s control.

Talking of freedom...

“How did Lucius save me?” I asked as Orthrus walked me from the room, making me almost want to groan out loud at the sight of another damn castle. One that obviously belonged to Lucius in Hell, as I had been to his place in Germany before, and this... well this most definitely wasn't it. Like the room I woke up in, it was made from gigantic shards of Obsidian, the hallways void of everything else but the black glass walls.

“You will soon find out.”

“So, it wasn't you?” I asked, surprised.

“No,” he gritted out as if annoyed by the fact that he had listened to me and allowed me to go in alone. And a good job too, or it might have been both of us bleeding out on the floor.

Orth led me to a room he knew they must have all been waiting in, and one that looked as if used for one purpose...war. A room decorated in every demonic weapon imaginable all mounted on the walls. The large table and chairs in the center were the only furniture the room held, telling me this was solely used for planning and not exactly fit for throwing dinner parties.

“Jared!” Lerna shouted when she saw me, and she was joined by an even more familiar face.

“Uncle!” Amelia ran at me at the same time Lerna did, neither woman paying any attention to the bloody big bandage around my waist, as they threw themselves into me.

“Humph... ah ah oww,” I moaned as pain flared once more, making them both back

away slowly.

“Sorry.”

“Oops, my bad,” Amelia said getting it straight from her aunty Pip. Although the kid called us family, as most of us had watched her grow up. I wasn’t really her uncle, just like Pip wasn’t her aunt. As for Lerna, she walked back to sitting next to her husband, who looked like he had hard time watching as his woman ran off to another man’s arms. Although, I had to say, as innocent as I knew it was, it still felt good to know she cared at least.

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As for the rest of the room, there was Marcus who looked relieved to see me. Asher, who also gave me a nod in acknowledgement, relief also painted his expression. Then there was Lucius at the head of the table with Amelia now sitting next to him. Tyr was also there, as well as Clay, and lastly a man I only vaguely recognized. A man that looked to be of Persian descent with a warm bronze skin tone and long dark hair that was currently tied back, often like I wore my own. Light olive-green eyes flickered amber at the centers in the candle light that hung from the ceiling in glass cages. His full lips smirked as I assessed him, prompting his brother to say,

“Jared, this is my brother, Dariush, you have him to thank for getting you out of there in time.”

Koro cleared his throat, making Lucius add with a smirk,

“And our Gypsy King of course.”

At this my shock showed, as my gaze snapped to find him looking smug.

“You saved me?” I asked in astonishment.

“Oh, the irony, HellBeast,” he replied with a wink, making Lerna scold him, something he didn’t look to take too seriously.

“Okay, back up, can someone please explain what happened?” I said, making Lucius hold out his hand, inviting my brother and I to take the last two empty seats. One of which was at the other end of the table. A seat that I knew technically should have been reserved for his Queen. But this was Lucius we were talking about here.

Meaning I knew how obsessed he was with his wife, so I doubted he wanted her to be that far away from him. Something I could relate to as I was the same with Ella.

I took the seat, with my brother sitting on my right and Marcus on my left. The chairs were black, gothic, and grand with their high spiraled carved backs. The table in between was like black glass had been melted over an existing wooden table, as the grain could be seen slightly through the top.

“Well?” I asked, prompting them to start, with Koro speaking first.

“After Ella cut her hand, I soaked it up, not wanting anymore to spill incase our fears were founded, something that transpired that they were,” Koro said, before placing his hand on the table and making the lengths of his bindings snake out beneath his sleeve. Instantly, they went to Lerna, as if attracted to her, making her giggle as they played with her fingers, wrapping themselves around them.

“Once they have tasted blood, they don’t forget it, and Ella happened to have quite a bit of your blood in her system, having recently fed from you, I assume?”

I nodded, confirming this.

“As soon as you spilled your blood, the spell Lerna and I had cast on Ella registered as being the same blood I had wiped away. Only a portal didn’t open, meaning we knew it must have been yours.”

I then looked to Lucius as he continued.

“Koro was already with me, as I had already been on my way to the ruins of Lúpe when he told me what happened. My brother here has a special gift that not many know about and therefore we would like to keep it that way.”

“Go on,” I prompted, as the Vampire knew I wasn’t one to spill anyone’s secrets.

“He can create portals, but to bring someone through, he must have a link to where they are if he hasn’t been there before, and your blood was that link, one Koro was able to provide.”

I released a sigh.

“And you three?” I asked, looking to Marcus, Tyr, and finally my brother.

“Once my brother had opened the portal, he recognized the castle from the color of the stone, seeing it through the gateway himself, so he created one above the mountain,” Lucius told me, making me look to his brother.

“I then searched for a way inside, after being told that there should be four of you,” Dariush added, making me look to Orthrus before he told me,

“This guy then pops up above us and tells us to climb up, telling me my brother needs me.”

“After that, we each took a trip on the Kingdom of Blood and Death express and ended up here,” Marcus added, making Tyr agree.

“What they all said.”

“And as for you, HellBeast, and the sorry state in which you arrived in, I had a witch I know help aid you in your healing, as you were losing more blood than your body could regenerate, which means you would have most certainly died,” Lucius added, this knowledge another bitter sting I was forced to swallow.

“I found bandages,” Amelia popped her hand up to say, making Lucius grin down at

her.

“Yes, you did, and amazingly, in the bag Nero told you they were in,” he teased, making her stick her tongue out at him. Something he would have killed others for. Of course, he did pretend to try and bite it off, making his brother Dariush groan and roll his eyes.

“Gods they are at it again. Seriously, brother, I remember when you used to be the most feared ruler of this land.”

To which Lucius smirked and after picking up Amelia’s fingers and kissing the tips of them, one by one, he said,

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“What can I tell you, brother, this little prisoner of mine tamed me.”

“Okay, now as her uncle and seeing her go from nappies to giving her piggybacks as a kid, I really don’t want to know any kinky shit between you two,” I said, giving Lucius cause to smirk down at her and mouth,

“Kinky shit,” to which she giggled.

“Okay, moving on,” I prompted.

“Thank the Gods,” Lucius’s brother muttered.

“What I really want to know is how we get Ella back?” I asked, now looking to the only two people around this table that could answer that.

“I think we can all take from the fact you were stabbed and screaming her name in midst of your feverous state, that she was the cause?”

I gritted my teeth at Tyr’s question.

“Still a sore spot there, buddy, might want to rethink your words,” my own brother offered.

“She has had her powers returned, I don’t know how, but she isn’t the same as before when she had them, Garmr is controlling her in some way,” I informed them with a grit of my teeth.

“That was like before, only it was more gradual the first time. By the end, it was almost as if she had forgotten her old self completely,” Lerna said in a pained tone.

“Yes, well that information might have helped when first going in there,” I snapped, making her Lerna sigh and admit,

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that again.”

Again... My jaw clenched so hard, I thought it would crack the bone.

“My question is how did you break it the first time?” I asked, as this was the only thing at this point that I wanted to know.

“We just needed a branch,” she said, making us all react as one, but it was Amelia who said,

“Er, come again?”

This made Lerna wince before clarifying.

“I should be more specific.”

“Yeah, that would help,” Marcus said dryly, getting an evil glare from Koro.

“She needed to come into contact with a piece of white poplar tree.”

I frowned.

“But why?” I asked.

“We discovered the only way to bring her back was to remind her of her old life.

Touching the branch of the white poplar tree belonging to Hades is linked directly to their mother,” Koro replied, making my Amelia ask,

“How?”

“It is the tree our father had planted after learning of our mother’s death, it is said it holds a piece of her soul, one that she promised to our father always. The last time, as soon as my sister picked it up, it secured her back to her old life enough that she remembered who she was. Only after that were we able to get her away from Garmr,” Lerna explained.

“So, this tree, where is it?” I asked, wishing I had known this shit first so as I would have had a backup plan.

“It’s in my father’s castle, planted in the garden he had made for her,” Lerna answered.

“I acquired a piece of it some time ago, doing so without his knowledge, as we thought it best not to inform the King at the time,” Koro explained.

“Why not? Wouldn’t he have helped with it being his daughter?” Amelia asked, as clearly the kid grew up with loving parents. Not the type that built her a temple prison and then left her there for the rest of eternity.

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“It’s complicated but at the time, he was living with the Queen, who is extremely jealous, and has wanted his offspring dead since she first learned of their existence. The tree, however, was kept protected from all harmful intent. Meaning when I stole a piece, my intentions were recognized as pure, and I was allowed to break it off. If Hades knew of this, I don’t know, only that it would have been more dangerous at the time to involve him,” Koro replied, giving insight to his part played in freeing Ella.

“But couldn’t he have fought Garmr?” Orth asked.

“Technically no, for at the time, Garmr was not in his realm, he was in the realm of Helheim, not under the control of Hades,” Koro told him, causing Marcus to ask,

“Which begs the question, where is good old Hades now?”

“I don’t know, as he hasn’t been seen for many decades now,” Koro admitted.

“And what about Ella, is she still bound to this realm, even if she has her powers back?” I asked, hoping for now that she was.

“She ate the fruit of our father and did so willingly,” Lerna replied.

“What does that mean?” Asher asked.

“That she will remain bound until our father can release her, regardless of her powers,” she said, making me release a held breath.

“Well at least we know that the war will be here then,” Lucius pointed out, as clearly

that was where his mind was focused.

“Which gives us a good enough start as any, for we need to assemble our troops and have them on the move towards your realm,” Lucius continued, making me realize we had a lot of work ahead of us, but first things first, which was why I stood and told Lerna...

“Then it’s time we go speak with your father and...”

“My Maker.”

26

AN ABANDONED ERA

“Well, this isn’t what I was expecting,” Marcus muttered the second we were through the portal, one that was already fully operational. Although we had used Dariush’s unique skills to get us to the border of his brother’s land, so as we didn’t waste time.

However, one look around the abandoned castle and I would say we had already done that.

“Fuck!” I roared, punching my fist through some of the crumbling stone, as I shouted, “Where the fuck is he?!” Something neither Koro, Lerna, Marcus, nor my brother could answer.

“But I don’t understand... it should be here... he should be here... this is his castle,” Lerna said in a desolate tone, now walking towards a part of the garden that was filled with dead plants, broken statues, and a very distinct hole in the ground.

One where a tree once grew.

“Yes, well not anymore,” I gritted out, yanking my fist free and ignoring the way my torn skin healed. The portal had brought us to what had once been Hades’ castle, but one look at the ruins we found and we all knew that something had gone wrong. Hence why we had all gone running across the bridge. Quickly making our way inside, only to find nothing but the broken remnants of what once was a beautiful, imposing castle.

And within its walls we found his garden, or what little remained of it, for our sole purpose for coming here was gone. I honestly was so close to losing it completely and allowing my HellBeast to erupt, that I could have torn the rest of this Gods forsaken place to the ground. That was until we heard a voice.

“Who goes there?”

We all turned to face a broken doorway, to see an old figure emerging in a ragged cloak. The person hobbled out into the garden with a cane of twisted tree root, using it to aid their uneasy steps.

“Who are you?” I asked, making them scoff.

“I asked first, now speak before the spirits of the lost battle cast you from this place.”

I looked around as the rest of group did, seeing nothing but crumbled remains of a wall.

“That sounds like an empty threat to me,” I replied, before the cloaked figure tapped his cane on the floor once, and suddenly we found ourselves surrounded by the ghosts of what I assumed were Hades’ fallen soldiers. Each one was shrouded in a blue hue, as if caught in a giant, unburning flame. All were dressed the same, in their demonic armor, with chest plates holding the family crest of Hades. Some even held torn, ragged flags and banners with the same symbol, showing that indeed, this had once

been Hades' army.

“Arh!” Lerna shrieked, moving closer to Koro who tucked her into his side to protect her from the undead army.

Everyone now had their weapons drawn, whether it be by sword or by spear, the ghostly figures saw us as a threat.

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“Alright, not an empty threat,” I replied wryly, before releasing a sigh and telling the newcomer,

“We are here in search of Hades.”

“And who would dare summon the King of the Underworld?” he asked, pointing his cane my way, as I think it became clear to him that I was the one leading this group.

“I am Cerberus.”

At this he gasped.

“The HellBeast King has returned?” he asked in clear shock.

“I have.” I nodded, crossing my arms over my chest, happy in the knowledge that my wound had healed and movements like this no longer hurt.

“And for what reason? For if it is to aid in battle, as you can see, you are decades too late,” he responded, making me glance around the ghosts of the fallen, that would now haunt this castle. Their faces were haunted and skeletal inside their spiked helmets.

“I am not here to help him but instead, I am here to help his daughter,” I told him, making him sneer angrily.

“Then you are the enemy, for who do you think did this!”

All the ghosts moved as one, closing in on us, making me rush out to say,

“I speak not of the Queen’s Daughter, but of the two he had with Nymph Leuce.”

The man staggered back, tapping his cane once more so as all the ghosts suddenly started to disappear. Their bodies evaporating like steam, leaving a blue hue in their wake.

“Then it is true... it was foretold.”

I frowned, demanding, “Explain.”

“Melinoë came here with an army, with the sole purpose to overthrow her father’s rule. She destroyed all you see now.”

I looked around, following the journey of his cane as he pointed to the destruction. Greek style columns were missing chunks out of them, as if chipped with the projectile of cannon fire. Walls completely missing next to those that had survived. And nearly the entire marble floor was cracked or covered in the aftermath of the castle’s devastation.

“But you are still standing, I see,” I pointed out, nodding to the old man whose face we still had not seen.

“Yes, and at the request of the King I remained, for Hecate told him that Fate would need to find him when the time came,” he replied, giving me cause to ask,

“What time?”

“The time that the next King in line for ruling the Underworld would come home.”

I frowned in shock, my brother muttering,

“Yeah, don’t expect me to kneel and call you your majesty.”

I ignored this and asked,

“The next King?”

“The one born from this realm and who is fated to save it, the one fated to his daughter, the one who holds the true power of Hades,” he told me, and had I not had an audience, I would have needed to sit down to process this. Could what he be saying, be true?

“Ella,” Lerna whispered in shock, as clearly I wasn’t the only one dumbstruck to hear this. But then my own prophecy came to mind. The one that spoke of my own Fate and how with my Chosen One by my side, I would become more powerful than even the most ambitious minds could ever dream. Those had been the words of the Oracle, the one now residing with the Devil himself. Could this be that prophecy?

Of course, the chance to rule over an entire realm was not why I was here, nor did it matter to me. No, all that mattered to me was getting my girl back and if I could do that without her wanting to stab me, then all the better.

Hence why I told him,

“She is the reason we are here. We need a piece of her mother’s tree to bring her back.”

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His reaction to this didn't fill me with confidence as he sighed.

"Then there is only one place you will find it, and only one person who knows where," he told us, naturally making me ask,

"Who?"

"His closest ally in a different realm not far from here," he said, giving me hope once more. But even more so when he gave us a name.

"The King of Greed."

I shot a look to my brother, who started grinning before telling me,

"Well lucky for us, we just happen to know his son."

"Then the son of Greed will lead you to your next destination and my task is therefore complete," he stated, his body starting to wither away. Making me shout out,

"But how did you know?!"

His voice was already fading away to barely above a whisper on the wind as he replied,

"Fate... knows... all."

"Well, that was unexpected," Marcus commented dryly, making me turn to face them

and say,

“Looks like we have an Enforcer to visit.”

* * *

“This better be good, Lucius, as I was in bed with my wife when your ass showed up and demanded I follow,” said the deep voice of one Ryker Wyeth, as the tall, dark haired man stepped through the portal minutes after Lucius had returned.

We had made it back to Lucius’s castle, explaining all we had learned in hopes that the Enforcer could be located quickly. A bit of digging around from Lucius on his whereabouts, and the result was the man we were standing and looking at now. Admittedly, it was quite a task, first taking Lucius to Afterlife with the aid of his brother’s portal creating skills. After which, it then took him to where Dom had assured him his Enforcer would be.

But in the end, this killed two birds with one stone as he was able to update Dom on our progress and the plan we had in place. In turn, the King of Kings was making his own preparations and thankfully, this included an army.

But as for the man that stood before us now, of course, I had met Ryker a few times before over the years. He had even frequented my club a time or two. His second in command, Vander, was a big fan of fighting in my ring. Which meant Ryker was well acquainted with me and Lucius, so he would not class being summoned here as a threat. Yet despite this, his dark blue eyes scanned the room in an assessing way before landing on me.

“Cerberus,” he said with a nod, making me step forward to greet him, holding my hand out for him to shake. I was also used to seeing him dressed in a suit, as he was quite the successful businessman in the mortal realm. And well, naturally, he had the

fortune to back that statement up. But then, given who his father was, this was not exactly surprising.

However, now he was wearing a pair of dark jeans and long-sleeved navy T-shirt, telling me that he had obviously grabbed the first thing he could find. And considering he had been in bed with his wife, who had been one of the Lost Sirens, it was little surprise that he looked pissed. Prompting me to say,

“Thanks for coming, Greed.”

“And I am here because?” he asked, looking around the room that Lucius had chosen to have this meeting in. A large sitting room that looked slightly more comfortable than anything else I had seen of his castle so far. For example, this room actually held leather armchairs, wooden furniture, and a large, carved fireplace that until their return, had remained unlit. It was as if Lucius was trying to make a conscious effort to make it more welcoming for the Son of Greed, as it ignited the moment he returned.

Greed continued to look around the room and nodded in acknowledgement to my brother. Someone who he had fought before in the ring at Devil’s. It had been a friendly match that, not surprisingly, neither of them had won.

“We need access to your father’s realm,” I told him, making him raise a brow in question.

“More specifically, we need to speak to the King himself.”

Greed narrowed his eyes in suspicion, before of course, asking why. But before I could open my mouth to try and explain it all, Marcus got there first.

“The super quick version, we need to save Jared’s fated from being controlled by a

creepy bastard who wants to bring upon Ragnarök, using his woman to do it. But in order to stop it, we need Hades. Went to his castle, he's not there and an old guy popped up. He told us your dad would know where to find Hades." After which he took a deep breath, making Greed look to me in shock.

"Yeah, that's pretty much the extent of it," I replied, making Orth scoff and say,

"Yeah, about the last two percent but okay."

"So can you take us there?" I asked, ignoring my brother's comment. Ryker released a heavy sigh before agreeing.

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“Yes, I can help you, but word of warning, HellBeast...” He paused, giving me a knowing look before cautioning,

“He may ask for something in return.”

I thought on this, wondering how much of my soul would be left by the time I was done, which is why I muttered,

“Yeah, those Kings of Hell usually do.”

27

A MASTER LUZUH

It turned out that all Ryker Wyeth had to do to get us inside was bleed. That was enough to create a portal inside, allowing just Ryker and I to step through. Any more and he explained his father would see it as an unwelcome intrusion. And let's just say that Mammon, ruler and King of the 4th realm of Hell, was not the most hospitable of Kings.

However, the first to greet us was someone Ryker knew as he practically growled her name.

“Annika Empusa.”

The woman he referred to was startling to look at. Dressed in black, her long hood covering all of her face, whereas the rest of her clothes barely covered her at all. A

small V-shape attached to the hood was all that concealed her naked torso, as she wore the pointed part of this in between her bare breasts. This leaving the rest of her skin on show.

Added to this, she wore a wide belt across her hips, with a small strip of black sheer fabric hanging between her legs. One of the legs was made of copper that looked to have been fused to her hip, as the skin around it was scared, puckered skin. Her knee-high boots were laced at both sides and had pointed, wicked metal spikes for the heels.

“My Lord Greed,” she greeted softly, folding her real leg back so as she could drop into a graceful bow, an action that showed her naked sex, as clearly underwear was not a thing this woman cared for. As for where we were, it looked to be some kind of place for greeting guests.

The room had only one theme, and that was gold and black... emphasis on the gold part. Every feature was gleaming and made for a startling contrast on the black walls. Everything from gold chairs, gold molding around the ceiling, golden candelabras, even the twin golden fireplaces. Both of which took up large portions of the walls as they mirrored each other. As for the floor, this was black marble, veined with gold, making it look like a golden stream was snaking beneath your feet.

“I am here to see my father,” Ryker informed her, making her reply,

“But of course, he has been waiting for quite some time on word of your mission.”

Ryker clenched his jaw before responding,

“I am not here for that.”

“No, I assumed not, but he will wish to hear of your progress all the same,” she

countered before sweeping her leg back and holding out her arm, indicating we should go first. No doubt her lower rank to the prince, not allowing her to walk before him.

“You know the way, my Lord,” she prompted, making him walk through the golden arch of the open doorframe and into a long hallway that was set in exactly the same style as the room we had just left.

“Something I should know?” I asked, referring to their conversation, giving him cause to sigh.

“Long ago, my father had something stolen from him, the Scepter of Psychopompós. One I managed to get back in our possession some thirty years back,” he replied, making me give him a sideways glance and say,

“Something tells me that isn’t the end of the story.”

“No, for he wishes for me to discover who it was that stole it.” This wasn’t surprising.

“You don’t know?” I asked, admittedly curious that the shrewd and perceptive enforcer didn’t know who it was.

“Admittedly I have been a little lax of late.”

I chuckled at that.

“Finding your Fated will do that to you, no doubt.”

He grinned, obviously thinking of his wife. One of the Lost Sirens that were all found within the same year that the King of Kings found his own Chosen One.

“And this thief is who he wants you to find,” I reaffirmed, prompting him to say more. As well, it was as the saying went, information was power, and it was a motto I lived by.

“Yes, for it is said that they hide in the mortal realm.”

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“Not surprising, seeing as it would be easier for them to hide there. Any clues?” I asked.

“Only a name, for they are known as the Master Luzuh.”

I had never heard this name before, nor did I know its meaning.

“Master Luzuh?”

“I forget your lineage is of Greek descent, it means person who steals, in Sumerian,” he told me, making me nod in understanding.

“It was thought that, for a time, the thief was to be found in the city of Kusig. The capital of my father’s kingdom. However, when it came to light that they were able to cross over into this realm, that was when the trail ran cold.”

I nodded, as I could understand why it had, and well, he didn’t exactly have a lot to go on.

“Ah,” I said, unconsciously rubbing a hand over my stomach and thinking of Ella. My reddish black T-shirt was not enough to hide the memory, despite there being no scar there for me to feel. I had dressed very much the same as I had before, conjuring up clothes from the same flame-resistant material I preferred. But one glance at Ryker and I was already missing my everyday attire of jeans, biker boots, and some gearhead Tee. Although, one glance around the place and I would say I was a far cry away from getting that back anytime soon. Meaning I was stuck wearing the skin of a fire salamander for a good while longer.

“My father is not pleased, for no one has ever been able to steal from him before,” Ryker went on to say.

“And he wants revenge,” I guessed, making him shrug before saying,

“Perhaps.”

“You don’t sound too sure,” I pointed out.

“It is a woman,” he stated, making it all become clear, especially after what Nefârtatul had told me about all the Kings of Hell being Fated to find their own Chosen One’s. Perhaps this thief was his, which was why he was so intent on finding her.

We continued to walk until we reached a pair of gleaming golden doors, as it had to be said, there definitely wasn’t any gold lacking in this place. A sight not often seen in Hell, as this was more a Kingdom of gold than it was ominous and foreboding. A far cry from Lucius’s castle that was for sure.

Two guards stood either side of the doors, that were twenty feet tall and ornamented with framed squares that each held a different symbol at the center. As for the guards, they looked like medieval Knights, their armour gleaming and not a single smudge on the gold plating.

As soon as they saw Greed, they dropped to a knee and bowed, lowering their heads. The clatter of movement couldn’t be held as it echoed down the large hallway.

“Lord Greed,” they both said, making him nod for them to open the doors.

The moment they did, light flooded out from the lustrous throne room that, admittedly, was staggering to see. It was made entirely from the same black and gold

marble on the floor, with huge pillars lining the length of the room and holding up the cathedral style ceiling. One that was decorated with delicate interwoven gold moldings that, from this distance, looked like golden lace.

“This is where I leave you, my Lord,” the one he had called Annika Empusa said, already turning on her copper leg before walking back the way she came. Her half-hooded cloak was much longer at the back, and now trailed behind her like a shadow.

At the end of the room sat King Mammon himself, and surprisingly he was the only one not dripping in gold, instead dressed entirely in black. His black tunic had a high collar and armored shoulder pads, with a long cape attached that looked made from silken fur. His large frame was tapered down, where a thick belt broke up the continuation of even more black material that covered his legs. His trousers were tighter and tucked into his thick leather boots.

The contrast of him sitting amongst a throne made completely from gold was one I struggled to take my eyes from. The wealth of this man was unfathomable, and the room was only filled with hints of his fortune. Each step we took inside, walked us past different pieces of his treasure displayed in crystal glass cases, reminding me of being in some museum.

As for the King who owned it, he rose from his golden throne as we got closer, walking down the steps and greeting his son. It was astounding to see how much alike they looked, as their vessels could have been brothers. But then, I knew that whichever vessel a supernatural took, they would naturally turn it into how they wished to look over time. Clearly, Mammon wanted to look like his son or vice versa. Although with the tense way Ryker held himself, I would say it was the first.

“And at long last, my son returns, and with news I hope,” he said, sounding excited, although Ryker’s face was no doubt expecting anger in place of this good nature. As he obviously wasn’t bringing him good news like he hoped.

“Father,” he said, bowing his head and prompting me to do the same. His father looked to me and asked,

“Have you exchanged your second? I thought you favored the Druid?” Of course, he was talking about Vander. Although knowing him and the happy go lucky, action seeking, guy I had met, I would say he would be pissed to know he was missing out.

“No, for I bring with me a guest, for there is a matter of urgency we must speak to you about.”

His father’s face scowled, realizing this visit clearly wasn’t to be about his thief after all. But knowing what I knew now of the situation, it gave me time to think, in case I needed it. Because it was like Ryker had warned me...the King would want something in return for aiding us.

Fuck me, but at this rate I was going to have to go into the Supernatural dating service.

“Then we will speak of it privately,” he said, nodding to one of his servants that were all lined up just waiting to do his bidding, this time dressed in ancient roman style dresses. They rushed over to open another golden door for us, that lead into an office of sorts. Although half of it looked like an ancient library, one that showcased even more treasure.

The King entered first, taking a seat behind a large desk, that... you guessed it... was all gold. As for Ryker and me, we took our seats opposite, as this was clearly a room he used for conducting any business. The Kings of Hell might have been mighty rulers, but they still had Kingdoms to run.

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“And your name is?” he asked, casting his lighter blue eyes on me.

“I am Cerberus, the HellBeast King,” I replied, making his eyes widen in surprise.

“Hades’ Realm... hmm, I cannot think of what I could assist you in,” he replied, making me frown. Because he didn’t know that I practically came with an inbuilt bullshit detector and the alarm was currently going off in my head.

“Can you not?” I tested, making his blue eyes glow slightly, a pair that was a lot lighter than his son’s. In fact, now that I had time to look at him, there were subtle differences between the two.

Mammon was slightly taller, with wider shoulders. His dark hair was much longer, with half of the waves pulled back, secured in a golden band. Rings adorned his fingers, with the ends of his fingers painted gold, matching the painted line from his lower lip down his chin. His brows were slightly more arched in a mocking arrogance, and his lips thinned in annoyance.

“We have come here in...” Ryker began, but stopped when his father held up his hand.

“Let the HellBeast explain it, but first, what of my thief?” he asked, making Ryker sigh,

“The search continues.”

His father huffed, folding his thick arms over his chest, making me realize we would

get nowhere if his mind was solely focused on this. Meaning, it was time to appease a King in want of his woman.

“What if I told you there was a way you could find her?”

Mammon’s sharp gaze turned to me.

“And you know a way, do you?” he said mockingly.

“Well, my brother doesn’t call me a cunning bastard for nothing,” I replied, making him scoff a laugh.

“And it will cost me, no doubt,” the King assumed correctly.

“I only seek information, nothing more.”

His brow raised at that, the black line arching higher in question.

“I make many deals in this room, HellBeast, but with nothing to show for your offer, then I am a King without a guarantee.”

“And here I was thinking fortune favors the brave,” I replied pushing my luck, but thankfully it paid off as he threw his head back and laughed.

“Mm, indeed it does, and no doubt a motto my little thief lives by. Fine, tell me, and if I like the idea, then you will have your information.”

“It’s simple enough in nature, as you just need to set a trap.”

He laughed and, this time, it was contemptuous.

“And you are a fool if you believe I haven’t tried that already.”

“Ah, but this will be different, as you will also be the buyer.”

He frowned before looking intrigued...

“Go on.”

“You have been searching for the thief by setting bait for her to steal, when instead you need to set your bait as the buyer.”

Mammon frowned again, but there was enough intrigue remaining in his keen gaze, that I knew he would allow me to continue.

“What do you mean, Cerberus?” Ryker asked.

“How many times has she stolen from you?” I asked quickly, knowing this would be an important factor.

“On more than one occasion,” he replied, enticing a tick in his jaw to jump.

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“But it’s not predictable what she steals, am I right?” I asked, and he tilted his head to the side slightly before asking,

“How do you know this?”

“Because she is only going for the items that she knows she has a buyer for. Otherwise, it’s too risky as the danger of getting caught doesn’t end until the item is no longer in her possession. She won’t be sitting on a mountain of treasure, but in the mortal realm, she will be sitting on a fortune in a bank somewhere,” I told him, making him rub the short beard covering the lower half his face.

“You might be on to something,” he admitted.

“Put the word out that there is something you want, something only she knows you have, offer a price that will be too good for her to turn down. Then instead of trying to catch her in the act, you catch her when she willing hands it over to you seeing as you are the buyer.”

At this he grinned before he clapped his hands once.

“Perfect! She will unknowingly hand herself over to me,” he said, his grin showing excitement.

“Exactly, along with getting back what she stole from you, so you can’t lose,” Ryker agreed, looking at me in relief, as clearly, this meant he was out of the shit with daddy.

“Then may I suggest making it seem more real, and make it something harder for her to steal, as if it is too easy, she may be smart enough to realize it’s a trap,” I added, making him smirk.

“Oh, she is certainly smart enough, but you are right.”

I shrugged my shoulders before saying,

“I am glad I can help.”

“Your brother is right. You are cunning and therefore worthy of the information you seek. Come, for Hades is waiting.”

At this I bolted up right in my seat, asking in bewilderment,

“Wait?! How did you know?”

To which Mammon told me,

“Because Fate is never wrong.”

28

MASTER OF YOUR OWN FATE

The King of Greed led us from his office back into the throne room but not beyond, making me frown at Ryker in question. Although from the looks of things, he too had no idea what was about to happen. Even less so when Mammon’s booming voice rang out, echoing all around us when he suddenly ordered,

“EVERYONE OUT!” To which all his servants and guards left the throne room at

once.

Only once the last one had closed the doors behind them, did Mammon walk over to one of the display cases. There was nothing special about what was inside, and he waved his hand making the glass reveal glowing symbols in gold. This was before the glass disappeared completely, making me realize that everything in this room had a spell cast on it preventing anyone from stealing.

Everyone but his fated thief.

Inside the case was a simple gold tear-shaped vase with a lid but once the top was removed, it revealed a glowing blue orb.

“Is that... a portal key?” Ryker asked in awe, telling me of how rare they must be. The nature of Greed within him lit up his eyes to an unnatural glow, and his fathers did the same.

“One gifted to me by Hades, with instructions to give it to the one who seeks him with only a noble cause... I have been told of why you seek the King of the Underworld, Cerberus,” he said, giving me cause to jerk in disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

“Like most Kings of Hell, my spies work not only within my own Kingdom but the other realms also.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“So, you know why I am here,” I assumed in a dark tone, knowing of the time wasted.

“I do.”

“But if so, then why not...”

“Help you the moment I saw you, because I am Greedy in nature and always require a bargain to be made. One that proved to be most useful,” he replied after first cutting me off, giving me cause to sigh in frustration before asking,

“Then you know of what Garmr plans to do?”

“I do, as does Hades.”

Again, the revelations just kept coming.

“Then why doesn’t he do something, why doesn’t he stop him?!” I shouted in outrage.

“That, you will have to ask him for yourself,” he said, lifting the portal key from its hiding place and handing it to me. The power of the thing pulsed in my hand as if I was carrying some kind of energy bomb about to explode.

“I will ensure my son returns and makes it to your realm with some of my legions to aid you in this battle.”

Naturally I was surprised by this and enough to ask, “But why?”

“Because if you fail to win this war, then all the kingdoms will fall.”

He then bowed his head to me and took a step back with his son. Leaving me with nothing more to do than throw the portal key, knowing it would open a gateway wherever it landed. Which meant that seconds later, and I was now staring at swirls of light shimmering like gold dust in water.

So, knowing this was the only reason I was here, I didn't hesitate to step inside, momentarily swallowed up by the sensation of falling. Just like what happened with most portal travel, it was disorientating at first. This meant that by the time I made it through, I had to shake myself free of the dizziness that gripped me.

After blinking through it and the bright light I could now see, I found myself in a garden. One that I imagined was a mirror image of what was now destroyed back at his own ruined castle.

The walled garden was teeming with life. Marble arches half covered with vines and ivy, each that held plinths holding statues of half-naked Goddesses. Flower beds created walkways, framing the pale stone slabs with every color imaginable. Flowering trees and manicured shrubs created a pattern and flow to the large space, but there in the center of it all...

Was Hades.

He was standing with his back to me, looking up at the large white tree. The poplar tree was void of any bark and was so smooth, it almost didn't look real. Its branches created a canopy of delicate white leaves that almost looked woven with silver thread. And as a total contrast, there was the King, dressed entirely in black. Making him the only thing here that was void of any color.

His long black cloak showcased his wide frame, and was made bigger thanks to the spiked armor pads that looked as if horns rose up from his shoulders. His midnight black hair curled at his neck just under the high fold of his robe. Upon his head was a

crown I had never seen before, as it had replaced the last one he used to wear. This one was made from the twisted white tree branches from the tree he looked at now.

“She was the most beautiful creature I ever beheld,” he said in his deep, unsettling voice, and still with his back to me.

This comment made me sigh when I realized he was talking about Ella’s dead mother. I walked closer, only stopping when I stood next to him. I was used to seeing his face, despite this being the first time doing so as the man I now was.

For my HellBeast, however, the memory of him was engraved on our soul. His light grey skin, one that rippled with an unnatural amount of muscle as his bare torso showed. The lengths of black material hung from his waist, hiding his legs from view. And as for the face I knew, a man that looked to be in his late forties held a wealth of knowledge in his dark, perceptive eyes. His black beard tapered down into a point, very much like my own, which was cut shorter at the sides of our jawline.

“You finally returned to the Underworld,” he stated, moving on from speaking about his lost love.

“I did and you know why,” I said, getting right to the point, something I knew he would appreciate.

“I do,” he said without looking at me, his gaze still fixed on the tree.

“Then you also know why I am here,” I stated, having no choice but to look up at him, as he was easily a foot taller than me.

“Yes, for it is time, Fate has decided and appointed you as the one to hold the dial.”

I frowned, asking,

“The dial?”

He finally turned to face me, taking my hand and lifting it up so as he could place a piece of the tree branch into it, one no bigger than the length of my forearm. Then he told me,

“For her to decide which way it will point in your hand.”

I frowned.

“I am master of my own Fate,” I told him firmly, making him ask,

“Yes, but is she?”

“You speak of Ella,” I confirmed, making him smile, the sight transforming his face into something a little less Hellish.

“My daughter, yes, for that is her new name, is it not?”

“It is,” I affirmed, the knowledge that my girl was born from the ruler of my world still a hard fact to process.

“And you wish to bring her back to her true self, the part of her that loves you?” he asked, making me grip onto the branch tighter as I answered his with firm resolve.

“I do and I will.”

“Ah, but there is naught more selfish than that of love,” he replied, now turning back to face the tree. But I couldn’t stop myself from asking,

“Why do you say that?”

“I have been in love twice in my life, and each did not end well, young King,” he told me, making me grit my teeth.

“I made a bargain for Persephone, to claim her as my own, but her heart was not mine to take, for her nature became dark and cruel. Her soul not meant to survive my world, for it was not as pure as I had hoped for. The light I brought into the Underworld simmered until it became the darkest thing there,” he said, telling me something I already knew as the Queen had been bitter, cruel, and twisted for a long time, with jealousy fueling her evil doings.

“And the second, what of Leuce?” I couldn’t help but ask.

He breathed in deep after I said her name, shuddering at the sound.

“She was the only one who truly loved me in return, willingly joining me, her soul so pure not even the darkest parts of my world could tame it. Nothing could snuff it out... nothing but the jealous nature of others,” he said, once more referring to his first wife.

“So, you hid them to try and save them?”

“I tried to give them up. But like I said, love makes you selfish and my only temptation was her,” he said, reaching out his hand, one as black as the talons that tipped each finger. Yet even with this dangerous hand, he still managed to caress a leaf delicate enough that it did not tear.

“But in the end, her love for me was what killed her,” he said, lowering his head before dropping to one knee at the base of the tree. Again, I gripped on to the branch in my hand like it was my last lifeline, as I could see now where he had broken a piece off. A fresh snap in the wood that would no doubt heal itself over time.

“This tree is the last piece of her I own. Her soul encased within its core, but one day it will leave me and I am yet to discover where it will go. For I fear it will be a place that I cannot follow,” he told me, now producing a flower in his hand, one called an

Asphodelus, with ghostly grey petals that he laid down at the roots.

“You think she will be reincarnated?” I dared to ask.

“Yes, which means only death will bring her back to me.”

“That’s why you don’t help us defeat Garmr now, isn’t it...? Love makes you selfish.”

He rose back to his full height, turning to me once more.

“You always were the smartest of my creations. Yes, for if I aid you the way you wish, then my opportunity to have her once more is gone.”

I gritted my teeth.

“The Fates told you this?” I assumed, making him nod.

“The Fates told me only of when I am to intervene, not before and not after, but precisely the right moment, for if I do not heed these words, I will lose the last pieces of her left in my world.”

I jerked my head back, understanding dawning on me.

“You mean your daughters?”

“If I intervene in your war, Cerberus, then my daughter no longer stays tied to this realm, one in which she needs to be.” Finally, I understood why he remained in hiding, as his very presence in this war could make all the difference and not for the right reasons.

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“Remember, my loyal HellBeast, love may make you selfish, but there is nothing to say that good cannot come from a selfish love. As long as that love is given back to you in return,” he said, now speaking in riddles as it sounded a lot like he was talking more about sacrifice. And well, I guessed he was right, as I was selfish enough to know that I could never give Ella up.

I would have to be dead first for that to happen.

Which was why I looked down at the branch in my hand and asked,

“Will this work?”

He shrugged his large shoulder and said,

“I cannot say, for I hear that her sister managed it before, but time is a curious thing, is it not?”

“In what way?” I asked, frowning in question.

“You are who you are today thanks to your greatest enemy, but it has taken you until now to fully understand that the Fate of others can impact us all. Time is the only true test we all must face, but it is what you do with that time given that truly matters.”

“Then I better not waste it,” I told him, knowing what he said was true, if it hadn’t been for Garmr taking Ella in the first place, I would not have become the HellBeast King I am today. Jared Weller would have died hundreds of years ago, as a simple blacksmith.

“No, you must not,” he said, now creating another portal behind me,

“This will lead you back to where you must go,” he told me, holding out a hand towards what I gathered was to be my Fate, whether I was master of it, or not. So, I walked away but before I could step through, he cryptically told me,

“Remember this, Jared Weller, even a well of souls sometimes sparks life.”

I frowned in question but before I could ask what it meant, the portal swallowed me up without me taking a single step.

The question was...

Whose Fate would it lead me to next?

29

BATTLE PLANS

“Fuck!” my brother shouted in shock the second I appeared out of nowhere.

I recognized the place instantly, and it was no longer any room that belonged in Lucius’s castle. No, instead I was back at the camp. One that had a lot more people in it since the last time I was here. And speaking of time...

“Where the fuck have you been?!” my brother snapped, making me frown before telling him,

“You know exactly where I have been.”

“You have been gone a fucking week, brother!”

At this my eyes widened as realization hit.

“It must have been a different time sphere. For me it was only an hour, two at the most,” I told him, making him sigh.

“Yeah, well a lot has happened since then,” he said, with only one name coming from me in panic...

“Ella?!”

“No word, but our army is vastly bigger since you last saw it,” he said, now nodding behind me so as I could see that he was right, there were legions of demons everywhere. Whereas the camp was once a quiet broken town filled with village folk and Koro’s soldiers, now it had become a hub for battle.

“Yes, well I fear it still won’t be enough,” Dom’s voice cut through, and I turned to see him enter the room from behind me, doing so with Keira next to him. In fact, all the Kings were here, as clearly, I had walked in on their battle plans. The room had been rebuilt with far more than sheets of patched material. It was now a war room, fit for kings. The large table in the center was filled with an old map of the Underworld torn around the edges. Its red ink lines indicating the borders and rivers, with painted monuments in between. The writing of each placename written in ancient Greek.

“I take it that means you found Hades?” Lucius asked, making me nod.

“Yes, but he will not aid in our fight.”

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Dom frowned before sighing. “I fear it would not help us, even if he did, as their numbers are far greater than our own and with Ella now able to summon their dead, it will be an impossible battle to win.”

Keira looked crushed by this, reaching out for her daughter’s hand as Amelia stood next to Lucius. The rest of the room held seats around the edges, most of which were taken up by Seth, Sigurd, Tyr, Koro, and Lucius’s brother Dariush. This made me wonder where Lerna was, as no doubt Koro wouldn’t have let her go far.

“Then let’s make it a diversion,” I said, making all heads turn to me.

“A diversion?” Keira asked.

“All I need to do is get close enough to give her this, and it should be enough to bring her back,” I told them, opening my hand to show them the stark white branch.

“And how do we do that, if she is there fighting?” my brother pointed out, no doubt uneasy about me being near her considering what happened last time.

“Dariush can create a portal,” Lucius said, making his brother groan.

“Seriously, brother, I feel like you’re my fucking pimp,” Dariush complained, making Lucius smirk before winking at him.

“And if it doesn’t work?” Seth asked in his sardonic way, his long black jacket folded over the seat’s armrest.

“It has to,” I replied in a hard tone.

“And if it doesn’t, we will have no choice but to fall back and wait for more reinforcements,” Dom said with a sigh, and I had to say, it wasn’t a good sign for us if he already saw defeat. The King had been in more battles than I had eaten steaks.

“They are not all here?” I asked, disappointment lacing my words.

“Many legions are still making their way here. My father’s and Lucifer’s included. So far, we have Luc’s army, Sigurd’s shadow army, part of my own, and what remains of Koro’s army after the first battle.”

“And mine, if I am able to reclaim them back,” Clay stated, now joining the room.

“Damn, but my army of Wraths would have really come in handy right about now,” Amelia mocked, making Lucius grin down at her. I looked to Koro, and without me asking, he shook his head.

“They are still too far from crossing the border,” he said, making me sigh.

“So, what are our odds.”

“With your own army of HellBeasts that are soon to arrive, we still fight twenty to one,” Dom replied with a tense look.

“And Adam?” I asked, knowing he would be our biggest asset in this.

“We are all in agreement that should the battle look to be lost, Adam will create the diversion that gives our men a chance to retreat without Garmr’s army being able to finish us off,” Dom replied, making me grit my teeth and once again, it wasn’t like Dom to plan for failure, which told me how bad this truly was.

“You fear they will find a way to stop him if given long enough on the battlefield?” my brother asked.

“We do, but this way his presence will cause panic and confusion, enough so that Garmr won’t want to risk the loss of any more of his army if he doesn’t have to, despite Ella’s abilities,” Lucius replied, as clearly, they had thought this through.

“And what if he brings about Ragnarök?” Sigurd asked, his usual easy-going nature now gone, replaced by stone cold strategy for the upcoming battle. And after my conversation with Hades, this was one problem we didn’t need to worry about...for now.

“He can’t, not until he figures out a way to cross Ella over to Helheim, hence why Hades remains hidden. He is the only one that can release her of being bound to this realm and with Ella stuck here, he can’t complete what is needed,” I told them, prompting Keira to ask,

“To do what exactly?”

“To break free of the forces of chaos, which the Gods had previously restrained,” Sigurd replied with a clench of his jaw.

“Oh... that would be bad,” she replied softly, making her shoulders slump.

“We still don’t know who else Garmr is working for,” Koro pointed out, and he was right.

“Then we can’t afford to wait for the rest of the legions to get here. For Garmr might not have found a way to get Ella out, but that is not to say whoever he is working for hasn’t found a way to get chaos in, in whatever form it may arise,” I said, bringing new concerns to the group. As an enemy you could see coming was one thing, but the

enemy you didn't know you had was quite another.

When no one else had any more to say, I added,

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“Then we are in agreement, the plan is for me to get to Ella and try and get her back.”

“Only then do we have any hope of winning this war, as with Garmr unable to use Ella, then his forces will be weakened,” Lucius agreed, making his wife nudge him.

“You mean as the dead remain dead,” she said in response, making Lucius wink at her again.

“Then I should go and ensure that our men are ready,” Dom said, giving his own wife’s shoulder a squeeze.

“And I better go tell Pip not to wear a bra,” Keira said, making Amelia laugh. And well, the joke wasn’t lost on any of us, as we all knew from experience that the only way for Abaddon to calm down from one of his rampages was to chase his wife naked somewhere.

Which officially made it the strangest way to end a battle plan.

* * *

This time, my brother refused to allow me to go alone, as he wanted to ensure I didn’t do anything stupid if this all went to shit like last time. This ended in me trying to argue, something he refused to listen to, as he told me,

“Shut the fuck up, I am coming and that’s that!”

Then he walked away, giving Marcus cause to look smug and comment,

“I guess he’s going then.”

I could do nothing but grit my teeth. Because I knew that when Orthrus was like this and his mind was set, there was no use trying to change it. As for our side, we had pulled together all the resources we could in the short time we had. But it was like Dom had said, most that were willing to join the fight, were too far away to get here in time. And time was definitely of the essence. Something we discovered the next day when scouts returned with news.

It seemed as though we hadn’t been the only ones busy in the week that had gone by in my absence. Because it turned out that even if we had wanted to wait for more men, that was no longer an option. Not seeing as now Garmr had decided to...

Bring the fight to us.

His enormous army was on its way, which meant that we had no choice but to meet him head on. However, it did give me an idea, because the scouts mentioned what road they were taking. Making me now run into the war room to find the Kings making the final preparations to their plans. Originally, each King was to lead a different section of the army, in hopes of taking them side on, and splitting up their legions. This was a risky strategy on our part, as it meant dividing up our numbers and taking out the chance of a head on attack like Garmr would want.

But what if there was another way to control their side. Hence the first thing I said when stepping inside was,

“I have an idea.” I then walked to the table, looking down on that huge map of the Underworld. One that now had markers of each side. Garmr’s in green and ours in red, to represent our own force. My eyes scanned for the area I knew they were taking, and I lifted up one of our markers and put it down at the Valley of the Gods.

“We fight here,” I stated, making Dom and Lucius look at each other, as if they knew where I was going with this.

“But what if he doesn’t take this route?” Seth asked, leaning in.

“Then we will have to encourage it,” I said, not yet knowing how.

“And why here?” Tyr was next to ask.

“Because it will offer us a swift way out if we need to retreat,” Dom said, already on the same page.

“Garmr would not fight in a bottle neck,” Clay pointed out.

“No, he wouldn’t choose to, but he will if he has no choice, and he will continue to do so if he thinks he is winning and wishes to foolishly give chase,” I replied.

“And what will happen when he does?” Amelia asked, making me point to one of the giant statues the Valley of the Gods were full of.

“We use these,” I said, making realization dawn on her face.

“And if you’re wrong about the route, we will have our entire army stationed in a place that will be difficult to escape from if they come at us from behind,” Clay said, crossing his big black arms across his chest, being at nearly the same size as my brother.

“Not if we force him to take that route,” I said, thinking of a way where he would have no choice. “What if we lure out Lernaean?” I added, knowing its lair was close enough so that all we would need was a little bait to keep her interested and reason enough to get closer to the riverbank. Once provoked, she could take out fifty men

with one strike.

“That could work, but we would need a lot of fucking bait to keep it out hunting near the river,” Lucius pointed out, and he wasn’t wrong there, as it wouldn’t leave its nest for anything less than a decent meal.

“What about the Cerastes, they burrow this time of year and all we would need to do is set fire to their tunnels,” I replied the second it came to me.

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These creatures were serpents that were incredibly flexible. This due to the fact they had no spine and therefore could hallow out burrows that were a warren full of their offspring. These burrows could span miles if left undisturbed, meaning there would be hundreds of them in the dunes that ran alongside the riverbanks.

Their horned heads usually protruding out of the surface as this was how they hunted, as they would lay in wait for their unsuspecting prey. For these horns were meant to deceive other creatures into thinking it is food. Then when the smaller creatures approached, the Cerastes promptly killed it, dragging its carcass back to its warren. This meant for us that they would be easy to spot and therefore we would know where to set the fires.

“If we planned it right, their movements would create enough vibrations to alert the beast and lure it out,” my brother added.

“I am sorry, but I have to ask, exactly what is a Lern... whatever you called it?” Keira asked, getting confused.

“Lernaeon Hydra,” her daughter replied, as of course Amelia would know, seeing as she had no doubt read every book in her father’s library.

“A Hydra, you mean one of those monsters that has loads of heads and every time you cut one off another grows in its place... that kind of Hydra?” Keira asked, making her daughter giggle.

“Try two heads grow in its place, but yeah, close enough,” she replied.

“Is that wise getting something like that involved?” Seth asked.

“It will be far from us but better still, it will not be a risk Garmr will be willing to bet on, as they take a very long time to kill, and he will no doubt lose a lot of his men trying.

“Meaning he will have no choice but to take the path we want him to take... gottcha,” Keira said, making Dom chuckle.

“It is not a bad plan. It offers us an easy escape, as we will have something they do not,” Lucius said with a nod of his head.

“What’s that?” Tyr asked.

“Me,” Adam answered, now joining us and looking at the map.

“Can you do it?” Lucius asked, nodding to the statues painted there.

“Yeah, but I might need some incentive,” he replied, making Pip stroll in right on time and say,

“Hi, I’m incentive, nice to meet you all.” Then she skipped over to her husband and winked up at him.

“Then this could actually work, should all else fail. And if not, forcing them into a bottleneck will give us an advantage, as he will risk it or not, either way, we have ourselves an out,” I said, looking down at the map and doing so now, by clinging on to hope that...

We wouldn’t needthat out.

A BRANCH OF HOPE

The first part of our plan went underway without a hitch, as we managed to lure the Hydra out of its home just in time. As soon as the Hydra spotted the army coming its way, it started attacking. Quickly leaving the smaller prey of the Cerastes to slither away.

Our scouts had been watching from afar and had been led by Bill. This after he had assured me that he'd had dealings with these Cerastes creatures before.

Which meant that like we predicted, Garmr had no choice but to lead his army towards the Valley of Gods, where he would find us waiting ready for battle. The valley was exactly what it sounded like. A mountain pass that narrowed first before opening up to where the statues of Gods would watch and protect travelers that ventured through. But the biggest of these statues was of Hades himself. One which was situated at the narrowest point, as if welcoming those to a place to worship the deities of the Underworld. A statue that was over a hundred foot in height.

This was also where the bottleneck was, the one that we would use to our advantage. But as for me, I wouldn't be part of the battle, for I would have my own personal fight to contend with. The reminder of such was strapped to my back in a sheath, that this time didn't hold a sword, but what I was hoping was a far more important weapon.

As for Orthrus, Dariush, and myself, we were all waiting for the right opportunity to put our part of the plan into action. Something we couldn't do until we saw Ella. Which was why we stayed hidden at one of the taller peaks on the mountain waiting to spot her. Of course, I knew that Garmr would want to keep her at a safe distance from the fight, as he couldn't risk anything happening to her.

But, with that being said, she would still need to see those that she brought back, as well as be within distance to control the souls she had acquired when taking hold of that book. Which was why it became increasingly difficult to watch as the battle began, knowing I could be of help in my HellBeast form. But Dom had been right, the moment I saw the sheer numbers of Garmr's army, I knew the battle would not be easy to win, if not impossible.

Not unless I could get Ella back. Because with her by Garmr's side, it would never matter how many lives we took on the battlefield, not when they would only become another soul to add to her collection. A soul we would have no chance at killing. Not when they would simply return to the book seeking the power needed to continue the fight.

"Gods," my brother uttered the second he saw what I did. Legions of HellHounds leading the battle, with other creatures that had joined in his cause. I wondered if they knew what this war actually stood for. That it wasn't to take over Hell, but instead to destroy it entirely? Would they still fight alongside him? I doubted it, but then, half of his army belonged to Clay, and believed Garmr to be their true king.

The clash of these two forces as they came together set us all on edge, as I could see Dom leading the way with the other Kings spread out along the front line.

Sigurd's darkness created a wall of night around a large group of HellHounds, as serpents lashed out from the thick black fog. His own army created a similar effect, causing mayhem and confusion between Garmr's ranks.

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Seth unleashed his own terror, becoming a monster so fierce he wreaked havoc among our enemies. My own HellBeasts ran into the fray, tearing apart the smaller HellHounds. Doing so as if they were no more than yapping demonic dogs. My council headed the army we had only just managed to get here in time.

As for Keira and Amelia, I knew they had not been allowed to fight, despite them being capable. But their husbands had convinced them to keep the innocent people at the camp safe in case any threat managed to break through. But even I knew that this was only an excuse so as Dom and Lucius could fight without concern for their safety.

Marcus and Bill both had been ordered to stay behind to protect them incase Garmr was to try anything. As for Koro, he had hidden Lerna somewhere safe. This was just in case she became Garmr's next target, and if Ella's true self managed a way to fight back against his control somehow. As it was clear she wouldn't have hurt her, no matter how evil Garmr had twisted her mind.

"I don't see her!" I snapped, forcing my gaze from the battle that raged on, trying to spot her in the distance.

"There, look!" my brother shouted when he spotted the green mist rising around a lone figure. As suspected, she was at the back, with Garmr standing not too far away from her. Although when he mounted a Colchian Dragon, which was essentially a long yellow snake with slim wings, I knew that now was our shot. As his focus was now on the battle below.

"We have to go now! Can you get me behind her?" I said, looking to Dariush.

“If I can see it, I can do it. But I can only take one of you at a time through the portal,” Dariush replied, making me look to my brother who gritted his teeth before saying,

“Fine, but don’t get dead in the minutes it takes me to get to you.”

I smirked and said,

“I will try my best.”

Then I ran for the portal Dariush created, taking a deep breath before stepping through. The mantra in my mind played on a loop, ‘this has to work, this has to work.’

That jarring feeling took over for a few seconds before I found myself looking at her back, as she was working her Summoning magic, pushing it to the front line. Her souls barged through before she could make those we had killed rise up to fight once more. An army of green ghostly figures of their former shell now charging into the living.

I crept up behind her, at the same time pulling the branch from my back, ready to force her to touch it. But I never made it to her in time before I was spotted. Because I hadn’t clocked the guards she had with her, now running at me, and giving me no choice but drop the branch as I was forced to deal with them.

“YOU!” she roared at me, the green glow of her eyes far more demonic than last time, telling me she was getting ever more lost by the day. And I had to remember, a week had passed. The dark emerald green of her armor shimmered like a diesel spill on tarmac. The darkness around her eyes transforming her beauty into something menacing and demonic.

I slashed out with my claws at the two guards that I had seen in his castle that day, ugly, red skinned fuckers that took no time at all to put down. Now as for my demonic fiancé, she was a different story. One that started with me being grabbed from behind, right after I had killed the threat. Which put me now facing a very different one, as she tossed me into the trees, making me split the wood.

“Didn’t I kill you?!” she roared at me, her voice once sweet and gentle, now hard with hatred.

“Fuck, babe, you not tired of throwing me into shit yet?” I said with a wince, cracking my dislocated shoulder back into place. But then she was running at me, making me duck out of the way just in time, telling her,

“That ain’t a very nice way to treat your HellBeast,” I said, making her scream at me,

“He is dead, as you soon will be!”

But as she continued to come at me, I continued to try and make my way back to the branch, rolling just in time before she took my head off with a whip of her powers. As for the branch, I landed close enough that I was just reaching out for it, when suddenly I was being dragged backwards. I looked down to see the green ropes of her power wrapped around one of my ankles, which I had no chance at fighting. I knew that when she used them to lift me upright, so as she could start to choke me once more. It was becoming obvious this was a favorite of hers. But then she surprised me by asking,

“Why do you continue to try and take me, when it will only mean your death?” She pinned me against the cracked tree and only loosened her hold on me when she could see I was trying to speak.

“Because I would do anything to save you... even from yourself,” I said, now looking

behind her and seeing my one and only chance present itself. Because my brother had just made it through the portal.

Luckily, he quickly spotted the branch, reached for it, and I nodded, telling him I was ready. She looked behind her just as he tossed it to me, making me catch it before she had a chance to stop it. Then I told her,

“...Even this!”

Then I thrust the branch at her, making her stagger back at the same time she purposely caught it. I landed on my feet and watched as emotions started to play out across her face. A single word now escaping her lips.

“Mother.”

I closed my eyes as relief washed over me, only opening them again when I heard the roar of anger coming from above. Garmr had spotted us and was now calling her name.

“Anástasi!”

To which she shook her head as if fighting within herself. I gritted my teeth, wishing I could turn into my HellBeast and rip the fucker apart. But I also knew I couldn't chance it, as like this, it would only see Ella as a threat.

Garmr dropped down from the flying serpent and held his hand up, making her suddenly tense. Her eyes had seeped back into the girl I loved when she came into contact with the branch. But now they started to glow once more, before her head snapped back up to mine. Then she told me in a deadly tone,

“My mother is dead!”

A statement she cemented by crushing the branch in her hand, making the pieces fall to the floor and with it, the last of my hope.

“NO! No, Ella! What... what have you done!?” I called out in shock, truly believing that it would have worked.

“NOW KILL HIM THIS TIME!” Garmr ordered.

Unlike before, she didn't use a piece of wood. No, she had something far more effective as she made power extend out her hand. A piece of her summoning magic formed into a flaming green sword, one held at the ready to end me. However, before she could make the first strike, my brother got there first, hitting her over the head with a rock and knocking her out cold. After this all her souls disappeared at once, making Garmr roar out in anger as he raced towards us.

As for me, the second I saw the blood trickling from her forehead, I fell to my knees next to her, something my brother wouldn't allow for long.

“No, I can't leave her... I can't...!” I was grabbed from behind and tossed towards the portal Dariush was keeping open. The struggle on his face told me that it wouldn't be for much longer.

“Hurry!” he shouted, but my mind was solely on Ella. The whole side of the army now coming for us at Garmr's demand. A horde of them far too great for us to ever fight. Something my brother knew.

“We can’t fight them all, brother, come on!” he shouted as the portal began to fade. And just before it could disappear completely, and as Dariush was stepping inside, I felt myself suddenly pushed from behind. I fell through the portal and out the other side where we had first waited. I landed flat on the ground, my hands barely saving my face as I panted and thought through all that had just happened.

It hadn’t worked.

I had failed.

She touched the branch, but it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough to bring her back. Wasn’t enough to make her remember her past life. I hammered a fist to the ground, knowing I had just barely made it out of there. But there was one thing I hadn’t expected next, as my nightmare was far from over.

“I am sorry,” Dariush said, making me frown as I pushed up and looked back at him. The confusion on my face was easy to see when I finally asked,

“Wait... where is Orthrus?”

Dariush shook his head and told me,

“I couldn’t keep it open any longer.”

I gasped and staggered back.

“No... no... where is he?Where is my brother?!”I roared, now running towards where we had come from, ready to race back down there and fight the fucking army to get him back! But Dariush stopped me, grabbing me from behind, telling me,

“You’re no help to them both if you’re dead! It’s too late, they have him. He pushed

you through so you could live, Jared, but if I let you go, then his sacrifice will have been for nothing!”

I tried to fight, only to lose it to my agony. The pain making me drop to my knees as my anguish overwhelmed me.

My brother.

He had been taken.

“Come, it is over,” Dariush said, prompting me to lift my head to see that he was right. Our army had started to retreat, just after Adam’s beast emerged. The deafening roar that rocked the valley of the Gods wasn’t enough to drown out the howl of agony that came straight from my HellBeast.

Not even the crashing sound and destruction of the statue of Hades was enough to pull me from this torment. I realized that we had lost so much more than just the battle. And as the sight of the Gods figures smashing to the floor created a barrier between us and them, it became symbolic for what Hades had told me.

The cost of love...was pain.

Because now Fate had taken two people I loved away.

Neither of which, did I know...

Were dead or not.

ELLA

Aprisoner.

That's what I was.

Trapped within the mind of someone else. It was torture. Pure and simple. I had spent over a week locked in this cruel version of myself, one that only grew darker and darker as time went on. Of course, I had tried fighting it. I had resorted to haunting her dreams, as this seemed to be the only time she was vulnerable. She would wake screaming for Garmr who would be there to comfort her.

It made me sick to watch how he was with her. As I knew now the awful truth. He didn't just use her as a weapon like I thought. No, he used her body and played with her darkening heart also.

Because he actually loved her.

And what was worse, a part of her loved him in return. And the part of me that was trapped, I spent my days trying to will myself to pick up a knife and stab him in the heart with it. The heart she clearly owned.

To watch them make love had been one of the hardest things to bare. But not more so than the day Jared turned up to try and rescue me. His face full of relief at finding me and in return I had been screaming at him from deep inside, trying to tell him to run. To save himself from me.

But he hadn't.

Which meant that I had been forced to watch as my evil counterpart stabbed him. I had been forced to watch as he bled out on the floor, my cries of pain meaning nothing but a headache to her. My heart wrenching despair was only enough to cause her discomfort as she fell to her knees gripping her head. Just enough to reach out to him, as if it was in my utter agony, that was all I had enough power to do.

But then a portal had opened up and swallowed him whole. My only hope being that he had been rescued just in time to save him. An answer to my prayers I had only received today on the battlefield. The moment I saw him, my heart sang out with relief but like before, it was short lived because it ended with another fight on his hands.

A fight that had finished the moment he thrust a branch into her hands. A bright light had filled our vision as the shadowed figure of our mother Leuce had appeared. I hadn't recognized her but when I heard the other version of me call her mother, I knew that was who she was.

But even then. Even after seeing her...

It hadn't been enough.

Not when Garmr had put a stop to it, taking control of her once more and, therefore, me with it. I fought again and again, screaming so loud in her head that I felt her falter slightly before she could plunge in her sword. And then just before she did...

Darkness fell over us both.

Meaning I had no idea what had happened, only that the next time she woke, Garmr was there sitting next to her on the bed. He smoothed back her hair, and the

affectionate gesture had me gritting my teeth.

“How are you feeling, my dear?” he asked softly, making her shake her head before putting her hand to the bandage that was obviously there. I could only see myself whenever she looked in the mirror and, most of the time, I was turning away in disgust at what we had become.

“What happened, did we win the battle?” I heard her ask, making me scoff internally.

“We did, for the cowards retreated.”

I felt her smile, because I could feel everything she could. The way my body moved, the power she wielded, the vibrations of her speech. I could feel it all as if it was my own. I just had no way of controlling it.

“And now?”

“I am afraid we lost quite a few in battle, their remains crushed due to the fall of the statues and rampage of that beast Abaddon they have fighting on their side.”

“Like you feared,” she agreed, sighing before asking, “Could we not steal away the Imp? That way we would control the beast.”

At this I cried out, mentally screaming, NO! Loud enough that it made her wince, and it was a small satisfaction in sight of what she had just suggested.

“Perhaps, but for now I have something to show you, if you’re feeling up to it, my love?”

I gritted my teeth once more, just like I always did at his endearments.

“I am, show me,” she replied, making him chuckle before taking her hand and helping her up.

“Always so eager to hear of my plans.”

“That’s because your plans are always so clever,” she cooed, making me want to gag.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:00 am

“But they are nothing without you, my dear. Come, for I will show you.”

I was forced to watch as they traveled down a hallway, one that I knew Jared had taken when sneaking inside. As I had heard them speak of how Jared could have gotten in, this discussion took place not long after the attack on him in the bedroom.

Which made me wonder, was this where they were going now? It seemed so, because they walked through a door and into a cave system. The long tunnel seemed to go on forever, until it finally opened up into a cavernous space. A hollowed-out section of the middle of the mountain. But that wasn't what was so startling.

No, it was the...

Valley of bones.

“It has been disturbed but as you can see, I have my men getting it all back in order now,” Garmr told her, as she gasped.

Millions of bones were all now getting piled up into pyramids by the workers we could see below.

“I don't know what to say,” she replied in shock.

“Say it can be done,” he returned, making her turn and throw her arms around him, before promising,

“It will take time, but yes, my love, I think it can be done.”

I inwardly gasped as it clicked just what she meant by this. My panic now burst over as the gravity of the situation started to play out in my mind.

“Excellent, for once you have brought back these souls, then I will be master of the greatest army all the realms of Hell have ever known, for nothing can stop us...not as long as I have you by my side,”he said, cradling her head to his chest, before allowing her to pull back to stare back at the sea of bones. One that if she managed her task, could truly mean the end.

And unfortunately, the horror of my situation was one that I didn't think could get any worse. But I was wrong. Because then he wrapped his arms around her from behind and told her,

“I have another gift for you.”

“You do?” she asked, her voice sounding amused.

“Yes...” he replied, practically purring the word, pausing before whispering what would soon become a new torture for me to bare from my living nightmares...

“I have captured a HellBeast for you to kill.”

To be continued...