







# A Secret Crush Valentine's (Holiday Shifters of Frost Mountain #9)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Escaping death twice in sixteen years?

Now, that's real luck.

Then again, it means I'm accident-prone.

Not exactly the type of gal you'd ask to the Valentine's Day dance.

I just wish my high school crush had asked me...

Before we fell through the ice and he disappeared forever.

Was I a goner when my plane crashed on Frost Mountain sixteen years later?

Nope.

Bumping into him was the real shocker.

This sizzling dragon shifter can't possibly be the same guy I lost in high school...

Except it is.

He's bigger, hotter, darker. A real survivor.

But crashing on Frost Mountain couldn't possibly have been good luck...

Valentine's Day is approaching, and once again, we're on thin ice.

The Collectors are everywhere.

They're ruthless marauders who steal rare items and kidnap creatures on the mountain.

And they've got a new target...

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A Secret Crush Valentine's

Holiday Shifters of Frost Mountain

green eyes gazing into hers in that split second before the surface gave way and they fell into the dark depths; of the icy water filling her lungs as she clawed desperately for the surface.

How long ago had that been? Fifteen years? Sixteen by January. In 16 years, little had changed. The memories continued to haunt her. No matter how much she tried to forget or how many songs she wrote in an attempt for catharsis.

The plane trembled again, snapping her back to attention. Her gaze landed again on the book in the woman's lap. It reminded her of a dictionary, but she could barely make out half the words on the yellow pages.

"What's with the book?" she wanted to know.

"It is power," the woman replied simply.

Did she have something against giving meaningful answers?

"Power..." Julia tapped her chin until a thought occurred to her. "Right. You mean knowledge. As in, knowledge is power. You don't look much like a nerd."

The woman simply blinked at her.

“Well, it’s a really old book,” Julia said.

Her companion nodded. “It belonged to one of my ancestors—my great-grandmother. She was one of its authors.”

“Impressive. Something tells me she was as great as her title.”

The woman’s eyes lit up. “I guess you could say I’m living vicariously through her.”

Julia chuckled. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, anyway. I’m Julia.”

“Daphne.”

“Nice to meet you, Daphne.”

Out of the corner of Julia’s eye, she saw a woman twist around in her seat to face the man with the buzz cut and headphones. Judging from her expression, she was clearly complaining about something the guy didn’t particularly care about.

“...just grooving to my jams,” the man was saying.

The woman’s scowl deepened. “You’re acting like a literal toddler right now.”

“Just let me listen to my music, will you? You’re kinda spoiling my groove.”

“ What? ”

“Guys like that are jerks,” Julia heard Daphne say. “He’s not going to stop kicking her seat.”

Julia hadn’t even realized he was doing that. “How can you be so sure about that?”

“It’s just who he is.” Daphne closed the book, and Julia caught a brief glimpse of gold lettering across the black cover. “Leopards don’t change their spots. Not even snow leopards.”

“Cripes!”

“I need to use the toilet,” she said, getting to her feet.

Julia could have sworn the woman winked just before she turned and headed for the back of the cabin. She sat, open-mouthed, at the spot where Daphne had been sitting.

How did she know what I am?

She replayed the words in her mind: Not even snow leopards.

No one, not a single living soul in Julia’s life, knew what she was. Well, except her parents, but they didn’t really count. She’d kept the truth about her supernatural nature a secret all her life, no matter how close she got to anyone.

Nothing strange about that. Supernaturals typically hid their true selves from the rest of the world. Most humans weren’t exactly comfortable with the idea that people like Julia existed. Believing supernaturals didn’t exist meant everyone could go on living their daily lives without fear. Julia knew if they ever found out she was a shifter, their reactions would be a lot less like parents at a gender reveal and more along the lines of Demon! Kill her!

Yeah. Humans were chill like that.

But how in blazes did Daphne know what she was? Something about the woman’s calm demeanor left Julia feeling even more uncomfortable. Should she go after her?

No .

She remained where she sat, trying to steady herself. When Daphne returned from the bathroom, she'd find out what she needed to know.

She turned her gaze yet again to the window, staring out at the expanse of blue sky. Now that she thought about it, maybe it wasn't so boring after all. She'd always been capable of creating songs or poetry out of the most mundane ideas. A sky so vast was hardly mundane. The same could be said about the elements, like water. Well, ice. She'd penned a few lines this morning before she'd arrived at the airport. The words were still burned into the back of her mind:

Lost beneath the ice, a lover's silent scream,

Fading echoes of an unrealized dream,

Icicles of tears in the heart of the snow.

You disappeared on the cusp of tomorrow.

She shook her head. Somehow, no matter what she wrote, it ended up being about that day, about him .

Sixteen years, and you still can't get him out of your head, she thought with a mirthless chuckle. Good going there, Julia. Next, you'll be writing books about him.

Daphne was right. Leopards didn't change their spots.

A figure moving in the corner of her vision made her look up. It wasn't Daphne, she realized. A flight attendant had paused in the aisle to speak to the arguing passengers. A moment later, the git with the buzz cut and headphones got up and followed the

attendant along the aisle.

At least that's settled.

Julia looked away, settling back into her thoughts.

Now, I'll travel through this frozen expanse

Of my heart, and someday I'll dance

To the fading echoes of our love's song

I'll remember you, forever gone.

It wasn't like she hadn't loved anyone since he'd disappeared. She'd dated a couple of guys at Oxford, one of whom was the most perfect gentleman she'd ever met. When she returned to the States and settled in Vegas, she'd gone steady with someone else for a little over a year.

Okay, to be honest, they were all really nice guys, but what she'd felt for them had been platonic. There had been dates, of course, but she'd never actually let any of them into her bed because she'd never been able to picture any of them getting that close to her heart. In fact, whenever she thought about it, only one person came to mind.

It made no sense that she couldn't get him completely out of her head.

Then again—

Before she could complete that thought, she was jolted in her seat as a violent shudder rocked the plane. Julia's fingers found the armrests of her seat, gripping them



for dear life as the realization swept over her: This wasn't turbulence, not like the previous tremors. Something was wrong.

A series of gasps swept through the cabin, informing her that other passengers shared her sentiment.

"What the hell just happened?" exclaimed someone.

She glanced toward the window just in time to see flames streak past. The sky was still mostly clear. Her gaze dipped, and she took in the sight of the trees and snow-covered mountain peaks and—

Wait, what in the world...?

"We've lost our wings!" someone else yelled.

"Oh, God, we're all going to die!"

Julia barely had time to process the statement before the plane shuddered once more and dipped. They were going down, she realized. And fast .

What was supposed to be a vacation for her had turned into a nightmare in the wink of an eye. Amid her panic, she swept her gaze about and saw that the other passengers felt the same way. Some were holding hands, eyes shut in prayer. Others simply braced themselves in their seats as if in acceptance of their fate.

Overhead, lights flickered, which did nothing to relieve the terror that engulfed her. She shut her eyes as a beeping filled her ears, almost drowned out by the screams of the passengers. She braced herself, opting to accept the inevitable fate that awaited her on the ground. She was going to die. What was more, she was never going to get that vacation she'd been so excited about.

She heard a series of deep groans like the metal hull of a plane slowly coming apart.  
Like the icy surface of a lake slowly giving away beneath the weight of two bodies.

But she knew it wasn't the lake. This wasn't ice cracking.

When she heard the explosion a moment later, she didn't hit the water. She didn't drown.

She spun into nothingness.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

Present Day

### A Day in the Life of a Vegetarian Snow Leopard

Julia Reel's afternoon was going horribly. And that was before the dragon showed up.

With another burst of desperation, she took a running start, scattering snow with her paws, and shot off the ground, hurling herself at the tree with claws extended. The result was the same as always: She managed to grab hold of the tree trunk for a second before she slid back down to its base. Frustrated, she snarled at the tree.

The tree did not respond, but she was pretty sure it was laughing at her. Whiskers twitching against the cold, she glanced up at the berries dangling from overhead. The berries were half-frozen, but the sight of them alone made her stomach growl.

This is getting on my last nerve, she thought.

But it didn't matter how hard or how many times she tried: She couldn't seem to reach them, which made no sense. The branch was barely 15 feet high. Between her claws and natural agility, she should be able to climb the tree and reach those berries. But the tree trunk was impossible to hold onto.

Since when do snow leopards have trouble climbing trees?

Since they found themselves on strange mountains like this, that's when.

She'd spent all afternoon and the greater part of her morning hunting for food, but it seemed to be evading her. She was starting to feel like that guy from Greek mythology, the one whose punishment was that he couldn't eat or drink. Tantalus or something.

Her ears perked up at the sound of a twig snapping nearby. Her eyes scanned the clearing, her whiskers twitching again as the scent reached her nostrils. There was another animal nearby, a deer, most likely.

Lunch.

No, Julia. She pushed the thought aside before it could settle in her mind. No meat.

No killing was more like it.

She'd lost count of just how many weeks had passed—six or seven—since she opened her eyes and found herself lying half-buried in the snow. Julia figured she was dead and this was the afterlife, but it had taken her only minutes to rethink that. She wasn't particularly religious, but she doubted that hell was freezing, like minus 70 degrees. If she'd somehow made it to heaven, she doubted it would be freezing either, which meant she was alive.

How she'd survived the plane crash, she had no idea. Julia remembered plummeting to her death, the mountain rushing up to meet her. But since she survived the crash, she figured she'd head down the mountain and try to find a village and report the accident.

She'd barely been traveling for an hour when she realized she would never make it, not in this cold and not in this body. The clothes she'd been wearing when she'd boarded the flight were chosen with a relaxing vacation in mind, not... this. If she kept traveling in human form, she'd end up a frozen corpse before the day was out.

Shifting had been a brilliant idea. The cold barely bothered snow leopards, not to mention she could travel a lot faster. On the mountain, she was an apex predator or close. Julia hadn't shifted back to her human form since. But it wasn't always easy to control the leopard's instincts, like now.

Hunger gnawed at her insides, a stark reminder of her need to survive, but the mere thought of killing and eating another living thing was enough to make her nauseous. Over the weeks, she'd stuck with berries and nuts and drank from nearby streams. She wasn't vegan, but no way was she sinking her teeth or claws into an animal, leaving her maw covered with blood. Maybe when hell froze over.

Oh, right. I might as well already be in hell.

Casting a final look at the berries, she turned and continued heading downhill, darting between the trees until the woods about her became a blur. Before long, she was out in the open, staring at the expanse of snow. That was all this mountain was—snow, snow, and more snow. And ice. And snow-covered rocks. Snow-covered trees.

It is a complete nightmare , she decided.

And she was starting to think she was trapped.

A cold wind brushed her flank, which added to her discomfort. Snow leopards were comfortable with the cold and the snow, but Julia was not. She felt like she'd been plunged into a horror movie.

You're thirty-one years old, she reminded herself. You're going to have to get over this at some point.

She knew that was true. But in a way, she was still that 15-year-old girl in the 10th grade who'd lost a part of her on that cold afternoon in January.

Laudville High had been a difficult place, more difficult when you didn't fit in. Julia did not fit in. She'd been the nerd with only two friends who'd published the school's newsletter, the awkward girl who not many kids noticed, the sort of girl who had crushes on people completely out of her league.

She'd figured from the start that Damon McLaurent would never even glance her way, much less consider his girlfriend. He was a year older than her and a quarterback with the Laudville Lions. Jocks on the high school football team got all the girls they wanted, and they always wanted the prettiest girls, aka the cheerleaders.

What chance could the chief editor of the Laudville Letters newsletter possibly have with someone as popular as Damon?

No wonder she'd nearly forgotten how to breathe the day she caught him staring at her in the hallway. She'd reluctantly brushed it off, figuring it was a random coincidence—maybe he'd been staring at someone else, and she'd gotten in the way.

But then it happened again and again . He'd caught her once staring at him from the stands during football practice and smiled at her.

Julia had practically run all the way home that day.

Over the next few weeks, they bumped into each other in the hallways and even chatted a little. She doubted he knew her name. He always called her Red , which she figured was because of her hair. Julia didn't mind. Why he even bothered to talk to someone like her, she had no idea, but there was no denying how amazing it felt.

She should've known it was too good to be true.

It happened in the middle of January. By then, the hallways of Laudville were filled with talk about the Valentine's Day Dance that was weeks away. She'd been hoping

Damon would ask her to the dance—a fantasy she'd nursed from the first day they made eye contact. And when he offered, out of the blue, to walk home with her one day, she'd been certain her wish was coming true.

And then they decided to cross that frozen lake. However, it wasn't as frozen as they thought.

She recalled the sound of the ice cracking beneath their feet, the roaring of water in her ears as she drowned...

By a stroke of luck, she'd been rescued and resuscitated, but by then, Damon was gone. Not dead, not discharged from the hospital she'd been rushed to. Just... gone, like he'd never even been there.

The authorities had scoured the lake for a body but had found nothing. As far as anyone was concerned, he'd somehow vanished from the face of the earth. Months passed before his family, and the police gave up on the search and declared him dead.

Julia never went to the dance, partly because she'd been stuck recovering at home until March. And in the years that followed... well, she never gave Valentine's Day much thought. She didn't hate Valentine's; she just couldn't help remembering that day in January when the guy she'd had the biggest crush on fell through the ice and never came back up.

With some effort, she brushed the thought from her mind, relying on the snow leopard's keen senses to scan her surroundings. Besides a few animals and trees scattered about, there was no sign of life.

But people live on this mountain, she thought.

She'd been here long enough to figure that out. The campfire sites and cabins that had

seen better days had been a dead giveaway, not to mention the tracks. A couple of times, she'd even thought she caught the scent of humans, but she'd given them a wide berth. The last thing they needed was a snow leopard snarling at them for help.

Or a naked redhead, she mused. Her best option was to keep heading downhill, which brought another problem to the fore: At her current pace, she should have reached the bottom of the mountain by now or at least seen it. But, besides the snow and the sky above, she'd seen nothing else. No buildings in the distance, not even the sea.

Where am I, anyway? Weren't we flying over Nebraska just before the plane came apart?

It was just another question she could not answer, besides the fact that she was surrounded by snow when she woke up on this mountain. She figured the temperature would rise as she headed down the mountain, but no such luck.

I've seen some pretty weird crap as a weather reporter, she thought, slowing her pace as she navigated around a pile of boulders, but this takes the cake. This is weird, conspiracy-theory-kind-of weird. This is the sort of made-up crap you see on YouTube.

None of this should be possible. There shouldn't be this much snow when the weather report at the airport had predicted clear skies and moderate temperatures. She certainly shouldn't be on a mountain in the middle of nowhere when she'd been flying thousands of feet above Nebraska moments before the disaster occurred.

There was only one cause for any of this: Magic. Bloody hell. Of course .

She never was particularly fond of magic. Growing up, she was warned about magic users and the atrocities they were capable of. No doubt a magic user was behind all of this.



It's going to get cold very soon.

Wasn't that what the woman on the plane had said?

If Julia had fists instead of paws, she would have balled them in annoyance right now. How hadn't she figured it out sooner? A weird-looking woman with an even weirder-looking book just happened to predict the weather and figure out Julia's shifter nature?

But why doom an entire plane? That part made even less sense to Julia.

At any rate, she'd like to get back home. To hell with the Four Seasons Hotel. She'd take her boring, annoying job over living like this.

You're a long way from home, she told herself. This can't be the States.

She was just going to have to keep moving and try to survive until—

Swoop. Swoop. Swoop.

The sound came from above. It was the sound of wings, very, very large wings.

A huge, dark shadow swept over her, and Julia dared to glance up and then froze in her tracks, her eyes widening at the sight of the creature overhead.

Of course, a weird, magical place like this would have dragons in it.

The dragon had to be at least 200 feet above, but she could make it out just fine. And goodness gracious, it was massive. Julia had never seen a dragon before, at least not this close up. The sight was as impressive as it was terrifying. A long tail snaked behind the body that was as large as three buses. Wings like tarpaulins spread from its

sides, and a long neck supported a horned head.

Is it just me, or... is it watching me?

The dragon circled overhead for a few seconds. And then it lunged.

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### Weirdest High School Reunion Ever

Jackpot!

He swooped out of the sky toward the creature, wings tucked at his sides. The creature turned and tried to get away. It was a snow leopard, alright. The snow leopard shifter he'd been after for weeks.

At long last, he'd found it.

He hit the ground in a flash, the earth trembling with the impact. Flecks of snow sprayed in all directions. The bag hanging from his neck shook and slammed against his scales. He unfurled his wings and let out a roar that echoed across the mountain. His prize lay in the snow before him, having been knocked out from the impact of his landing. Tough day for him.

Or was it a her? Hadn't Grim Jim mentioned earlier that it was a female shifter?

Tough day for her , he corrected himself. Good for me.

The leopard staggered to her feet, not taking those bluish eyes off him for a second. He could see the fear in those eyes.

Good.

His live catches tended to show fear. Fear meant there was less likely to be resistance. This should be easy.

He'd almost given up a week ago after searching this side of the mountain and finding nothing. Heck, he'd considered taking the risk and fleeing to Caprichor. The Ice Melter would never find him there. He'd learned about the place a few months ago and visited it once. That village was too well hidden, both from the eyes and the minds of other inhabitants of Frost Mountain.

After this, he wouldn't have to flee. After this, he would be free to live as he pleased. At least now he didn't have to worry about facing Jim's wrath.

You do not mess with Jim, and that was that.

It was Jim who'd sent him on this mission after receiving word from other Collectors about the snow leopard's presence on the mountain weeks ago. Find her and bring her to me alive. Those were his orders.

He took a step toward the snow leopard, and she backed away with a whimper. Despite his relief, guilt clutched at his heart. This wasn't right. This was an innocent shifter, someone who probably had no idea what kind of things happened around these parts. Whatever Jim had in store for her was no more pleasant than being attacked and captured by a dragon.

This was why he'd decided to part ways with the Collectors.

He'd been with them since he'd arrived on Frost Mountain. They'd found him and given him a new life, a new purpose after what had happened to him: Falling into that lake and losing everything—his old life, his family, his dream of a college scholarship...

And her.

Grim Jim wouldn't let him go unless he paid back the favor he owed him. But it was

this sort of thing that made him want to leave the Collectors in the first place.

He stepped closer, and the leopard's eyes grew even wider. Then she began to shift. The sound of bones expanding and reshaping themselves filled his ears. The spotted white coat slowly receded into pale flesh. In seconds, a woman stood staring, wide-eyed, back at him.

His heart nearly stopped. A single thought floated to the front of his mind.

Red?

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The way Damon McLaurent saw it, luck was only a matter of perspective. Sometimes, stuff happened that made you the happiest guy in the world. And sometimes, the same stuff meant you were knee-deep in a pile of crap.

Right now, staring down at the woman before him, he was both the happiest guy in the world and knee-deep in crap.

It was her. It was Julia Reel.

She'd definitely changed in the 16 years since he'd last seen her. Her red hair was longer than he remembered, her face a little less round, but there was no mistaking those blue eyes. The last time he'd gazed into them, he'd been awestruck. Even then, she'd been a breathtaking sight. He could see that time had been more than kind to her. He tucked in his wings, gazing silently at her.

And then his gaze dropped from her face. She must have lost her clothes when she shifted, he realized. She stood stark naked before him, shivering violently in the cold. For a moment, Damon could do nothing but stare. She was a bit taller, her red curls

falling past narrow shoulders and settling just above her perky breasts. Her nipples stood to attention in the cold, and as she shuddered...

He let his gaze travel even lower, taking in the curves of her hips. A sprinkle of red hair traveled from her tiny navel toward the apex of her rather luscious thighs, and—

“P-please,” she whimpered, “don’t kill me.”

When he returned his gaze to those wide eyes, Damon could have sworn he felt his heart shatter.

He backed away from her, the red dragon scales fading into flesh as he did. Soon, he, too, stood naked before her, completely human, the brown leather bag slung over his shoulder. Thinking quickly, he pulled out a pair of trousers and slipped them on, then handed her some clothing as well.

Now fully clothed, she continued to stare at him.

Eternities could have passed between them, and he could care less. His heart thudded frantically in his chest, and he couldn’t seem to find his voice. Julia was staring at him as though she’d seen a ghost. If only she knew just how similarly he felt.

Finally, she spoke. “Damon?” she asked.

Damon found his voice. “Red,” he replied.

Her voice quivered. “You... you’re...”

He had barely enough time to nod before she rushed at him, throwing her arms around his neck. Damon thought he heard a sob as he wrapped his arms around her, cradling her head to his chest. He wondered if she could hear his heart thundering in

his ribcage. He stood there, unable to believe this was really happening.

Julia pulled away then, blinking rapidly at him. “I... I thought I’d never see you again. When the ice broke, I—”

He managed to crack a grin. “This is one hell of a high school reunion, isn’t it?”

She didn’t laugh. It wasn’t hard to guess the thoughts going through her mind. He could remember the details of that afternoon just as well. Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he could hear the ice cracking seconds before it split open under him. He could see the air bubbles escaping his mouth as he tried to claw his way back to the surface from the murky depths of the lake.

When he broke through the ice again, she was gone, along with the rest of his world.

It had all been his fault. If he’d never asked Julia to cross the lake with him, he wouldn’t have ended up here.

But he’d been hoping to spend more time with her, even if it meant taking a detour as he walked her home. To be honest, he’d never imagined she would ever want to be with a guy like him. Girls like her always thought guys like him were dimwitted jerks, but he’d always found her fascinating.

He never missed a chance to read whatever she’d written in her newsletter. He’d spent time perusing her articles and poetry at home or in the locker room if it was empty, all in hopes of getting to know her better.

That day in January, he’d decided to stop hesitating and ask her to the Valentine’s Day Dance. And then it happened.

Damon never got to that dance.

He'd thought he would never see her again. But here she was now, standing before him, those beautiful blue eyes tugging once again on his heartstrings.

"Red..." he muttered.

"You... you look different," she said, glancing at him from head to toe.

"In a good way, I hope." He grinned. "You've changed a lot, too, Red. What's with the accent?"

"I was in England for a while." She was still staring at him like he'd come from outer space. "So... you're a shifter?"

He nodded. He'd never mentioned that fact to her, never even thought to out of fear of scaring her off. But now...

"So are you," he replied.

A snow leopard shifter, to be exact. Grim Jim's new prize, which changed everything.

This is bad, he thought. Really, really bad.

He'd just bumped into the one woman who'd claimed his heart after nearly two decades. That made him the happiest guy in the world. But it also meant he was about to be waist-deep in crap because she was in more danger than she could imagine.



## Page 4

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### A Traipse Through the Magical Junkyard

Okay, maybe this was the afterlife, or her spirit was stuck in limbo, or this was all a very detailed dream because the man standing before her couldn't possibly be real.

Except he was. Deep down, she knew that much.

She took another long look at Damon and felt her breath hitch in her throat. He looked different, alright. And it wasn't just the stubble on his chin, or his shorter brown hair, or that chiseled chin. He'd filled out nicely since the last time she'd seen him, standing at least a foot taller than her so that her face was level with his barrel chest.

Broad shoulders widened his frame, nearly filling her vision. Julia was willing to bet those muscles were larger than her head. A few scars lined his abs, traveling down into his trousers. He looked less like the high school football jock she'd had a silly crush on and more like a hardened survivor. His eyes were as green as ever, but even they had changed. Gazing into them felt like staring at a veteran. She couldn't guess what Damon had been through over the past 16 years; she wasn't sure she wanted to know, yet curiosity burned within her like wildfire. It was hard not to want answers, especially when the questions continued to prod her mind.

"You were... gone," she said, choking back the lump that had lodged itself in her throat. "I thought... I thought you were..."

"So did I, Red, for a while," he replied. "When I got back to the surface, you were gone. Everything was gone. I figured I must be—"

“Dead,” she said, completing his sentence. “It’s hard not to think that this is some kind of heaven when there’s so much snow around.” At least she wasn’t the only one who’d mistaken this place for an afterlife. “So where exactly is this place? I don’t think it’s anywhere in the States.”

Damon shook his head, those eyes locked on hers. “Frost Mountain isn’t anywhere on earth.”

It took Julia a moment to process what he’d just said. She lifted an eyebrow at him like he’d lost his marbles. “Are you saying we’re in space, or on some other planet, or—”

“No, not another planet, a separate dimension.”

She blinked. He wasn’t making any sense. Nothing he’d just said answered the questions swirling through her mind, like what in deuces was going on, how were they both still alive, and why he’d been a dragon about to attack her just moments ago?

“What are you talking about?” she asked him.

He simply stared at her for a moment, like she was a piece of meat he was trying to guess the weight of. Then, after sweeping their surroundings with his gaze, he took her hand in his, sending tingles up her arm.

“I’ll explain as we go,” he told her, a look of unease filling his eyes. “We need to move.”

That was definitely enlightening . “Where to?”

“To Caprichor.”

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They didn't continue down the mountain but instead headed west in the direction of more trees. Damon led the way, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. At first, Julia figured he was probably making sure she was still behind him, but the uncomfortable expression on his face told her it was something else.

"You still haven't answered my questions about this place," she reminded him. "This... dimension. Frosty Mountain, you called it?"

"Frost Mountain," he corrected. His features relaxed, and Julia could tell he was grateful for the distraction from whatever it was that was bothering him. "And yes, it is a separate dimension. Don't look at me like I'm crazy. You, of all people, should know I'm telling the truth. We've already had the impossible happen to us. We're supposed to be impossible."

She knew he was referring to the fact that they were both supernaturals. The fact that he was a dragon shifter still baffled her. How had she missed that he was like her? Maybe that was why he'd been drawn to her. Then again, he hadn't known about her, either.

"The first thing you need to know about Frost Mountain is that it's magic," he started, stepping over a fallen tree and pausing to help her over it as well.

"Figures. I've been traveling for almost two months, and there's not much around here that makes sense."

"The second thing you need to know is that you can't leave."

Her movements faltered. She'd already figured that part out, but it was still chilling to hear. "What are you talking about?"

Damon adjusted the strap of the bag he was carrying. “Frost Mountain isn’t just a dimension. It’s more like a cage than anything else, only there aren’t any bars you can see. That’s the trick. All there is to this dimension is the mountain itself. The mountain goes on infinitely—at least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

She considered the implication of what he’d just said. “Wait... there’s no end to this mountain? There’s nothing at the bottom?”

“There is no bottom, Red,” he corrected. “If you continued traveling downhill, you’d have done so for the rest of your life. This mountain is a cage with infinite space. We’re all on a hamster wheel, trying to stay alive and keep our minds intact.”

He spoke as casually if he were a high school senior giving a tour to a freshman, but it was his tone that troubled her. His words either made no sense at all or were too horrifying to believe. She bit her lip unconsciously. How long would she have to spend here before she got used to this place?

Sixteen years should do the trick, she told herself.

“Any idea why a place like this even exists?” she asked.

“I was getting to that.” His shoulders sagged a little, his eyes narrowing. “This place is magic. Who do you think is responsible for it?”

The answer was so obvious that Julia couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it earlier. “Witches.”

“Ding, ding, ding.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you could pass for a female movie lead with that accent? You know, the sexy kind.”

In spite of the weather, Julia felt heat rush to her cheeks and wondered if he could see her blushing. Clearing her throat, she asked, “Why would they do something like this?”

“Boredom?” He chuckled. “People say there was a war on earth a long time ago.”

“How long ago are we talking?”

“A few hundred years, give or take.”

“That’s a long time.”

“That’s what I said.” He swept his gaze about as they walked past the trees, snow crunching beneath their shoes. “It was a war between shifters and witches. And you can guess who played dirty and who bit the dust—er, snow.”

“Blimey.”

“Uh-huh. The witches created this dimension to imprison the shifters who survived. This place is crawling with descendants of those shifters. But they’re not the only ones here.”

“Yeah, you mean you and me.”

He cocked his head and flashed her a tiny grin that twisted her insides in a knot. “Yeah, Red. Along with millions, if not billions, of other people from the earth.”

“Wait, what ?” She froze in her tracks.

He motioned to her to keep walking. “I told you that this place is designed to keep people from leaving. The thing is, it doesn’t keep anyone from getting in. There are portals all over earth. I’m willing to bet that half the people who go missing wind up here. Same with cars, ships...”

“Or planes.” Her pulse throbbed in her ears as the memory of Flight 18 falling from the sky flashed through her mind.

Damon gave a grave nod, and Julia had a feeling he already suspected how she’d arrived here. The plane crash had been because of some portal in the sky. And Damon... the same must have happened to him when they fell into that lake all those years ago.

His expression seemed to brighten a little. “Look, Red, there’s nothing we can do about this place. It’s out of anyone’s control. You and I are stuck here now. Sure, it’s designed to imprison and sometimes kill you, but there are perks.”

She lifted a snowy brow. “Such as?”

“Well, first, the people coming in from our world aren’t just adding to the population. They bring their culture and ideas along with them. You know, for a while after I got here, I used to explain football to...” His smile wavered. “Well, to my friends.”

He cleared his throat. “Items end up in this dimension, too. Food supplies, clothing, scrap metal... it’s a magical junkyard. Between that and the people showing up, there are parts of Frost Mountain more civilized than others. It’s like having multiple time periods in the same space. Why do you think you’ve got a Nike jacket on instead of animal skin?”

Julia looked at the clothes he’d given her and decided he had a point. “And second?”

He winked over his shoulder at her. “Well, you are stuck here with me.”

If her face got any hotter, it could start a campfire. Julia couldn't tell if he was flirting or simply being himself. It was one of the things that had confused and excited her back then.

She glanced at his broad back as they walked and felt the knot tighten in her belly. Did he have any idea how big a crush she'd had on him all those years ago? Did he know how badly she'd hoped he would ask her to the dance when he offered to walk her home? Maybe the incident on the ice had saved her from embarrassment. It hadn't saved her from disappointment or quelled her feelings for him. She hadn't felt this way in so long; she'd almost forgotten what it was like to have a crush on a guy like Damon McLaurent, high school football quarterback and, now, a survivor on a mountain farther from home than anyone could imagine.

She wondered if he'd ever felt the same way toward her but discarded the thought as it appeared. Now wasn't the time. There was too much to think about. She was stuck here on a mountain that was determined to turn her into a pillar of ice.

It was hard to believe all of this was really happening and not just a bad dream.

“What is this Capricorn place you're taking me to anyway?” She'd been meaning to ask since they commenced their journey, but her curiosity about the mountain had taken precedence. “You haven't told me anything about it.”

“It's Caprichor ,” he said. “It's a village. We'll get there in a week or two. Hopefully, we'll be safe.”

“Safe from what?”

Damon didn't reply, but his back stiffened. Julia picked up the pace with a shiver that

had nothing to do with the cold, walking at his side.

Clearly, something was making Damon uneasy, and she wasn't sure she wanted to find out what it was—just yet.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

“Call 911”

The cold didn't bother him much anymore. His body had adapted to the weather over the weeks. It was the hunger that nearly drove him insane.

He leaned heavily against the nearest tree, struggling to keep his eyes open and his body from falling as he swept his gaze around. More trees. More snow.

More unanswered questions.

He knew that it had been weeks since he broke through the frozen surface of that lake and found himself here. What he didn't know was where here was or how he'd ended up here. One second, he'd been crossing a presumed frozen lake, and the next thing he knew, he was on a behemoth of a mountain blanketed by snow.

Besides the trees and a few animals he'd spotted over the weeks, there hadn't been any other sign of life.

Where is everyone, he found himself wondering for the thousandth time since he'd arrived here. Where is... she?

A scream echoed through his mind, and his heart clenched as the memory hit him: Julia's eyes widened as the ice gave away beneath them, plunging them into the lake's freezing depths.

Her arms flailing as she struggled for survival. Red hair billowing around her head as she sank out of his reach.

Up until a few weeks ago, he hadn't realized that memories could also become nightmares. All that was needed was a catalyst like fear or tremendous guilt.

By now, Valentine's Day had passed. No dance. No Julia. For all he knew, she could be dead. She wasn't on this mountain. He would know if she were. She'd drowned in that lake. That was all on him. He should've known not to cross that lake with her. He should have known the ice wouldn't support their weight.

I'm probably dreaming, he thought. It made no sense that there was no one else here. He had to be dreaming. For all he knew, he could be lying in a coma in some hospital right now, hooked up to a machine that beeped incessantly.

Do coma patients dream?

His stomach growled, providing a grim reminder that he was awake. Hunger was always a good indicator. It was a reminder to try to survive, like the CHECK ENGINE light that flashed on the dashboard of his father's truck. Damon hadn't eaten more than a few nuts and half-frozen berries since he'd got here. The hunger gnawed at the pit of his stomach, causing his vision to blur.

It also caused him to see other things. Dark shapes moved around in the corners of his vision. He couldn't sense anyone around, which had to mean he was hallucinating. He'd never tripped before—a few guys on the football team were rumored to have LSD in their lockers, but he'd never been one to try that sort of thing.

As far as first experiences go, he thought, as he heard the sound of water trickling, this hallucination sucks.

But what if he wasn't hallucinating?

Another growl from his stomach decided for him, and he staggered northward

through the woods, dragging his feet through the snow until he came across the source of the sound.

It was a river.

“Water,” Damon said.

That was all he managed to get out before his legs gave way beneath him, and he toppled forward, hitting the snowy riverbank.

“Urgh,” he groaned.

A pair of dark shapes appeared in the corner of his vision. And then they drew closer, coming into focus. It was not a hallucination.

Two men stood gazing at him from the other bank. Well, more like a man and a boy. The man had to be in his late twenties at least, with dark skin and a mustache that reminded Damon of Dick Dastardly from Wacky Racers . The boy was slightly shorter. He looked about Damon’s age, with short, silvery hair and hooded grey eyes.

“We have to help him,” the boy said to his companion. “He’s already half-dead.”

“I’m not so sure we should. Grim Jim might not—”

“You helped me, didn’t you?”

The man’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but his expression soon relaxed. “Of course, Jan.”

Damon blinked at the duo. “Who... are you? Call... 911.”

The boy chuckled. “Man, have I got news for you.”

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The trees gave them cover, or so Damon wanted to believe. It was small consolation to imagine, if only for a moment that here, deep in these woods, no one could see them. But 15 years of living as a Collector had taught him otherwise.

It certainly did not help matters that, as they trudged among the trees, Julia kept grilling him about his time on Frost Mountain. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before she asked for his resumé.

“So,” she said after minutes of traveling in silence.

“So,” he replied, keeping his expression as even as he could.

“Been up to anything interesting since you got here?”

Like stealing items and kidnapping shifters for the most dangerous man on Frost Mountain? He shrugged. “There’s a lot you can do in 16 years.”

He thought she might prod him some more. To his relief, she simply nodded, glancing up through the trees at the sky as it turned copper. It was almost nightfall. The woods were mostly silent, although he heard the occasional sound of small animals scampering about. Not for the first time, it occurred to him to shift into dragon form and fly the rest of the journey to Caprichor, but something told him that shifting now wouldn’t be a good idea.

“You’re right,” she said, jumping a little as a twig snapped under her feet. “I’m just surprised to see you, to be honest. For a while... I thought you were dead.”

I thought you were, too.

He wanted to say the words, but they were lodged in his throat for some reason. Just looking at her made him want to freeze completely. Only years of learning to perform under pressure kept him from turning into a block of ice under her blue-eyed gaze. He felt a tug in his stomach, but it was hard to tell whether it was from unease or simply his body urging him to give in to his desires and pin her against the nearest tree, kissing her for all he was worth. He wondered what those lips of hers tasted like. Over the years, she'd become incredibly attractive, more than he'd ever imagined.

The memory of her standing naked before him flickered across his mind. Almost reluctantly, he dragged his focus from the titillating image of those bare curves and distended nipples and how they would feel grazing his torso as he kissed her.

“...it's been so crazy these past few weeks,” Julia was saying. “I might have ended up losing my mind if I hadn't seen you. What a weird coincidence, isn't it?”

Damon forgot to respond. Coincidence was one way to put it, but Damon's mind, which had been working overtime ever since she had revealed herself to him, had already made connections. Time wasn't as simple on Frost Mountain as it was back on earth, but he guessed they were roughly in the middle of January, which meant Valentine's Day was only weeks away. That was the first thing that sent pinpricks up his spine. The second was that it was around this time, 16 years ago, that he'd lost Julia.

A coincidence was a concurrence without an instigator. This time, Damon couldn't shake the feeling that fate was toying with him. He could imagine some cosmic being tossing Julia into his path like, Here, buddy—it's the woman you've loved since high school. Now you get to be with her. Well, except the thing is, you actually have to kidnap her in exchange for your freedom. Ta-da.

Yup. Definitely waist-deep in crap.

At the very least, this was a shocking turn of events. Nothing could have prepared him for what was happening right now. Hours had passed since he'd found Julia, and he was still struggling to process it all, especially the fact that she was a shifter. It was almost ironic how he'd processed something as impossible as Frost Mountain but was having trouble making sense of everything from her presence here to the fact that she was a snow leopard shifter.

Then again, it was this snow leopard shifter who'd watched him from the stands and made his heart skip during football practice.

This snow leopard shifter deserved to know what was going on and how much danger she was in.

But he knew he couldn't tell her because doing so meant opening a can of particularly nasty worms he would rather not open.

Am I doing the right thing, he wondered, taking her with me to Caprichor?

On the one hand, he'd be saving her life, keeping her hidden and safe from whatever Grim Jim had in mind for her. On the other hand, if he did as he'd been instructed to and captured her, he'd be saving his neck.

He could still remember Grim Jim's words. You have a debt to fulfill. A debt to me, and I am collecting it now.

Why did things have to be so damn complicated?

He glanced sideways at Julia, who was wrinkling her nose as she brushed flecks of snow out of her hair. He watched as she stepped around a tree, her frame shivering

slightly.

I can't let anything happen to her, he thought.

Overhead, the sky was a blanket of deep blue and fiery orange as day slowly faded into night. Stars scattered across the expanse of darkness, twinkling from a distance as crossable as that between this dimension and earth. It was almost like a constant reminder of the home they'd never return to, a home just as out of reach. The witches who'd created this place either hadn't given enough thought to the interior décor or had a sick sense of humor.

"Do you think we could get some rest soon?" Julia asked suddenly. She leaned against a tree. "My legs are killing me. Maybe I should just shift back and—"

"No," he snapped.

She blinked. "Beg your pardon?"

Crap.

"There's no need to shift," he assured her. "We'll soon be out of these woods. If we walk a bit longer, we should get to Dragon's Den, and we can spend the night there."

Her eyes widened at his words. "Dragon's... what?"

"That's just the name of the town."

"There's a town on this mountain?"

He couldn't resist a chuckle. "There are villages, towns, even cities scattered across Frost Mountain. It's an infinite dimension. If you travel far enough, you'll always

find something new. Let's move quickly." Under his breath, he added, "Hopefully, we'll be able to get in without anyone dying."



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

### Storytime with the Ginger-Beard Man

“You know,” Julia muttered with a light shiver, wrapping her jacket more tightly around her body, “this does not look anything like a dragon’s den.”

“I told you it was just the name,” Damon replied.

The streets of Dragon’s Den were mostly empty except for a few townsfolk and the occasional patrolling guard. Most people took one glance in their direction and went about their business.

Good.

So far, the most trouble they’d encountered had been at the town border, but a couple of the guards had recognized Damon and let them pass without a fuss.

He could only hope no one else would recognize him.

Damon had been to Dragon’s Den before. It was a rather pleasant town, all things considered, except for the fact that it always seemed to be on the verge of chaos. He and Julia should be fine as long as they kept a low profile.

“Those guards back there seemed to know you,” Julia said. In the flickering lights that dimly illuminated the street, he saw her eyebrows furrow. “How’s that?”

His chest constricted at the question, but he flashed her a grin. “You know I’ve always been popular.”

“Of course.” Her features morphed into a scowl. “You had cheerleaders flocking around you back in Laudville High.”

Damon wanted to point out that he’d never been interested in any of them and that he’d only had eyes for her, but he decided to let the matter rest. Better that than for her to find out about the Collectors.

After so long, he’d finally got her back. And in the twinkle of an eye, he could lose the woman he wanted more than anything. All he had to do was say the wrong words. Or make the wrong choice.

“This way,” he said, pointing. “If I remember correctly, there’s a tavern in the next street.”

They turned, and sure enough, there it was.

“Well, that’s an underwhelming sight,” Julia commented with sarcasm. “I bet business is really booming.”

Indeed, the tavern was the size of a cabin, smaller than any of the establishments back in Laudville, that was for sure. The building slanted precariously to one side; in fact, it was a small miracle it hadn’t toppled over completely.

“It’s not exactly a business. Money doesn’t exist on Frost Mountain, not as a concept, at least. Most people work for favors and supplies or simply in service of their community.”

“Karl Marx would be proud. It sounds almost utopian.”

“Almost,” he told her. “Let’s go inside.”

“What, you only met me today, and already you want to buy me a drink?” She arched an eyebrow at him.

Damon opened his mouth, but no words came out. He climbed the steps to the building, and she followed behind.

He did a quick recon as soon as he was inside, his gaze sweeping around the tavern. It was even uglier on the inside. Customers sat at tables, and a few sat at the counter, drinking and laughing. A man and a woman glanced up as they passed them, but Damon doubted they’d recognize him.

He wasn’t that popular, only among a certain caliber of people, people he couldn’t afford to go back to if he had any hope of keeping Julia safe.

The duo approached the counter, where a woman with round eyes, thin brows, and disheveled hair was pouring a drink into a cracked mug. The barmaid handed the drink to the customer, then glanced up and shot Damon a crooked grin.

“What can I get you two?” she asked. “Don’t reckon you’re from around here.”

“Something like that, Angela.” Damon leaned closer. “Any chance you could get us rooms?”

The woman’s thin eyebrows knit together as if in confusion. “This is a bar. If you’re looking for a place to stay, you’ll have to discuss that with the sheriff so he can get you a cabin.”

“We just need a place to spend the night.” Damon flashed her a winning smile. “I’m sure you’ve got a couple of rooms in the back you could spare.”

Angela stared back at him for a moment, and he could practically hear the gears

turning in her head. “Fine,” she said finally. “But you’ll need to help me clean up after everyone’s gone. And just so you know, there’s only one room available. I was saving it for some extra hands at the bar. Since you’re so willing to offer your help...”

“We are?” Julia piped up.

“Shh,” Damon told her.

“... I guess I could let you sleep here for tonight. Do we have a deal, big guy?” Angela cocked her head to one side.

“Sure.” Damon’s grin widened.

When the barmaid left the counter to get the room ready for them, Julia turned to Damon, her hands folded across her chest. “How did you know her name?”

Damon hadn’t even realized he’d said her name until now. He shrugged. “I guess I’m just good with names.”

The look Julia shot him told him that she wasn’t buying his excuse. With a sigh, he said, “She’s friends with someone I know, a guy named Rowan Flameheart. She doesn’t know me, but Rowan’s told me about her.”

She sniffed. “She’s kind of cute, don’t you think?”

“Well, I never really thought about it...”

“And she seems into you.”

Damon frowned at her words. “What?”

“You are Mr. Popular, after all.”

“Wait, what are you—?”

He was cut short by a deafening bang. One of the customers had slammed a table with his fist, causing his drink to spill.

“They’re a terror around these parts, those Collectors,” he said. “I tell you, they’re even worse than dragons.”

Damon held his breath, listening intently. The man was sharing the table with two other middle-aged men, both burly and bearded. He’d had enough experience in taverns across Frost Mountain to know that these were the type of guys you gave a wide berth. No one else in the bar seemed to care about the noise the man was making. They opted to mind their own business instead.

One of the other men at the table, a man with a ginger beard, raised his mug to his lips. “They’re not worse than dragons because a lot of them are dragons, like Grim Jim.”

Damon felt his left eye twitch once, then twice.

The man’s companions stared at him for a moment in what appeared to be awe. Damon realized a moment later that it was simply ignorance.

“Who is that?” one of them asked.

The ginger-bearded man blinked at him with the same incredulousness that Damon felt. “You mean you know who the Collectors are but not their leader?” He shook his head, took a long sip, and sighed. “Can’t blame the lot of you, anyway. To many, Grim Jim is nothing but a myth. But he’s real, I tell you.”

He glanced around the bar for a moment before he went on. Damon almost breathed a sigh of relief when the man's gaze merely passed him by.

“Grim Jim is, as they say, the most powerful dragon on this mountain. Some say he's been alive since Frost Mountain came into being. Yes, centuries . From what I've heard, he was among the shifters who fought against the witches during the war and was cursed for daring to stand up against them.”

“Cursed?” The two other men and just about half the entire bar had leaned in closer, eager to hear what the ginger-bearded man had to say.

The storyteller nodded slowly, clearly enjoying the attention his story was getting. “He was cursed with life . Centuries ago, he roamed the mountain. They called him the Ice Melter then, but 50 years ago, he retreated to a place on the mountain where no one would find him... a dragon's den, if you will.”

A collective gasp swept through the bar. Damon saw the man's chest swell a little as he reached for his mug again.

“In that den, his hunger grew—a hunger for all things rare on Frost Mountain. He loved to collect treasures, even if that meant stealing possessions and people. It's why he created the Collectors.

“We are all lucky he's using them now. If Grim Jim were to come out of his den, the skies would blacken, and all would suffer. The Ice Melter cannot be killed, and he is... insatiable.” The man shuddered.

The customer who'd banged the table earlier muttered something that Damon could not hear and reached for his drink.

Damon's jaw clenched. He could feel his heart hammering outside his chest and

wondered if anyone else in this tavern was experiencing the same. Probably not. He was the only Collector in here, the only one who could verify the story the man had just told.

It was true, all of it. Damon was surprised by how accurate the man's tale was. What the man had failed to mention was that Grim Jim went by another name that was twice as unsettling and that he had his ways of getting his Collectors to stay in line. Not to mention the fact that he was the most terrifying being any of the Collectors had ever known.

Even more surprising was how uneasy Damon had become in the last minute. The mention of Grim Jim was enough to raise the hairs on anyone's neck. For Damon, it was even worse. He had good reason to be terrified.

He glanced at Julia, who'd been watching the storyteller with the same confusion and curiosity as the rest of the listeners, and his heart sank into his stomach. If only she knew she was next on Grim Jim's list of treasures. As far as Damon could tell, there would soon be trouble, and she would be at the center of it.

The last thing he wanted was for Julia to be involved in any of this, but here they were.

Damon balled his fists. The dilemma that had plagued him for hours faded into a single resolution: He would not let anything happen to her.

But if he hoped to protect Julia, he was going to have to act fast and act smart. He couldn't run forever. He couldn't afford to make mistakes. There were Collectors everywhere. He had to get to Caprichor as quickly as he could because if he didn't, then it was only a matter of time until that storm came for him—and Julia.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

### The Marauders

Most people dreamed of falling. Not Julia. She dreamed of drowning.

The way she saw it, drowning was a thousand times more terrifying than falling. The majority of the time, falling from great heights meant instant death, maybe even a painless one. Drowning often meant being fully alert and fighting for your life as it slowly and painfully escaped you.

She was agonizingly aware of water, water, everywhere; water so cold it stung her body. The pressure grew as she sank deeper from the surface of the lake, gazing hopelessly at the section of the ice that had shattered just moments ago.

Her arms and legs flailed in a mad struggle to propel herself back toward the surface, to safety, but her efforts only seemed to quicken her descent. She tried to scream and watched in dismay as bubbles floated in the opposite direction toward the sunlight. Water rushed into her ears, mouth, and nostrils, forcing its way deep into her lungs.

Drowning was slow torture, promising death but never really fulfilling it. Her lungs were bursting from icy water and lack of oxygen. She could feel her consciousness fading, but it never really disappeared, not completely. It lingered just enough for her to experience the agony and terror of dying.

As she sank farther into the lake's depths, still thrashing, a shape came into view.

Damon's eyes were wide with the same panic that coursed through her. He, too, struggled against the water's pressure, bubbles escaping from his lips. Their eyes met,



and his grew even wider. He reached for her, his fingers stopping just inches away from her face...

Then, an explosion of light sent them spinning away from each other.

Julia awoke, gasping desperately for air. Then, it occurred to her that she didn't need to gasp for air because she could breathe just fine. There was no water in her mouth, ears, or her lungs. She lay on her side on a hard, flat surface. A floor, she realized.

"Hey, Red!" Someone was gently shaking her shoulders. "Wake up. You're okay. I'm right here with you."

She blinked. In the light filtering in through a crack in the wall, she could just make out who it was. Damon's handsome features were tight with worry. Julia blinked again, only half-consciously taking in the details around her. They were in the small room the barmaid, Angela, had offered them. It was somewhat musty, but they'd spent the night just fine here, at least until her dream woke them up.

The memory of the past couple of days trickled back to her. They were still on Frost Mountain, a magical prison, a death trap. But she was safe. She was alive. She wasn't a bloated corpse at the bottom of a lake.

"You're okay, Red," Damon told her. His hand reached up to cup her cheek. "It was just a dream."

She nodded wordlessly. His face hovered just inches away from hers, those beautiful green eyes of his locked on her. If she moved a little closer...

Not now, she chided herself.

Definitely bad timing. Besides, she doubted the thought had even crossed his mind. If

she tried to kiss him, she doubted she'd survive the awkwardness that followed.

She pulled herself into a sitting position, refusing to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"You didn't," he replied. He sat back, and Julia couldn't help feeling a twinge of disappointment. "I've been watching you sleep since sunrise."

He'd been watching her? Her cheeks burned. "Oh."

Damon got up then. "Get some more rest if you can. We'll be leaving Dragon's Den this morning. I'll go into the town and gather whatever supplies we might need for the rest of our journey."

"I can come with you." She started to climb to her feet, but he stopped her with a stern look.

"Get some more rest," he said again, more firmly this time.

Julia sat down again.

"I'll be back soon," Damon said. He stared down at her, and for a moment, she thought he was about to say something. Then he turned and left the room.

Julia didn't go back to sleep. After the dream she'd just awakened from, sleeping was the last thing on her mind. It wasn't the first time she'd dreamed of drowning, but it had been some time since it happened—weeks. No doubt, being around Damon after all these years must have brought the memory rushing back.

She walked over to the small window and peeked out. The town had already come alive from what she could see. Townsfolk had begun going about their businesses.

Julia bit her lip. It felt a little strange being here around all these people after she'd spent several weeks traveling alone across this mountain. She'd known people were living on Frost Mountain, but a whole town?

And based on what Damon had told her, there could be hundreds of thousands of places like this. She'd thought she was simply lost, marooned on a mountain far from home. But the reality was that this place was her new home. She might as well kiss her job and her vacation goodbye. Her life was here now, with all these other people who were trapped on this mountain. With Damon.

In this foreign land, ice whispers roam

My once-wounded heart is now in Frost's bitter home.

The words appeared in her mind just then, and she let out a groan of dismay as she realized she had no pen or paper to write them down with, no phone, either. Here on Frost Mountain, all she had was her mind, assuming she didn't lose it in the cold.

"Just great," she said with a sigh.

She certainly couldn't remain here waiting for Damon to return without going stir-crazy. Without further thought, she left the room, stepping back into the tavern. Julia did a clean sweep of her surroundings. There were fewer customers in here than last night. Less than half a dozen men sat at different tables, silently sipping from mugs.

Figures , she thought.

The bars in Laudville had the most customers in the afternoons and evenings, too.

"You're up early."

The barmaid from last night, Angela, smirked at her from behind the counter.

“Are you going to keep standing over there, or what?”

Julia walked over to her and took a seat. Angela poured a drink into a nearby mug. Whatever kind of drink it was, Julia had no idea. She stared into the mug but made no move to take a sip.

“It’s just water,” the barmaid said, rolling her eyes. “I’m not giving you any of our ale on an empty stomach.” She grinned. “I never did get to introduce myself last night. I’m Angela Whiteclaw.”

“Julia Reel.” Julia glanced around the tavern once more.

“Don’t worry, your friend should be back soon,” Angela said as if reading her mind. She frowned at a man who had just walked in. “Speaking of friends returning...”

She wasn’t the only one gazing at him. Everyone else in the bar was staring, their drinks practically forgotten. The man was quite tall, his fur jacket doing little to conceal his massive build. A silver pendant on his chest gleamed. Julia’s gaze dropped to the floor. Standing by the man’s large feet was a silver wolf.

“There you are,” Angela said. “I thought you said you’d be here yesterday?”

The man shrugged, coming to take a seat next to Julia. “I got caught up. Sit, Laia.”

The wolf sat.

He turned to Julia, who realized she was still staring. “I remember you. You and Damon came in last night.”

“This is Julia Reel,” Angela said. “Julia, Rowan Flameheart. He’s my best friend, although sometimes I want to kick him into the snow.”

Julia’s gaze flicked from his face, and she realized she wasn’t the only one still staring. “Why’s everyone looking at you like that?”

Rowan’s expression darkened for a second, but the next moment he was smiling. “They don’t exactly like me.”

A memory from last night flashed through her consciousness. “Are you... are you a Collector?”

He blinked at her, and then he and Angela burst into laughter.

“What? No, of course not.” His grin broadened. “I’m one of the town guards. But I’m a dragon shifter. These aren’t welcoming times for dragon shifters in Dragon’s Den.”

“Isn’t this town literally named after your kind? I figure dragons should be top dogs around here or something.”

“Not since dragons set this town on fire,” Angela replied, picking up a rag and wiping the counter. “That was a long time ago, but there’s been a recent dragon attack. And people think Rowan’s got something to do with it.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Rowan said, “I’m the last dragon in Dragon’s Den.” He lowered his voice. “Except for Damon, of course, and he doesn’t count. Speaking of, where is he?”

“He went to get supplies. We’ll be leaving soon,” she replied quickly, still dismayed

at his words. “It must be hard, having everyone think you’re guilty and knowing you’re not.”

He gave another shrug. “I thought some of these people were my friends. Then the attacks started, and they turned on me. Sometimes, the people you expect to hurt you are the ones who don’t. It’s usually the ones you least expect that end up hurting you.”

“Me, for starters.” Angela dropped her rag and punched him hard in the shoulder. Both friends laughed again.

A thought prodded the back of her mind. “What’s the deal with the Collectors, anyway? I heard they work for some guy named Grim Jim, but...” she said, her voice trailing off.

Angela’s jaw tightened. She and Rowan exchanged a look.

“The Collectors are marauders,” Angela said, her voice so low that Julia had to lean in closely to listen. “They do work for Grim Jim, and they... they find treasures for him, no matter the cost. Over the past few decades, they’ve plundered villages, separated families, and even killed just so they could get what they wanted: precious metals, rocks, rare creatures. Anything that could be valuable... it goes straight to the Ice Melter.”

“That’s horrible,” Julia said, suddenly considering asking for some of that ale. She wasn’t sure she could stomach more of what Angela was telling her. Whoever these Collectors were, they didn’t sound much different from terrorists. “Why do they work for him?”

It was Angela’s turn to shrug. “I don’t know, really. Some believe it’s the way they earn their keep—their services in exchange for food, clothing, survival. Others say

Grim Jim forces the Collectors to do his bidding. Why they do what they do is still unclear. But I can tell you one thing: If you ever find yourself within range of a Collector, you'd better run. Run, and don't look back."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

Jeremiah Ebon, Ice Melter

“I can’t do this anymore,” Damon said.

He knelt at the edge of a chasm so dark he might as well have been staring at the backs of his eyelids. The entire cave was a dark, massive space in which he could barely see, but even that was nothing compared to the yawning pit before him. No one knew how deep it went because no one who had fallen into it had ever made it out, but many believed it was as deep as Frost Mountain was large—an infinite stretch of cold and darkness.

A gentle hiss rose from the pit. It was almost like it was beckoning to him, urging him to abandon all reason and take the jump. But the fear of falling into the chasm was greater than whatever appeal its depths might hold. Grim Jim had made sure of it.

“Do what?” boomed a voice.

It hadn’t come from inside the pit but somewhere above, reverberating around the cave and rattling his bones.

Damon chose his next words as carefully as he could. “I can’t be one of your Collectors anymore.”

Apparently, he was not careful enough. A tremor shook the entire cave. A second later, something crashed onto the ground behind him. A stalactite, he figured. He remained where he knelt, not daring to inch backward, not wanting to fall forward,



ever conscious of the danger above.

This was what Grim Jim did to all who came to him. It was a simple reminder of the danger that awaited anyone who displeased him. Damon remembered something he'd read about when he was a teenager almost two decades ago: the sword of Damocles, a sword hanging over a man's head by a single hair. That was how he felt now with Grim Jim overhead. Only it wouldn't be a sword that caused his demise.

This was much, much worse.

"Explain yourself, child," Grim Jim said. "And pray that you have breath in your lungs by the time you are through."

Damon swallowed. Perhaps coming to him hadn't been such a smart decision after all. But it was too late to turn back now.

"I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, really," he said. "You saved my life and took me in, gave me a chance to survive instead of leaving me to die out in the cold. But I can't be a Collector anymore. All the pillaging, all the violence... I can't take it anymore. With your permission..." His voice trailed off.

The silence that followed made Damon consider throwing himself into the pit. He wasn't just speaking to a fellow dragon, nor his boss, either. This was an ancient power that had lived for centuries. Anyone would be wise to fear him, no matter how brave they considered themselves.

"So," Grim Jim said, his tone sounding even more threatening than usual, "you want to take off after everything I've done for you."

"I'm sorry, I know you've—"

“You may leave if that is what you want.”

Damon blinked. “What?”

“You’ve proved yourself to be one of my most skilled Collectors, Damon McLaurent, but if you want to leave, then so be it. Someone else will come along and take your place. You may go.”

He was... free? Relief washed over Damon, but just as suddenly, he was gripped with more trepidation. Grim Jim wouldn’t let him leave that easily. There had to be a catch.

His jaw clenched. “What do you require of me?”

Grim Jim gave a throaty laugh, and more stalactites shattered on the ground around Damon as the cave rumbled again.

“A wise question,” he said. “There is one last treasure I want you to acquire for me.”

Of course. “What... what is it?”

Another moment of uncomfortable silence passed.

“A female shifter arrived on Frost Mountain just yesterday,” he said. “I want you to find her and bring her to me. She is a snow leopard shifter, a rarity on this mountain. I must have her.”

“To add her to your treasures, a living being.” This sort of thing was exactly the reason Damon wanted to leave the Collectors. For years, he’d been uncomfortable doing Grim Jim’s bidding. Only now he had dared to speak his mind and this was Grim Jim’s requirement to let him go. It felt like the Ice Melter was toying with him.

“Do you question my wish?”

“I... I don't think I can do this.”

“You will do as I ask if you wish to leave,” he said, chuckling again, filling the cave with the sound, “if you wish to live . I should not have to remind you. You already know who I am.”

“Yes, I do,” Damon said with a hint of annoyance in his voice as he muttered, “Jeremiah Ebon, Ice Melter, collector of living treasures.”

The ground beneath him trembled, forcing him to fall forward, but he stopped himself with his arms, gripping the cold ground for all he was worth.

“You will do as I ask,” Grim Jim said in a booming voice. “Or the darkness of that pit will be the last thing you see.”

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Dragon's Den was a good place to go if you needed help but a terrible choice if you were on the run. There were suspicious eyes everywhere. The entire town was on edge for some reason. As he walked through the streets, gathering whatever supplies he could, he braced himself for an attack, which could come from anywhere.

Good thing he hadn't brought Julia along. She would have noticed in a heartbeat and asked him what the problem was.

Guilt flickered in his chest. He didn't like keeping secrets from Julia, but he could picture the look of revulsion on her face if she ever found out about his affiliation with the Collectors. He couldn't bear to see the disappointment in those blue eyes. And the last thing he wanted was for her to feel, even for the briefest moment, that

she was in danger.

In Caprichor, he wouldn't have to worry about that. Caprichor was a fresh start, a new life with her .

Time was of the essence. Once Grim Jim realized Damon wasn't going to do his bidding, he would send others after him. Damon couldn't afford that.

He continued his march toward the end of the street and was about to round the corner when he realized he was being watched. Damon felt his body grow even more tense. People everywhere were looking at him, of course, but most people looked away after a while, except for the man who'd been trailing him down the street.

Crap , he thought.

He rounded the corner, whirling around just in time to see the man do the same. Before he could attack his stalker, the man raised both hands as though in surrender.

"Hey," he said. "It's just me, Damon."

Damon unclenched his fists. "Jan?"

The man was a little older than him and had hooded eyes and silvery hair that hung down the sides of his face and disappeared into a bushy gray beard. Between that and the snow, he could have passed for a mall Santa. He was built just as sturdily as Damon, only he was a bit shorter.

Jan's face broke into a smile. "I knew it was you. I heard a few people talking about a traveler coming in last night with a woman. My gut told me it was you, and I was right. You probably shouldn't stay here long, though. It's not safe for you."

“What about you?”

“I’m a wolf shifter. If these people figure out you’re a dragon, there’s no telling how far they’ll go to hurt you. This time of the year, they tend to get edgy. Valentine’s Day is the anniversary of the Cataclysm.”

“What is the Cata...?” Damon shook his head. “What are you doing here?”

Jan Hoover was a fellow Collector and one of the few people Damon considered a friend. Like Damon, he’d come from earth. Jan had been with the Collectors for much longer than he had, and he’d shown Damon the ropes. The man was someone Damon could relate to, someone he could trust. Over the years, they’d gone on missions together and had each other’s backs. Standing before him now, Damon felt a warm sense of security.

But it was gone in a heartbeat as a thought crept into his mind.

“Did Grim Jim send you here?” he asked.

Jan’s expression turned serious. He shook his head. “No, he didn’t. But he’s growing impatient. You need to act quickly. Bring that snow leopard to him before his patience runs out.”

“I will,” Damon replied tersely.

“You really plan to leave the Collectors?”

Damon nodded.

“Wow.” His friend looked like he was about to say something else, but he simply smiled.

“I should keep moving.” Damon said, shouldering his bag, “I need to gather more supplies and be on my way. I’m not staying long, so you don’t have to worry about me.”

Jan frowned. “What about your companion?”

“What?”

“The woman you’re traveling with. Who’s she?”

Grim Jim’s treasure.

“She... she’s someone I met on my way here. I’m doing her a little favor while I search for the snow leopard. Once I give Grim Jim what he wants, I should be free.”

Unless I get to Caprichor with the snow leopard first.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

“I Didn’t Want to Go to the Dance Without You”

Fifteen miles. They had traveled this distance without so much as pausing to rest. For Julia, it felt like so much more. A dull ache filled her legs with each step, but she pushed forward. She swept her gaze around. As always, Frost Mountain stretched even farther than her eyes could see. It was an infinite dimension, probably millions of miles across—or more. Dimension didn’t even seem to be the right word for this place. It was starting to feel more like a universe.

But even a universe had its limits.

“How long has it been since we left Dragon’s Den?” she breathed, stepping over an upraised root.

“Five days,” Damon replied without glancing at her. He didn’t look it, but she could tell he was also tired, not that it would stop him.

“You sure it’s not two weeks?” She bit her lip, wincing as it stung. “I’m starting to miss that town.”

More specifically, she missed being indoors. She missed it because it meant she could pretend she wasn’t surrounded by all this snow. Out here, in eternal winter, she felt ill at ease.

She knew she wasn’t the first to feel this way, and with time, she should get used to it, like Damon.

“We’ll get to Caprichor soon, Red,” he said, adjusting his bag.

“How soon?”

She supposed the silence that followed meant he was thinking of an answer. Finally, he said, “Soon.”

“That definitely answered my question,” she said, rolling her eyes.

He had something on his mind. That much she could tell. He’d been brooding ever since they’d left Dragon’s Den. Whatever he was thinking about, it was clearly serious, but she couldn’t read him, not after all these years. The man walking alongside her was a far cry from the guy who’d offered to walk her home in high school.

She decided a direct approach was in order. “Penny for your thoughts or whatever passes for money on this mountain.”

He cracked a smile, which made her heart swell for a moment. The memory of his gorgeous face hovering over hers flickered in her mind. She shifted her gaze to the sky, where the afternoon sun shone, only half as bright as his grin.

“It’ll be evening soon. How much longer until we get some rest?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “There’s a set of caves up ahead. We should arrive there by tomorrow evening.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

She knew the answer before he went on. “There’s a shortcut, though. One that should save us a day at least.”



“What kind of shortcut?”

He looked her dead in the eye. “There’s a lake ahead of us. It’s been frozen for years, and—”

The sound of ice cracking and groaning filled her ears, and she shook her head. “No lakes. Please. Let’s take the longer route.”

“That’s an extra day, and we’d be walking through the woods.”

“I don’t care,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’ll walk as long as I need to. I’m not... I’m not going through all that, not again.” She wanted to sound assertive, but her words sounded more like a plea.

Damon opened his mouth to respond but seemed to think better of it.

They continued traveling through the woods in silence for what seemed like half an hour before either of them spoke again.

“Hey, Red?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s life like back on earth?” Damon wanted to know.

The question caught her off guard. Julia blinked. “Huh?”

“What’s it been like since I disappeared?”

She shrugged. “Earth is... earth, I guess.”

“Fair enough. What about my parents?”

Absentmindedly, Julia twirled her hair between her fingers. “I’m not sure. They moved out of Laudville a year after the accident. There was a funeral for you and everything. When the police couldn’t find your body, everyone figured you were dead. Your parents were distraught for weeks, and...” Her voice trailed off as she caught the expression on Damon’s face. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s okay. They moved on in the end.”

She hoped that was true. She’d told herself that she had moved on, but that didn’t seem to be the case because the nightmares and memories hadn’t yet ceased.

“What about you?”

Her breath nearly froze in her throat at his question. Julia’s mouth went dry.

She decided to be truthful. “I... well, I was just as distraught, to be honest. I quit the newsletter. I didn’t go to school for a while, either. It was all so much for me to process. And... memories kept coming back. For a while, I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing you struggling in the water.”

Another moment of silence passed between them. Then Damon asked, “Did you go to the Valentine’s Day dance?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I was at home,” she replied. “Recovering from the accident.”

And I didn't want to go to the dance without you.

Valentine's Day was barely weeks away now. Julia wondered what his response might be if she took the initiative and asked him to dance with her. She let the thought slip from her mind.

Damon's lips parted, and this time, she was certain he was going to say whatever was on his mind, but all that came out was a muttered, "Sorry."

"It's okay," she said, resting her hand on his. "We've both had our share of bad luck. On the bright side... it looks like our bad luck brought us back together."

"You know, when you put it that way..." He smiled a smile that warmed her insides. Julia's heart fluttered in her ribcage.

In shadows cast by spells, I wallow in pain,

Magic's touch, a twist that breeds disdain.

Not bad , she thought.

God, if only she'd known she would end up on this mountain, she would've packed several pens and notepads on her way to the airport. She suppressed a chuckle at the thought.

In his warm embrace is a spell so tragic.

Oh, I wish his smile weren't the substance of magic.

Not just his smile, she decided, shooting him a glance. His entire being seemed to be magic. Just being around him was enough to make her body and her heart respond in

ways they hadn't in a while. Maybe she should have stolen that kiss back in Dragon's Den when she'd had the chance. Whatever awkwardness followed, it would have been worth it.

When he disappeared under the ice all those years ago, the memory of him had haunted her dreams. Now, here he was, in the flesh, and his very presence continued to torment her, albeit in a different way.

No sooner had they stepped into a large glade of trees than Damon froze in his tracks.

"We're being followed," he said, holding out a hand to stop her.

It took Julia a few seconds to register what he'd just said. "What? By whom?"

As if in response to her question, there was a rustle of leaves. And the men stepped out of the trees.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

The Frost Mountain Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Back in high school, Damon had always tried to avoid a fight. Even when it meant getting beat up, he'd held back. As a dragon shifter, he was stronger than pretty much every other kid at Laudville High, not to mention he never really had a reason to fight.

On Frost Mountain, the rules were different. Here, you had to fight because if you didn't, your chances of survival were slim—very slim.

Now, Damon eyed the men. There were five of them surrounding them. As he watched, each of them drew a weapon. Damon counted three daggers, a sword, and a hammer.

It took him two seconds to realize who they must be: Collectors.

He'd never met them all because Collectors were scattered all over Frost Mountain, but he knew in his gut that Grim Jim sent these men.

Jan's words resounded in his memory: He's growing impatient—

and desperate, it seemed, if Grim Jim had sent other Collectors after him. He must have figured something was up.

Next to him, Julia's breathing quickened. Damon reached for her hand and squeezed it.

To the men, he said, “I’m going to give you all one chance to drop your weapons and leave before things get ugly.

They did not respond, but Damon thought he heard one of the men snicker. He found that irritating.

Grim Jim had sent these men here for one of two reasons. First, was that the Ice Melter already knew that Damon was with his prize and wanted to take it from him by whatever means necessary. That seemed improbable. However, the second reason made more sense: Grim Jim had sent his Collectors to punish him.

The men inched closer, tightening the circle. Damon clenched his fists as his pulse slowed. His mind was racing a thousand miles a minute, calculating his possible moves. He couldn’t shift, not with Julia so near, not to mention shifting would draw too much attention. His only option was to fight these men.

“Stay close to the ground,” he whispered to Julia. “Things are about to get ugly.”

She nodded and dropped to a crouch. But when he glanced down at her, Julia was gone. In her place, sitting atop a pile of clothes, was a snow leopard.

“Red, what are you—?”

Gasps erupted around them.

“Snow leopard!” one of the Collectors exclaimed.

That was all he got out before Damon slammed his elbow into the man’s jaw, which made a satisfying crack, and the man hit the snow. The other Collectors, momentarily shocked, quickly recovered their wits and attacked. Damon snatched the dagger from the fallen man’s hand and hurled it at the man standing nearest him. It stuck in his

thigh. With a howl of pain, the man dropped to the ground and, in the process, knocked himself out with his own hammer.

Then, there was a snarl that made Damon look up just in time to see Julia slam into one of the men, knocking him to the ground. The man was quick to react. The next thing Damon knew, the snow leopard was sailing through the air straight into a tree.

Julia!

Damon slammed his boot into the man's head, and the guy passed out with a grunt. The last two guys ended up on their backs in the snow, groaning in pain.

He thought he heard some movement in the trees, but when he turned toward the sound, there was no one. Adjusting his bag, Damon scrambled over to Julia, who was getting up on all fours.

"Shift back," he told her, "now."

Ten seconds later, a very naked Julia lay at the foot of the tree. Under different circumstances, Damon might have taken his time admiring her inviting curves and rosy spots, but between the sight of her shivering and the fact that Collectors had just attacked them, he was too distracted to care about that right now.

He took some clothes from his bag and helped her shimmy into them. His voice was thick with concern as he said, "What the hell were you thinking?"

"You asked me to stay close to the ground," she pointed out.

"You could have been hurt." He pulled out another article of clothing and handed it to her. It was a blue windbreaker with gold lettering on the back.

She blinked, holding it up. “Is this... is this an FBI jacket?”

He shrugged. “I told you, Red, all kinds of people and items end up on Frost Mountain.”

“I’m guessing there’s a Frost Mountain Bureau of Investigation?”

He smirked. “If there is, I’d like to meet the agents someday.” The smile vanished from his face. “But not today, when we’re being attacked in the woods by men with weapons. You need to promise me you won’t shift again, at least not until we get to Caprichor.”

“Why? What’s the problem with...?” Her voice trailed off when she caught his stern look. “Fine, I promise.”

“Good.” The last thing he needed was to be discovered traveling across the mountain with Grim Jim’s latest prize. In human form, she’d be harder to spot. “Let’s go.”

They got up and left the clearing, moving as quickly as their tired legs would carry them.

“Who were those men?” Julia asked once they’d gotten far enough away to slow down.

“Collectors,” he replied before he could stop himself, hoping he hadn’t just made a mistake.

Her expression grew more troubled. “What could they possibly want from us?”

Not from us, from me.



“Whatever it is, we can’t afford to get discovered again,” he told her. “We need to move faster.”

She touched his arm, and he felt his pulse quicken.

How ironic , Damon thought.

Earlier, when they were surrounded, and he knew he’d have to fight, his heart rate had dropped steadily, and his respiration slowed. But when Julia was involved, it was a whole different matter. Damon couldn’t tell whether that meant that her presence was somehow more dangerous than an attack by Grim Jim’s Collectors.

He sucked in a deep breath. “Neither of us can shift, for now, Red. Flying is only going to give us away. And if we hope to get anywhere quickly, we’re going to need to take as many shortcuts as we can.”

When she looked at him, her eyes were wide. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Damon said grimly, “that we’re going to have to cross that lake.”

### On Thin Ice

“Look where you’re going, will you?”

Julia let out a gasp of dismay as the stack of books and papers fell from her hands and hit the floor. Her jade-green spectacles clattered onto the tiles. Suppressing a groan, Julia bent to pick up her things.

The problem was that someone was standing on one of the papers. It was the latest issue of her newsletter, the Laudville Letters . Julia registered that little detail before she raised her eyes to see who it was. He wore a brown winter jacket over baggy trousers. Clutched in his hand was a football.

A jock, Julia thought, feeling her stomach sink.

She’d been waiting for the final bell so she could head home, where her mother was waiting. As soon as it rang, she’d burst out of the classroom but had barely made it three steps down the hallway before she slammed into someone.

And, just her rotten luck, that someone happened to be one of the jerks on the football team. And behind him were other jocks. Julia froze as she caught sight of a familiar face.

Damon McLaurent blinked back at her.

“S-sorry,” she told the guy she’d run into. “I wasn’t really paying attention.”

She tugged at the papers under his foot, but he wouldn't budge. "Could you please lift your foot?"

"You really shouldn't stick your newsletters under people's feet, Miss Chief Editor," the boy replied. "Someone could trip on them, you know."

With that, he dragged his foot across the floor, ripping the cover off the newsletter in the process. The other boys chuckled.

"Leave her alone, Connor," said a voice.

Julia's breath faltered. It was Damon. He brushed his brown hair across his forehead in a slick move that nearly made her heart flip and stepped forward, those gorgeous green eyes meeting hers for a moment.

"What, McLaurent?" replied the beefy jock. "Got a thing for this nerd?"

"Just leave her alone." Damon's voice had a dangerous edge to it. "Don't make me ask you again."

Clearly, she wasn't the only one who noticed the edge. Connor's eyes widened for a second, but he quickly regained his composure. He lifted his foot off the newsletter and stepped away.

"Whatever, man," he said. "She's not even worth it."

He continued walking down the hall, and the rest of the jocks followed.

Julia continued picking up her books.

When she looked up, Damon's face was inches away from hers.

“H-hi,” she breathed.

“Hey, Red.” The sound of his voice, so close to her, was almost hypnotic. “Need some help with that?”

Before she could respond, he reached for some of the books, handing them to her. They rose together, Julia clutching her books to her chest as her heart fluttered. He flashed her a tiny smile that knocked her pulse up a notch.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “Those guys can be jerks sometimes. The only reason I hang around them is—”

“You’re all on the football team.” She realized she was staring at him and looked away. Kids were filing into the hallway as classes changed. Several pairs of eyes were trained in her direction, reflecting everything from disbelief to jealousy. “It... it’s fine. I don’t really care about the newsletter anyway.” That was only half true.

She glanced up at him again just in time to see his eyebrow rise. “Why not? You write really well. I’ve seen your articles. And your poetry? It’s neat.”

Julia almost fainted on the spot. “You... you read the newsletter?”

He shrugged. “Now and then.”

Be cool, Julia. “That’s nice. I’m glad you like it. I write the articles because I’m expected to, not because I like writing them. The poems... those are different.”

“How so?”

“I love writing them.”

“I can tell. You write beautifully, Red.” He frowned, then chuckled. “That’s something you don’t often hear from a guy like me.” He stuck out a hand. “I’m Damon. McLaurent.”

Gingerly, she shook his hand. “I know.”

Great, Julia. Now, you sound like a creep.

“I’m Julia Reel.”

“I know who you are, Red.”

She blinked. “Huh?”

“Everyone knows the Chief Editor,” he said as if she’d said something stupid. “Plus, I’ve seen you around school. In the hallways, class... football practice.”

She was certain her face had turned the shade of a ripe tomato.

“Oh, right. I’m... a big fan of football,” she lied.

Why the heck did she say that?

“I didn’t know that.”

His grin widened. God, she was going to melt on the spot if he didn’t stop smiling at her like that. His green eyes were mesmerizing enough. His gaze was fixed on her as if dozens of kids didn’t surround them in the hallway.

“That’s really cool,” he said. “You’re cool, Red.”

“Red?”

In response, his eyes slid from her face to her hair. Julia felt a tingle travel from her head to her toes.

I can also turn into a snow leopard.

The thought crept into her mind so suddenly that she almost dropped her books and shifted. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

Relax, Julia. You can't tell him that!

But it was hard because she was so wound up. This was the longest she'd been around Damon McLaurent, and it was taking all her willpower to keep from jumping up and down like a cheerleader. Out of all the people in Laudville High, he was talking to her. And he'd read her poetry and thought it was great. He knew who she was.

If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up. She pinched herself to make sure.

Meanwhile, she would have kept staring at him for hours if he hadn't spoken the next moment.

“So,” he said, “you headed home?”

Her stomach lurched, but she nodded. “I am. I've got to see... uh, my friend. Yeah.”

“Cool.” Those beautiful lips parted slowly, and his next words tumbled out. “Want me to walk you home?”

“Huh?” she asked again, being anything but cool about it.

He cocked his head and smirked. “I don’t bite. It’s the least I could do after... you know—Connor.”

She bit her lip, also not cool. “Okay. You can walk me home.”

Who was she kidding? Just the thought of it brought butterflies to her stomach. No way would she ever refuse a chance to walk with Damon McLaurent. She would follow him anywhere.

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“Cripes, I can’t cross that,” she said, her lips trembling. “Damon... I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can, Red,” he replied.

She looked into his eyes. They were filled with pity and something else she couldn’t quite make out. Reluctantly, she tore her eyes away from him and faced the lake.

From the snowy bank where they stood, the lake was a terrifyingly magnificent sight. It stretched eastward as far as the eye could see. But that wasn’t what terrified her. The lake had to be at least a hundred feet across.

With a shudder, Julian looked down at their feet. She listened carefully for the sign of a current, but there was none. No surprise there. The entire lake looked like a solid block of ice, but for all she knew, it could be an illusion. There was no telling if the ice would hold. Damon seemed convinced they could make it safely across with no trouble, but he’d felt the same way 16 years ago. What were the odds that the ice wouldn’t shatter under their feet like the last time?

She chuckled nervously. “I don’t even like the snow, and you want me to cross a

frozen lake.”

He nodded gravely.

“You know what happened last time.”

“I’ve lived with that memory for years,” he told her without hesitation. “The pain, the guilt... I think I know how you feel, and if I could take it all away, the memories and the pain, I would do it in a heartbeat.”

His hand found hers, and he squeezed it, just like he had when those Collectors attacked. Again, a tingle shot up her arm at his touch.

“Look, I know you’re afraid,” he said, “but we don’t have a choice right now. We need to get to Caprichor before something else happens. The Collectors aren’t going to stop looking for us, especially not after what happened back there.”

Her mind flashed back to the men in the clearing. It had all happened so suddenly. Julia had been frozen in terror. And then everything became a blur. The next thing she knew, the snow leopard’s survival instinct kicked in, and she’d shifted.

Damon hadn’t been too happy about that for some reason. But her curiosity was piqued. She could tell something was going on with him and that he knew more about it than he was willing to say. And the more curious she became, the more she wondered if she really wanted to know the truth.

That aside, she had a bigger question facing her: to cross or not to cross?

If they crossed, they risked falling through the ice. Damon had told her there was no way off Frost Mountain. The portals only worked one way. If they ended up in the lake, they wouldn’t end up on earth; they would simply drown.



But if they didn't cross, then the Collectors would find them, and who knew if Damon could fend them off again. Julia glanced at Damon. He certainly wasn't the same guy she remembered from Laudville High. His time on Frost Mountain had changed him. Somehow, she knew that if he'd wanted to kill those men, he could have easily done so.

Why he'd shown them mercy when they'd been prepared to kill, she had no idea, but if the tables were turned, she doubted those Collectors would return the favor. And just how many times could Damon hold them off before they overpowered him?

"We're going to cross the lake," she muttered, taking a deep breath. "We're crossing it."

He gave her hand another affectionate squeeze, which momentarily distracted her from the expanse of ice before her. "We are, Red. And we're going to make it across. Nothing will go wrong, I promise. I'm with you. You can trust me."

Julia felt a sudden twinge of annoyance. And she thought she knew why.

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"You're not wearing a jacket," she observed, pointing at his shirt. "Aren't you cold? It's freezing out here."

"A little," he said with a shrug. "The cold doesn't bother me much after a while."

"Huh?"

"You could say I'm warm-blooded."

She frowned. "So is every other human."

If she didn't have such a huge crush on him, she might have smacked him upside his head for saying something so dumb.

He opened his mouth to say something but then stopped himself. "Right."

It was a cold afternoon in Laudville. The roads and sidewalks were slippery, and their brief walk from school was starting to feel like an eternity. Not that she minded much, not with him beside her.

Damon McLaurent is walking me home, she thought, feeling a little giddy.

Cars rolled by slowly. Up ahead, the road bent into another street. Directly in her line of sight was a row of tall, snow-covered trees, beyond which she couldn't see much. It was mid-January, and it would be weeks before the weather turned.

You should be a weather reporter, Julia, she thought and chuckled to herself.

"Quarter for your thoughts?" Damon asked, flashing her that same heart-stopping grin. "I'd offer a dollar, but I'm short on cash right now."

She chuckled out loud, then wondered if she was trying too hard. "Nothing much."

"Try me."

She eyed him for a moment. "I was thinking about what you said earlier about liking my poetry."

"Yeah?"

"It meant a lot to me. The articles are the newsletter's main content; I just squeeze a couple of poems in now and then. But those poems mean more to me than the

articles.”

“You don’t like writing articles?”

She shrugged. “They’re okay, I guess. I don’t mind reporting. But I’m more of a creator. I like to write. And sing,” she said as an afterthought.

His eyes widened like green pools. “You sing?”

Heat rushed into her face as she nodded.

“That’s super cool, Red. Would you could sing for me sometime?”

If she blushed any harder, her face was going to explode.

“Maybe someday. I’ve always loved writing and singing. But that sort of thing isn’t easy for people around you to accept, you know? It’s not… professional enough. Not to my parents, at least. But they were thrilled when I became chief editor.”

A part of her wondered whether she was saying too much. Somehow, in a matter of minutes—or was it an hour—she’d gotten more comfortable with him. The nervousness that had choked her earlier was slowly receding. Dear God, if she got too comfortable, she just might spill everything about her life and scare him off. The last thing she needed was for her crush to run from her because she’d told him too much. She could end up the talk of the entire school, then the entire town: the weird girl who could shift into a snow leopard.

Before long, her family would have to move.

That’s not going to happen, Julia, she told herself. Take a chill pill, will you?

“I can imagine,” he said to her surprise.

Her eyebrows rose sharply. “You... you can?”

“Yeah.” He stared at the ground as they walked. “For me, it’s football.”

“Wait, really?”

He nodded. “I mean, I used to enjoy playing. The only reason I’m still on the team is... well, I want a scholarship for college. I lost interest in football last year.”

“How come?”

Damon lifted his head. “I just did. And the guys on the team aren’t exactly the kind of people I like hanging around with. They’re knuckleheads.”

Julia stifled a giggle. “So what are you interested in if not football?”

He thought for a moment. “I don’t know. But it’ll come to me soon.” Then he smiled.

They were nearing the bend in the road. She glanced up at the sky. Clouds were gathering. Julia had a feeling it was going to be a stormy night.

“We should walk faster,” she said, increasing her pace before he could respond. “I have to get home on time.”

He matched her pace with little effort. “That’s okay, Red. I know a shortcut we can take. You’ll be home before you know it. It’s just beyond those trees.”

He pointed ahead at the row of trees.

Julia followed his gaze and frowned. “You mean... Laudville Lake?”

He nodded. “Don’t worry, I’ve crossed it lots of times.”

Something about the way he said it made her wonder what he’d been doing when he crossed the lake all those times. Playing hooky or kissing cheerleaders under the cover of the trees? Was that why he wanted her to go with him to the lake? The thought made her grin, but she suppressed it before he could notice.

“Okay,” she said as evenly as she could.

They stepped off the curb onto the snow-covered grass, making a beeline for the trees. Up close, she could see just beyond them. Laudville Lake was barely 20 feet away from them, the bank covered with rocks and a frosting of snow.

“Whoa,” she said, staring at the lake. “It’s frozen over. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s how I can cross it. I just walk across to the other side.”

The other shore was identical to the one they stood on. Beyond it, she could see more trees. He was right. It was a shortcut. Taking it would save them from walking several blocks.

“Once we cross, we can get back on the road. It saves a lot of time. Plus, we get to walk on water, well, sort of.”

She couldn’t resist a chuckle, but it quickly faded as uncertainty rose in her chest. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

He flashed her a playful grin. “I’ve crossed it lots of times.”

“Yeah, but I’ve heard lots of things about accidents on frozen lakes. What if something happens to us?”

“Nothing is going to happen, Red,” he said. When she didn’t respond, he added, “Just trust me, okay?”

She stared at him for a moment. “Okay.”

When he smiled at her that way, how could she help but trust him?

He took her hand, sending a tingle shooting up her arm.

Together, they stepped onto the ice.

### A Frosty Trip

“Are we there yet?” Julia asked for the fifth time.

“No.”

“Oh, my God,” she whimpered. “I can’t believe this is actually happening.”

She gave a shiver that Damon suspected had nothing to do with the cold. Even without looking at her, he could sense that she was holding her breath. For the last minute, she’d had her eyes squeezed shut and a tight grip on his hand like she was trying to crush his fingers.

Or maybe it was her way of holding him to his promise, making sure he didn’t let go of her, making sure he took her all the way to the other shore. Damon glanced at her and felt a twinge of guilt in his chest. A part of him wanted to turn them around and take the longer route instead, but they really didn’t have much of a choice, not with the Collectors after them.

By now, those men must have gotten up and resumed their chase. Damon wondered how long they’d been after him and how many of them there were. He’d fought off five men, but for all he knew, there could be dozens of them.

He gritted his teeth, taking another careful step forward. The ice beneath his feet didn’t crack, not even a little, but the surface was still quite slippery. The only advantage that offered them was that if the Collectors tried to follow them, they’d be forced to move carefully. Damon knew the ice would support his weight and Julia’s,

but if they slipped and fell, that was another problem entirely. The force of their combined weight hitting the ice just might crack it, and who knew what might happen after that?

Whatever did happen, he thought, they were together this time. That was consolation enough for him.

“It does feel like walking on water,” Julia said, snapping him out of his thoughts. “It’s like Peter from the Bible.”

Damon tried to remember. Then he grinned. “Well, in that case, don’t be afraid.”

He might as well have asked a snow leopard not to have spots. He could practically feel the fear emanating from her body. He gazed ahead. They were getting closer to the other shore. Only about 70y feet to go.

“Please tell me nothing is lurking under the ice,” she muttered.

Sixty feet to go. “No,” said Damon.

But even he doubted that. You never really knew with Frost Mountain. This place was brimming with an infinite number of unknowns. There were creatures on the mountain he’d neither seen nor heard about, creatures that were supposed to be extinct, creatures that should be purely mythical. What were the odds that one of them was hiding under the ice?

He pocketed the thought in a corner of his mind where it couldn’t bother him and kept walking, his hand in Julia’s.

Forty feet.



All of a sudden, she froze in her tracks. Her eyes snapped open wide, and she stared at him. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Her breathing was growing more ragged by the second. “The ice. It...” She lowered her gaze to the ice. It was still completely solid, not a single crack in sight. “Oh.”

“There’s nothing wrong,” he assured her as they continued walking. “You’re fine. We’re almost there.”

Thirty feet left.

He glanced around them. There was no hint of anyone following them. The only signs of life were the trees in the distance. That was good. It meant the Collectors were still far behind. Then again, he hadn’t noticed them earlier until he and Julia had been surrounded. He gave their surroundings another careful scan.

Twenty feet.

“We’re almost there.”

To his surprise, she doubled her pace, rushing for the shore. He moved after her, his hand still in hers. Seconds later, they reached the shore. She stood in the snow, panting, her eyes wide as though she couldn’t believe what they’d just done.

“We’re here,” Damon said, breaking the near silence. “I told you...”

Before he could finish his statement, she threw her arms around him, hugging him so tightly she almost broke a rib. He ran his fingers through her red hair and drew a shuddering breath. In a way, they had just accomplished something. A part of their

past that had gone awry had been righted.

They'd crossed the lake. And they both were still alive—and dry.

When she lifted her head from his chest, he wanted to kiss her, to hell with the consequences. He smiled down at her, and perhaps he was simply giving in to delusion, but he could swear he saw her face inch closer to his. His lips parted, waiting for the kiss that was like a plate of food to a starving man.

But it never came. Because Julia wasn't smiling at him. The look she gave him as she slowly pulled herself away from him was nothing less than scathing.

She was angry. But why? His mind backtracked rapidly. Of course. The Collectors. They'd been attacked, and he still hadn't bothered to explain what was really going on. Damon swallowed. The longer he kept it from her, the worse things would turn out for him when she found out.

If she ever found out.

"Julia," he started, "there's something I want to tell you—"

"I don't want to hear it," she snapped, taking a step backward. "Just... leave me alone."

And with that, she walked off toward the trees.

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Damon wasn't very good at following orders. For one thing, he hadn't done as Grim Jim had ordered. If he had, Julia would be sitting in the Ice Melter's cave along with his other living treasures. But here she was, storming off in the snow ahead of him

and insisting that he leave her alone.

He had no intention of following that order. Not for anyone or anything.

I should have told her about the Collectors, he thought, giving himself a mental kick.

That was why she was so mad at him. This was on him.

He jogged after her. “Look, Julia. I’m really sorry. I should have told you—”

She ground to a halt so abruptly that he nearly ran into her. She fixed him with a fierce, blue-eyed glare. If looks could kill, he would be lying dead at the bottom of the nearest lake. Even that would be preferable to her frosty gaze.

For a moment, he simply stared back at her, unsure whether it would be wiser to keep talking or keep his mouth shut. A moment later, he chose the former. “I didn’t want to tell you—”

“You’re a jerk, Damon McLaurent, you know that?” she snapped. “A big, stupid, annoying jerk who can’t even—aargh!”

She threw her hands up in frustration and stared daggers at him for another moment, then turned and continued walking away.

Damon hurried after her again, but this time, he didn’t try to stop her. He walked ahead, leading the way through the woods, and was relieved when he glanced over his shoulder and realized that she was following him, keeping a few feet of distance between them.

At least she’s not going to run off on her own, he thought.

He took in their surroundings, preparing to double back at the slightest sign of movement. The Collectors were out there somewhere, he knew, perhaps waiting for the right moment to strike. But they would get near Julia over his dead body.

He'd just gotten her back. He couldn't afford to lose her again.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

### A Startling Confession

Hello again, this is Julia Reel, reporting from Frost Mountain, and... yep, you guessed it: It's freezing up here. I don't see the temperatures rising anytime soon, folks. I'd find shelter if I were you. Only a fool—or a couple of fools—would be traveling across this mountain right now.

It had grown surprisingly colder over the last couple of hours. To Julia, it felt like days since they'd stepped off the frozen lake. She wrapped the jacket more tightly around her as she trudged through the snow a few feet behind Damon. Overhead, the sun was slowly sinking in the distance, casting an orange glow across the sky.

Her stomach growled, and she bit her lip. It had been nearly a day since she had anything to eat. Between that and the fact that they'd been traveling all day, she was on the verge of collapse. But Julia wasn't about to complain. Not to him. Talking to him was the last thing she wanted to do.

In fact, she thought, glaring at his broad back, the only reason she was still following him was because she couldn't afford to get lost or attacked out here. Well, that and the fact that as mad as she was at him, she didn't really feel like leaving, especially not since she'd just gotten him back after all this time.

Damon glanced over his shoulder as if to make sure she was still following. His massive body almost filled her vision. His eyes met hers, sending a shiver through her body. He continued walking, marching forward without so much as a grunt.

A dull ache throbbed in Julia's legs. A piggyback ride from him would be great right

now...

She could just imagine wrapping her arms and legs around his wide, muscular frame, drinking in his scent.

Hmm...

Her pulse quickened at the thought, so she brushed the thought aside. She'd had enough excitement and danger for one day—or one year if she was being honest. She still couldn't believe she'd crossed that lake with him. The whole time, she'd been certain the ice would shatter and they would both fall to their doom. Even now, hours after she'd stepped off the ice, the memory still haunted her. Crossing Laudville Lake had been scary enough. But everything was 10 times more terrifying when you were stuck on a magical mountain designed to kill you.

Or when you were being hunted.

Instinctively, she craned her head to look this way and that. No Collectors in sight. She hadn't seen them since their last attack. They probably had good heads on their shoulders and decided not to chance crossing that icy lake like she and Damon had done. Either that, or they'd simply given up the chase. For all Julia knew, they'd seen the FBI jacket she had on and decided not to pursue them out of respect for authority.

Whatever the case, they were safe for now, well, as safe as anyone could be under the circumstances.

It seemed like an eternity before Damon stopped and announced, "We're here."

Letting out a sigh of relief, she gazed in the direction he was pointing, and her eyes widened.

Sixty feet northwest of them was a set of caves etched into the side of the mountain. The longer she gazed at them, the more stunned Julia felt. Even the smallest cave had to be at least 10 feet wide. No telling how deep they were. For a death trap, Frost Mountain sure had some amazing sights. If they weren't in a separate dimension, the caves could have been one of the seven wonders of the earth.

And tourists would flock here in millions, she thought, not knowing it would be a one-way trip.

"We'll take shelter in one of those for the night," Damon said, returning his attention to her. The sound of his voice sparked a feeling of annoyance. "We're going to need to rest and recover our strength for tomorrow. We're getting close to Caprichor."

With that, he continued walking, and she followed him silently, still staring at his back. They settled in one of the larger caves, which Julia figured was just as well. At least there would be plenty of space between them.

The cave was dark, but it took Damon no longer than a minute to produce a flame brilliant enough to illuminate their surroundings. They ventured deeper into the cave, where the light couldn't be detected from outside, and settled down. Julia took a position opposite him, grateful for the 10 feet that separated them.

"You must be hungry," he said as he rummaged through his bag. "Have some food."

He handed her a piece of meat wrapped in leaves, but she simply frowned at it.

"Take it," he insisted.

"I'm not hungry," she mumbled, even though there was a gnawing feeling in her stomach. She turned her head away, gazing instead toward the mouth of the cave.

“Don’t lie to me.” Damon’s voice was stern. “You haven’t had anything to eat. I’m hungry, so you must be, too.”

“What’s it to you?” she snapped.

He drew closer to her, and she felt her heartbeat accelerate. “I can’t afford to see you starve to death.”

“If you cared so much about my life, you wouldn’t have endangered it 16 years ago.”

The words tumbled out almost of their own accord. Damon blinked at her, and she saw surprise and hurt flicker across his face. Not that it mattered. She’d been shocked and hurt as well all those years ago, hadn’t she?

“What?” He sounded incredulous. “That’s the reason you’re mad at me? That’s what this is about?”

His words annoyed her even more. She glared at him. “So you didn’t even realize it before?”

Damon inched nearer but still maintained a careful distance. He looked like he was trying to figure out what to say. “I thought you might’ve been upset for another reason. I...” He shook his head. “Sixteen years ago...”

“We fell through the ice, and then you were gone.” Her voice quivered as she reminded him of the horror. “Just... gone. Do you know how that made me feel?” She drew her knees up to her chest. “I was scared. I was worried. I thought something had happened to you. I didn’t even know if I was going to make it.”

“Red, I—”



“You told me I could trust you, Damon. You said nothing would happen.” She spread her arms, gesturing at their surroundings. “This isn’t nothing. The 16 years since that afternoon aren’t nothing. Do you know how many nightmares I’ve had about what happened?”

It took her a moment to realize she was hyperventilating, her chest heaving. Before today, she didn’t think she was mad at Damon, not once in nearly two decades. Perhaps it had simply taken her that long to process everything that happened that afternoon in Laudville Lake.

“Do you have any idea how it felt hearing you tell me the same thing hours ago?” She scoffed. “It felt like high school all over again. You assuring me that everything was okay, that nothing could go wrong, asking me to trust you. It felt like, even after all those years, after everything that happened, you hadn’t learned a thing. You just put my life in danger again.”

His green eyes blinked at her. His lips were parted, but no sound came forth.

She looked away, not wanting to meet his gaze. “When you disappeared, I was broken. It didn’t end there. Half the gits on the football team hounded me for months, claiming I must have done something to you. There were even rumors that I had you locked up in a basement somewhere.” She chuckled humorlessly. “Walking across that lake was the most terrifying thing ever. And you made me do it again.”

In the silence that followed, she thought she could hear her own heart pounding in her chest. There was a shuffle as Damon drew even nearer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him staring at her.

“Red—” he began. “Julia.”

Her head whipped around faster than she could blink. He’d never called her that

before.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “For everything. You’re right—I should never have asked you to cross the lake with me back then and today. I’ve put you through a lot of pain.”

He stretched his hand out. In his palm was the food he’d offered her. “I know forgiving me won’t be easy, but I don’t want you to punish yourself.” When she didn’t take the wrapped piece, he set it gently by her ankle. “Just eat. You need your strength.”

With that, he retreated to the other side of the cave, out of her reach.

Julia had a good mind to toss the food back at him. But then her stomach growled again.

She unwrapped the meat and dug in, feeling her insides scream with joy as she chewed and swallowed. She was halfway done with her food when Damon spoke again.

“I was broken too, you know,” he said.

Julia froze with the food halfway to her lips.

“For a very long time, I blamed myself,” he went on. “When I found myself on this mountain and realized you hadn’t come along with me, I thought you must have drowned in that lake.”

“Damon—”

“And that was my fault. I’d asked you to cross Laudville Lake with me.” He wasn’t

looking at her; his gaze was fixed on the flames between them. “I should have known the ice wouldn’t hold us. I just... I was trying to impress you.”

Impress me? Slowly, she set her food down. Was Damon McLaurent trying to impress me ?

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” she said hoarsely. She cleared her throat and repeated herself. “I didn’t even realize how upset I was.”

“You had a right to be.”

She shrugged. “It felt like you walked into my life, lit it up, and just... left. You left me out in the cold. That’s how it felt for so long. You’d finally come into my life after wanting you for so long, and then that happened.”

Damon frowned. “A long time? I don’t think I understand... what—?”

Julia couldn’t help but chuckle. “Damon, I’ve had a crush on you since the seventh grade.”

The silence that followed was almost deafening.

He sat up straighter and blinked at her, shock flickering across his face. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Why would I kid about something like that?” She tried to sound as casual as possible as if she wasn’t suddenly a nervous wreck. It hadn’t really dawned on her until now that she’d just blurted out one of her biggest secrets. “Lots of girls had crushes on you back in high school. You were Mr. Popular, after all.”

He suddenly looked sheepish, which surprised her. “I never... I guess I didn’t think

someone like you could ever like someone like me.”

“Why, because I was a nerd?”

“You ran a newsletter. You were brilliant, creative... and beautiful. I was just a jock. And more than half the guys on the team were jerks. You know what they say about bad apples.”

“Fair enough.” She suppressed a smile. “Why did it matter, anyway? It’s not like...” She trailed off, realization dawning on her. “Oh, my God.”

He nodded. “Yeah, since the sixth grade.”

She felt like her heart was trying to pound its way out of her ribcage. Damon scooted over, sitting against the wall next to her, and she made a conscious effort to breathe.

“You never told me, Damon.”

“I never got a chance to,” he said. “I was going to ask you to the dance that afternoon. I guess I ruined things for myself when I asked you to cross the lake with me.”

More silence passed between them. Julia found herself grinning. “And what about now? You still have a crush on me?”

She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

Damon turned to face her. “That hasn’t changed in 16 years, although I wouldn’t call it a mere crush anymore.”

“I feel the same way.” Her voice came out a few pitches higher than she’d intended, but all she cared about was the man gazing back at her, those lips of his just inches

away.

His eyes lit up. “I was hoping you did.”

She’d been mad at him since they’d crossed the lake. The anger had pretty much solidified in her chest like an iceberg. When Damon kissed her, that iceberg melted.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

Mr. Popular

The cave was spacious enough to house three fully grown dragons, but Damon was finding it difficult to pull air into his lungs, and it was all because of Julia. Her mere presence took his breath away. Kissing her was another matter entirely. He'd fantasized about doing it since high school, back on earth, but not even years of longing and imagination had prepared him for this moment.

He half-wondered whether she might object and felt a thrill as she kissed him back. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer, the heat of his desire growing in the depths of his belly and even deeper, consuming his senses until she was all he was aware of.

He could feel his pulse throbbing in his extremities in sync with his heart. Even as he kissed her, a small part of him struggled to comprehend the stark reality of it. He could accept Frost Mountain, a magical mountain from which no one could escape. But kissing Julia was even more unbelievable.

His tongue found its way into her mouth, meeting hers, exploring her mouth with an excitement he'd never felt. He cupped her face, then her breasts, kneading them. She let out a soft moan that was powerful enough to stop a dragon in its tracks.

And it did. Damon pulled away, blinking at her as the rest of the cave slipped from his vision. Those blue eyes returned his gaze. Chest heaving, hair half-disheveled and covered with snow, she was the single most beautiful thing he'd encountered in 16 years of life on this mountain.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sounding just as breathless as he was.

The sight of those lips moving was an impossible challenge for his self-restraint, but he managed to hold back. “You know where this is headed, right?”

In response, she nodded, then smirked. “I’ve never made love in a cave before, but it sounds exciting.”

“Me, either,” he admitted.

Disbelief crossed her face for a moment. “Probably in some village, then, or somewhere else on Frost Mountain.”

Slowly, he shook his head.

It was her turn to blink. “So you’re saying you’ve never...?”

His silence was the best answer he could muster.

Realization dawned on her, and her eyes widened. “You’re kidding me.”

“I’m not.”

“You. Mr. Popular.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I was saving myself for you.” It wasn’t the real reason, obviously. He hadn’t even realized she was still alive until he’d found her on Frost Mountain. But even if he’d wanted someone else, there was little he could have done about it. Being a Collector hadn’t afforded him the liberty of romantic connections.

Her lips curved into a warm smile that added to the fire blazing in his gut. “Well, if

we're being honest, I haven't, either. I never got to do it."

He lifted a brow. "You never met anyone else?"

"They weren't you, Damon."

That was all he could take. His lips crashed over hers again. He kissed her deeply for a moment, then gave in further to his desires and ran his lips across her cheek, trailing a path along her jawline until he reached the base of her throat. She might be his first, but that didn't mean he didn't know what to do. Her moans and sighs echoed through the cave, urging him on, reflecting the desperate need that was growing inside him.

His hand found her breast again under her jacket, and he kneaded it, brushing his finger across her distended nipple. His erection strained against his trousers, pulsating with each second. It dawned on him a second later that his fingers were trembling with anticipation, which made no sense. He'd seen this woman before, all of her. But logic had no place here, especially where the desires of his heart and body met.

As he kissed her, he slowly tugged off her clothing, easing the jacket from her shoulders. Her other tops followed, and she gave a light shiver even though it was warm in the cave. She sat before him, her breasts bared to his hungry eyes. In the golden firelight, they were practically aglow, beckoning to his lips.

Fuck.

Damon was nothing if not obliging. Easing her onto her back on a pile of her clothes, he hovered above her and promptly took her breast into his mouth, suckling and kneading it as wave after wave of unfiltered desire washed over him.

"Oh, God, Damon." Her body arched up to meet his, and he felt the warmth of her belly against his throbbing erection. "You feel so..." The rest of her sentence was lost



in a gasp as he pinched her other nipple between his fingers.

When he glanced up at her, her blue eyes had darkened with lust. He snaked his tongue along her satin skin, swirling it around her distended nipple, and was rewarded with a moan that kicked up his own desire.

Oh, yes, baby.

As if of their own accord, his fingers traveled down the length of her torso, over her belly, and unzipped her trousers. Tugging them to her ankles, he trailed his fingers up her inner thighs, feeling her shiver at his touch. The scent of her arousal hit his nostrils, nearly knocking him senseless.

“I’ve always thought you were beautiful, Red,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion as he drank in the sight of her nakedness. “But this... this is mind-blowing.”

She kicked her trousers off completely, her breathing harsh as she stared up at him. She parted her legs wide, opening herself up to him like a flower. Keeping his gaze on her, he brought his mouth over her engorged clitoris, parting her folds with his fingers. As her alluring eyes widened with a gasp, he slid a finger and then another into her, caressing her sweet spot.

“Oh, fuck,” she panted, her hips bucked against his face, but she reached down and raked her fingers through his hair, holding him in place. “Oh, my—yes, just like that.”

A thrill spread through Damon, and he continued to taste her, his tongue swirling around her clit as he had done with her nipple. When he suckled it, she let out a strangled cry that only encouraged him to keep going, and he thrust his fingers in and out of her in a steady rhythm, feeling the pressure building up inside her. When she began to spasm, he knew that her pleasure had reached its crescendo.

“Oh... Damon!” Her entire body seemed to freeze for a moment. And then she began to convulse, gasping and crying out as her orgasm bolted through her. In moments, she was panting and writhing as the final spasms wracked her body.

In a moment, he hovered above her again, gazing deep into her eyes. He brought his lips to hers, allowing her to taste herself.

This time, it was she who broke the kiss. “Are you going to take your clothes off or what?”

He grinned against her mouth. Then, as quickly as he could, he divested himself of his own clothing, stretching his bare body over hers. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, his erection throbbing against her warm, wet folds. After what looked like hesitation, she reached between them and curled her fingers around him, gently stroking his shaft, and he let out a soft hiss.

Yes, she was going to blow his mind.

Damon looked forward to it.

“I want you,” he rasped. “Now.”

She spread her legs wider.

They stared at each other for one heart-stopping second. “Are you...?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I want you, too, Damon.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. Positioning himself between her thighs, he shifted his hips and slid into her in a single stroke, burying himself to the hilt. They gasped in unison, Damon both from the pleasure and warmth that rolled over

his cock and the realization that he was inside her.

He'd wanted this since the day he'd landed in front of her and saw her shift from a snow leopard, but a part of him still hadn't dreamed anything like this could happen, especially given their current circumstances. Here they were, hiding out in a cave, on the run from Grim Jim and his merciless Collectors, and he was buried inside her.

It felt right.

It was right, he told himself, as he began to move. Emotion and lust rushed through him as he thrust into her. She felt delicious around him, and as he continued his strokes, his pleasure mounted. With a whimper, she wrapped her legs around him, locking him tightly against her.

"Damon.... oh!" Her eyes rolled up into the back of her head as he quickened his thrusts. She threw her arms around him, her fingers digging into his back.

"You feel perfect." The words left his mouth without him really thinking. "So... perfect."

Her legs tightened around him, forcing him to quicken his strokes. A grunt of pleasure escaped his lips. They were joined completely, his skin grazing hers with each movement, her nipples poking his chest. It was only a matter of time before his ecstasy reached a climax. Her eyes grew wider with each thrust, and he knew he was driving her closer to the edge, too.

"I love you, Red," he murmured. He wasn't sure if she could hear him, but he didn't care. "I've always loved you. I always will."

When her orgasm came, it was with a shriek that reverberated through the cave. She clenched around him as she erupted, her finger sinking even deeper into his skin. Her

climax triggered his own release, and with a few more pumps, he groaned loudly as he spilled himself into her.

They lay clinging to each other for what had to be minutes but felt like hours. Finally, he rolled over and lay on his side, holding her close to him, panting as he tried to fathom what he'd just done with his high school crush.

No, not crush. That was an oversimplification of his emotions.

She was his first love.

His only love.

And she belonged to him just as much as he belonged to her.

He wasn't about to let her go again. And he sure as hell wasn't going to let any harm come to her. He'd spent the past 16 years surviving on the mountain, no matter the cost, but he would risk it all to protect this woman who had an unbreakable hold on his heart.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

### Pillow Talks in a Cave

“You know, you blush when you come,” Damon was saying. “You get all red in the face. And your eyebrows scrunch up like you’re thinking really hard.”

“Are we pillow-talking right now?” Julia turned her head to look at him.

“Maybe. What’s wrong about that?”

“Well, for starters, we don’t have any pillows. And we’re inside a cave on a mountain that shouldn’t exist.”

He flashed her a sexy smirk that made her tingle. “We just made love in this cave.”

Her cheeks burned. “Touché.”

They had just made love in the cave—for the third time that night. Sweet exhaustion spread through her, and she doubted she could stay awake much longer. They’d learned about each other’s bodies more than once, and here she was, still blushing like a schoolgirl at the mention of their intimacy.

They lay clothed now, to her mild disappointment, cuddling before the flame. Damon had an arm wrapped around her, pulling her close so that her bottom was pressed against his groin. She could feel his erection still pulsating against her. How that was possible, she had no idea, but it excited her to see just how much he craved her.

It was a dream come true, all of this, well, sans the Ice Age setting. Tonight had been

full of pleasant yet unimaginable surprises. Even now, she found herself wondering if she'd struck her head on a rock earlier and was having some kind of hallucination. But it was real, and she didn't even need to pinch herself to know that. Pleasure was as real as pain.

She returned her gaze to the flames. She could feel Damon's warm breath on the nape of her neck. His presence was soothing, his hold on her protective. He definitely was into her. But just how much? And did he have any idea how deeply she felt for him? Their lovemaking had spoken volumes, but they hadn't actually had a proper discussion.

Yet.

Damon's fingers caressed her belly through her clothes. "You know," he said, "when all of this is over, I'd like us to have that dance finally. You know, in Caprichor, where it's safe."

A flutter filled her belly, but she wasn't sure if it was from his words or his touch. "Our Valentine's Day Dance? I... I'd like that."

Suddenly, she felt like that girl 16 years ago, before the ice gave way under their feet. Before she could start worrying about things like what she was going to wear or whether Caprichor happened to have makeshift clubs with speakers from earth, another thought crept into her mind, piquing her curiosity before she could ignore it.

"Hey," she said, "do you think those Collectors might have been after just one of us?"

Behind her, she felt him freeze at her question. A second later, he said, "They never mentioned. I think they were more eager to attack us."

"Good thing you were prepared for them."

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Frost Mountain prepares you for everything by throwing the impossible at you. Only the strongest or the smartest can thrive out here on their own, at least. That’s why some people choose to live in villages or towns.”

“You never did?”

“Not for more than a little while. I learned to keep moving if I wanted to survive. Staying in one place makes you complacent. Living in Caprichor, spending the next few years or maybe the rest of my life there is not something I’ve had to consider until now.”

He was survivor through and through. “You never did really explain why we have to go to Caprichor.”

“I did. It’s safe.”

“You said that.” She twisted around, breaking his hold on her and facing him, her eyes searching his face. “But you never told me what you’re running from—or who .”

“I thought we were pillow-talking,” he said, frowning.

She thought about that. Their conversation was slowly turning into sort of an interrogation, but her questions remained. Damon knew something he wasn’t telling. She knew that instinctively.

“We are talking,” she told him. “When you met me, you wanted to go to Caprichor. Why was that?”

“I...” He stared past her at the flames, and she could tell he was struggling. “I—”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it.” She gave a disappointed sigh. “I guess

whatever it is, it's a touchy subject for you. I shouldn't have pried."

"No, Julia." He sat up suddenly. "You deserve to know. Especially since it concerns you."

She blinked up at him.

Wait... what?

"What do you mean by that?"

Guilt flickered in his eyes. "You should probably sit up for this."

Her heart sank into her stomach as she obliged, not once taking her eyes off him. Damon continued to stare at the fire, shadows flickering across his face. Moments passed without a word. Julia was starting to wonder if he was trying to gather his words when he finally spoke.

"I've survived on Frost Mountain for 16 years," he began. "I learned to survive over time. But when I first got here, I nearly died."

She held her breath, feeling like she was on the edge of her seat.

He inhaled deeply. "The cold didn't kill me. But I nearly starved to death. I wandered through the woods for weeks before anyone found me. They helped me, fed me, and took me to someone they knew could help me even more, a person who could make sure I learned to survive on Frost Mountain."

"That's a good thing, right?" But something about the way he said it made her suspect otherwise.



He met her gaze, and she found her suspicions confirmed in those green eyes.

“That person was Grim Jim,” he said.

Julia’s breath caught in her throat. She stared at him, waiting for him to burst into laughter or yell, “Gotcha!” or something. But Damon was dead serious. That made it even worse because if he was being honest, then he’d just told her that—

“Grim Jim was who helped you?” She remembered what she’d heard about the man. He was the leader of the Collectors, the dragon who collected treasures, including living beings. “I don’t understand.”

She had an idea where Damon’s confession was heading, but she held out hope that she was wrong, so she waited.

Suddenly, Damon looked like he’d aged 10 years. “He taught me to fight, to hunt. Half the things I know about staying alive on Frost Mountain, I owe to Grim Jim and his people. But there was a price.”

She gulped. “Wh-what price?”

He looked away from her. “He made me work for him. To help him... add to his treasures.”

That was all she needed to hear. With a gasp, she scrambled away from him, eyes wide.

“Red—”

“You’re a... a Collector,” she said, scrambling to her feet and giving him a wide berth. “You’re one of them.”

She didn't want to believe it, but he'd just admitted it. It was all starting to make sense: the unanswered questions, his furtive behavior... and what about the day he'd found her? He'd swooped out of the sky as a dragon and roared at her like he'd been trying to make her his next meal.

The realization hit her all at once. He hadn't been about to eat her; he'd been trying to capture her. And that was what those other Collectors had been hoping to do when they'd attacked. It wasn't an object or revenge they were after; it was her.

"I can explain," Damon said, getting up.

"Oh, you'd better." She laughed bitterly. "This is why you wanted to take me to Caprichor. That's where Grim Jim is, isn't it? This whole time, you've been leading me like a lamb to slaughter."

"Look, I—"

"I trusted you!" she shrieked. Her voice echoed through the cave, ringing in her ears. "I trusted you, Damon, and you... you lied to me. You made me think you cared about me, that you liked me, that you were going to take us to safety, but it was all a lie."

"No, it wasn't. You've got it wrong."

She scoffed, her voice dangerously on the verge of tears. "Oh, have I?"

"Caprichor is safe," Damon insisted. "I wasn't taking us there to give you up. You're right: I was supposed to capture you. I wanted to leave the Collectors. I hate everything they stand for. I was done. But Grim Jim wasn't going to let me go that easily. He told me I had to do something for him if I wanted my freedom."

“He asked me to get the snow leopard shifter that had just arrived on Frost Mountain. I spent weeks searching until I found the shifter, and then it turned out to be you. I just... I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take you to him, not when I’d just found you again. So I decided I’d take you to Caprichor and hide you from him for as long as I could.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes! I mean, I know you probably don’t trust me after—”

“Probably?” she snorted. “I thought you were a good person. I thought the accident that brought me to this mountain wasn’t such a terrible thing because I got to see you again. I guess I was wrong on both counts.”

With that, she turned and flounced toward the cave’s entrance.

“Julia, wait!”

She ignored him. Right now, she wanted to put as much distance between them as possible. Fearing he might chase her, she shifted, dropping on all fours as a snow leopard—Grim Jim’s prize—and sprinted out of the cave into the night, sending up flecks of snow in her wake. The wind rushed in her ears as she picked up speed, and she had no idea where she was headed, only that she needed to get as far away from Damon as she could.

He's a Collector.

The thought replayed itself in her mind as she ran. Over and over.

He’s one of them.

Shifting had been brilliant thinking. It was the quickest way to get away from him,

although there was no telling how far she'd get before she had a dragon trailing her again.

At least in this form, I don't have any tears.

Of course, she'd been wrong about him. Of course, he was a threat to her. She should never have thought otherwise. She'd seen the signs. This whole time, he'd been keeping things from her, acting suspiciously. She should have known the guy who almost led her to her death all those years ago would try to do the same thing again.

But he had protected her, hadn't he? The thought struck her so suddenly that it nearly stopped her in her tracks. He'd fought off the other Collectors and tried to get away from them. Why would he do that if he was in cahoots with them? What if, by some impossible chance, he was telling the—?

She never got to finish that thought.

Swoop, swoop, swoop.

This time, she skidded to a halt so suddenly that she toppled over and rolled through the snow. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted several massive shapes hovering above her. Shapes with massive wings like tarpaulins... tails like whips...

As she tried to get up, a pillar of fire cut through the air, illuminating her surroundings, and she saw them clearly.

Dragons.

There had to be at least seven of them circling above. Julia considered trying to take off again before they hit the ground, but she was surrounded. A dozen or so men stood in a wide circle around her. She couldn't imagine how they managed to sneak

up on her, but they were all heavily armed. And Julia knew exactly who they were.

The Collectors raised their weapons as one, leveling them at her.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard a shout. The fur on Julia's body stood to attention.

Damon?

A sudden movement caught her eye, and a voice said, "He can't save you now. Not with so many of us. He will answer to the Ice Melter. And as for you, you're his latest treasure..."

She spun just in time to see the man raise his foot. And then her world went dark.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:35 am*

### Workplace Conflict

The first thing he noticed when his eyes flickered open was that he was in a cave. He lay flat with his back on cold, rocky ground, staring at a dark ceiling that was way too high for the cave he'd been camping in. That was the second thing he noticed. This wasn't the same cave.

He sat up, wincing as the back of his head throbbed. With each throb, a memory returned: Julia staring at him in horror and revulsion, Julia taking off into the night, half a dozen men ambushing him as he tried to go after her...

He blinked, looking around. This new cave was dimly lit and huge, large enough to dwarf even the biggest dragons. But it wasn't the size of the cave that sent a tremor down Damon's spine. It was the sight before him. Barely 30 feet away in the darkness was a pit. And not just any pit. The pit, the one so dark and deep it seemed even to defy the light.

Oh, no.

A whimper to his right jerked him to full alertness. Next to him, sitting up against the cave wall and shivering through her clothes, was...

"Julia," he breathed, pulling himself into a sitting position. He reached for her, his concern overshadowing his pain. "Are you okay?"

The look of terror on her face was all the answer he needed. A bolt of horror raced through him. Things had gone from bad to worse. The Collectors had caught them.

Grim Jim had them now. He looked to his left, where a series of openings led to other caves he couldn't see, caves where Grim Jim kept his treasures.

Where was the Ice Melter? He stared at his hands. He wasn't chained, nor was Julia. He knew neither of them dared try to escape without fully understanding the stakes, but what about—?

"You're awake," said a familiar voice. "I was worried the others hit you too hard."

Damon jerked his head up just as Jan Hoover stepped into view, a thin smile on his face. Behind him, Damon spotted a few other Collectors.

His stomach sank. "Jan, what have you done?"

"I figured it out," his old friend replied. "When you told me about your traveling companion, I suspected you were lying. You've always traveled alone. So I decided to find out the truth for myself."

Something clicked inside Damon's head. "That attack, back in the woods. It was... you."

"Guilty as charged. I gathered as many other Collectors as I could on short notice. To be honest, I hoped I was wrong. But then she," he said, jabbing his finger at Julia, "chose that moment to shift. It turned out you'd been traveling with the snow leopard this whole time. You'd already found Grim Jim's prize, but you weren't going to take her to him, were you?"

Next to him, he heard Julia gasp.

"You shouldn't have done this," Damon said.

“I did what I knew to be right.” Jan lifted his chin, his shoulders tensing. “You should have done as you were told instead of believing you could defy the Ice Melter and somehow get away with it. And now, I’m sure you know what fate awaits you.”

He glanced toward the pit, and Damon swallowed. “I couldn’t let him have her.”

“And now he has both of you. I can’t believe you, Damon. After so many years, you were willing to abandon the Collectors? After all Grim Jim did for you? After all I did? You wouldn’t be sitting here if I’d let you drown in that river. You certainly wouldn’t have tried to defy the Ice Melter.”

Damon started to get to his feet. “Jan—”

The sound of footsteps echoing through the cave interrupted him. There was a collective gasp, and all the Collectors, including Jan, dropped onto one knee. Damon stared ahead, watching a tall man saunter into view.

“That,” Grim Jim said, his voice booming throughout the cave, “is enough.”

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Damon had stared death in the face many times before. And some of those times, that face also belonged to the Ice Melter.

Grim Jim looked amused, which was in stark contrast to his name. The immortal Ice Melter was slightly taller than Damon, with a more muscular build and an overgrown beard. His dark eyes seemed to be receding into the back of his skull.

“You’re... you’re him,” Julia said, staring wide-eyed at him. “You’re Grim Jim.”

“I am him,” came the reply.



“Your beard could use a trim.”

He chuckled, which was the second most terrifying sound Damon had ever heard. The Ice Melter drew nearer, making Damon’s pulse pound violently in his ears.

“You know,” said the Ice Melter, “when the war ended centuries ago, and the witches imprisoned us here, that was all I believed Frost Mountain to be: a prison, a cage for wild animals.” His grin widened. “And for the first hundred years or so, I continued to believe it was. But as I learned to adapt properly to this place, as I learned to thrive, I realized something.”

He stopped 10 feet away from Damon and folded his arms across his bare chest.

“Frost Mountain is no prison,” he continued. “Not for me, at least. This place is a paradise, teeming with infinite possibilities. What more could I ask for? Those witches who cursed me and put me here had no idea what they were doing.”

Damon held his breath. The Ice Melter’s eyes were focused on him. Even the other Collectors looked trepidatious. At this close range, he could lash out at anyone, and no one wanted a surprise tour of the pit today.

“Whatever I want, I ultimately get,” Grim Jim said. “But you, Damon, tried to take my prize from me.”

His gaze flicked toward Julia, who gasped and seemed to shrink away from him.

“Ah,” he muttered. “The snow leopard shifter. I have waited weeks, and now I finally have you.”

He stepped closer, reaching out to caress her chin, and Damon heard Julia whimper again. She looked even more terrified than ever. Seeing her like this made Damon’s

heart feel like it was trapped in an icy grip. She shouldn't be here. She didn't deserve any of this, not at all.

And it was his fault. He should have come clean to her earlier. If he hadn't kept his secret for so long, they wouldn't be here now. Perhaps they would already be in Caprichor. Instead, they were trapped in a place he wouldn't wish for his worst enemy. Damon was minutes, if not seconds, away from death. And Julia? Hers was an even worse fate, trapped in this cave to suffer as one of the Ice Melter's treasures until her last breath. He'd seen the way Grim Jim treated his other living treasures. The thought of Julia going through that made his chest ache.

"You defied me, Damon," Grim Jim said, turning back to him, the smile slowly fading from his face. "I'm not happy about that at all. You should have known better. You used to know better."

"I did what I had to do," Damon said as defiantly as he could, with death staring him in the face. "I refused to bring her to you."

"Why, because after nearly two decades, you're suddenly horrified at the things we stand for?" The Ice Melter chuckled, his eyes full of hate. "Or perhaps, by some chance, you have strong feelings for this woman?"

Damon's breath faltered for a second, but the triumphant look on the Ice Melter's face told him it was long enough.

"Of course..." Grim Jim's eyes darkened. "I should have known."

He jerked his head toward the other Collectors. "Take her to the treasure chamber."

Two men instantly stepped forward and took Julia by the arms. She shrieked and protested, but they held her fast, leading her toward one of the darker passages.

“No!” Damon cried.

“As for you, Damon, your punishment will be swift. You should not have defied me.”

With another tiny jerk of his head, Jan and another Collector grabbed hold of Damon and began dragging him toward the pit. Damon heard the familiar hiss rising from the dark, gaping hole as though it was beckoning to him, happy that he had returned. The pit was hungry, and Damon was its next meal.

Red-hot anger flared inside Damon’s chest. He couldn’t go out like this. And he sure as hell wasn’t going to let Julia end up a prisoner here.

“I’m not going in there,” he snarled.

“If only it were up to you,” Grim Jim replied. “You seem to have forgotten who is in charge here.”

“Jeremiah Ebon, the Ice Melter.” Just uttering the words sent a chill down Damon’s spine, but he spat them out with as much disgust as he could muster under the circumstances.

“Yes.” Grim Jim’s tone was frosty. “I’m almost sorry to see you go... almost.”

As Damon was dragged closer to his doom, he fought like the devil.

“No!” he screamed.

With a sudden burst of energy, he broke free of Jan and the other Collector, knocking them aside before either had the opportunity to react. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Collectors who were holding Julia turn to look. Grim Jim’s eyes widened in surprise as Damon charged toward him, and he braced himself, preparing to take

Damon down with a single blow.

But Damon had other ideas. He shifted as he lunged, ripping out of his clothes and frame in an instant, and a fully grown dragon collided with the Ice Melter, slamming him to the ground. The sound echoed through the cave. The blow should have killed Grim Jim in an instant, but when Damon lifted his foot, the Ice Melter lay there, completely unhurt, a sinister smile on his lips.

Damn curse.

“My turn,” Grim Jim said, a deadly flicker in his eyes. And then he began to grow. Damon watched with horror as a scaly pattern appeared on the Ice Melter’s flesh, which blackened by the second. Horns sprouted from his forehead, and wings emerged from his back. The Collectors nearby backed away, crying out in terror. It took Damon nearly all of his willpower to stand his ground.

Jeremiah Ebon’s body expanded at a rapid rate. Spikes jutted from his face, and a set of silver plates covered his obsidian chest like armor plates. His face elongated into a long snout, and smoke spurted from his nostrils. His eyes flickered red.

The black dragon stepped forward, towering over Damon, who found himself momentarily backing up toward the pit.

Suddenly, throwing himself into it didn’t seem like such a terrible idea.

He snarled and, with a beat of wings, hurled himself at Grim Jim. But this wasn’t just any dragon. Damon was up against an older, smarter, more powerful force of evil. At best, this was a Hail Mary. But Damon wasn’t about to back out now, not with Julia’s fate hanging in the balance.

Red and black scales clashed, and claws flashed in the dim cave. Damon let out a roar

of agony as the Ice Melter slashed him across the chest. It wasn't a deep cut, but it stopped him long enough to give Grim Jim a chance to blast him in the face with a column of flame. Damone hit the ground, his mind in chaos, his body engulfed in heat and pain.

“Damon!”

It was Julia. He couldn't see her, but the sound of her voice was gutting enough to make him forget his pain.

With another roar, he parted his jaws, firing at Grim Jim as the black dragon prepared to strike again. The Ice Melter's shriek of pain sent a violent shudder throughout the cave, causing several stalactites to rain down on them.

Damon tried for another attack and was surprised to feel claws at his throat. Before he could wrestle himself free, he was slammed onto the ground.

A soft hiss snapped him back to alertness, and he realized just where he was. He was pinned beneath Grim Jim, just at the edge of the pit. He could feel the gaping darkness beckoning to him. Overhead, the black dragon's jaws parted wide, and Damon saw the brightening glow in the back of its throat.

This was the end.

Not if I can help it , Damon thought.

With a roar, he heaved with all his might, sinking his claws into whatever bit of flesh he could find. Grim Jim shrieked again, causing more stalactites to rain down. As the larger dragon struggled to regain his composure and balance, Damon pushed again. The Ice Melter gave a surprised grunt as he toppled over Damon, tumbling over the edge of the pit into the darkness.

A deafening roar arose from the pit, fading by the second. And then it was over.

Damon shifted back, panting and clutching his chest. He scrambled away from the pit, half-expecting a dark monstrosity to emerge from it and attack him again. But nothing happened. He continued to stare at the pit, unsure whether to burst into laughter or tears. The impossible had happened. The pit had claimed the lives of anyone who dared to defy Grim Jim. But before this, it had never occurred to Damon that it would do the same to the murderer. The idea had crept into his mind at the last minute, a desperate attempt at best. And it had worked.

Then again, Grim Jim was immortal. This pit wouldn't destroy him, but Damon knew that Grim Jim would continue to plummet through the darkness from which no shifter—alive or dead—no dragon —had ever escaped, and no one ever would, not even Grim Jim.

As far as anyone knew, Jeremiah Ebon, the Ice Melter, was gone for good.

Relief flooded through him like a rush of adrenaline. He got to his feet finally and looked around. To his surprise, the cave was almost empty. The Collectors were nowhere to be seen. Damon surmised they must have taken off during the battle with Grim Jim. Standing alone by the cave wall, staring back at him, was a lone figure.

“Julia.” He rushed over to meet her, throwing his arms around her body in a tight hug.

She hugged him back, filling him with a rush of warmth.

“I thought he was going to kill you,” she muttered, her voice choked with emotion. When she looked up at him, he saw that her face was streaked with tears.

“Julia...” His voice caught in his throat for a moment. “I’m so sorry. This is all my

fault. I never should have kept this a secret from you. I—”

She shook her head. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

She shrugged. “Well, you’re right. It was pretty messed up, all of it. But I’m sure what you did as a Collector was because you didn’t have a choice, not with that monster as your boss. Honestly, I don’t even blame the other guys, either.”

“Still...”

“There’s no need to apologize anymore, Damon. I think I’ve found out everything I needed to know, everything I wasn’t sure about.”

He frowned. “Such as...?”

“I know now that you care about me,” she said, and she smiled, making his heart flutter. “I know you wouldn’t hurt me. I... I trust you, Damon, and... and...”

The word trust set off a three-alarm fire in his gut, but he simply smiled. “And?”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him gently on the lips.

“And I love you.”

His breathing stopped. “I love you, too, Julia.”

They stood gazing at each other for the next few seconds. Then Julia said, “Let’s get out of here. This place gives me the creeps. I’d like to put as much distance between myself and this cave as possible. And then we can... talk . Really talk.”

### Valentine's Day

In the heart of winter, our love burned so bright.

We danced like snowflakes, pure and white,

Your hand in mine, our hearts intertwined,

Our love is a story of heart and mind.

It's Valentine's Day, this moment's divine,

Your soul and mine will forever align.

"You sing so beautifully."

His words sent a rush of heat through her body despite the cold. "I still can't believe I agreed to this," Julia said, frowning at him. "I'd normally avoid a place like this. Why did I let you bring me back here?"

"You trust me," Damon reminded her, twirling her around and pulling her close.

"That I do."

His lips twitched, and she fought the urge to kiss him.

"How many more days until we reach Caprichor?" she wanted to know.



He chuckled, his hands falling to her waist as they swayed together. “There’s no rush. Grim Jim is gone. No Collectors, either. You and I are free now.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I know that, but I’m tired of traveling.”

“We’ll be there by tomorrow evening,” he assured her.

“Promise?”

“I promise, Red.”

“That’s good enough for me.” She rested her head against his chest, content with the gentle thudding of his heart.

And together, they continued to dance on the frozen lake.