



Bound by the Wraith: Northern Realms (Mated to the Monster: Season 3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Will one year with a demon really save her soul?

Cali sold her soul to save her dying husband, only to have him walk out on her. Now, the sexiest reaper has come to collect. She's prepared for an eternity of damnation, until the wraith offers her a way out.

Be his for one year.

Mind, soul and body.

Cillian only has ever pursued power and his favors always come with a price, but being dark and evil can be lonely. Maybe it's time for him to take a mate, and desperate Cali makes his cold blood heat with a fiery passion. He'll bind her to him and make her forget the mortal world.

It seems like an easy way out for Cali, but can she last the year locked away in his realm?

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I just have to bide my time.

Although, patience was never his virtue. That's what Cillian had to keep reminding himself to do. Which infuriated him, he'd been waiting a very long time. There was something to be said for being a wraith and being able to not only cross realms, but also to cross time and space. He could go wherever he wanted, to do anything. The world was for his taking.

Sort of.

He did have power and could manipulate history to suit his needs to a point, but not completely.

Which was the problem.

And that's what he'd been doing for far too long, playing with time and never really getting what he wanted because his powers only extended so far. All because his father was a human. And a shit one at that.

And he was fucking tired of it all.

His half sister, and some of his other half siblings, had warned him about messing with the fabric of space and time, but he didn't care. He'd met Cali a long time ago on one of his history jaunts. And he let her go time and time again, watching her die. Either she was burnt at the stake, murdered, died of illness. Just, she never

succumbed to old age. It was a cruel twist of fate.

She died too many times and yet her soul kept coming back.

He'd feel it, a reverberation in the fibers of the reality.

His little secret realm, or as his brothers-in-law liked to call it, his "goblin kingdom," was tucked away deep in the underworld. Past the netherworld and that's where he could sense her the best. That's when he knew that her energy, or soul, was ready to move on again. To come back to him.

Cali.

His Cali.

Now, the moment was right. Or it almost was, and soon he could make his move.

This version of Cali he wasn't going to let go of.

This time, he was done waiting for her and he was going to make sure that when she returned to his realm, she would be bound to him no matter what. Wraiths weren't supposed to have human mates, permanent ones, and perhaps that's why she was snatched from him repeatedly. Not this time, though. He'd give her an immortal life and no one was going to stop him. Not even Death. He'd set things up so perfectly—cut off the elven realm, overthrow some other realms, and with Cali by his side, he'd crumble the veil and let magical beings and mortals mingle. Then he'd rule it all.

It was easy to manipulate the blood treaty with the northern realm and fire up all those displeased magical beings. Just like it was easy to manipulate the mixing of human and magical beings, which further strengthened the magic potential, strengthening the binds of the northern realm, while destroying Tiene's.

It was all lining up.

And Cali would be his.

He spent years infiltrating her dreams, trying to get her soul to remember her past lives. The lives they spent together, before her untimely death, every reincarnation. Like Persephone to Hades, he was going to bring her back here and hopefully solidify his complete rule over everything.

If he had his way, he'd punish those responsible for her deaths over the centuries, but he knew he had to be careful with time and time travel. His plan had to unfold correctly, or all would be lost.

"Sire," a goblin named Honk croaked, scurrying across the stone floor. "It's time."

Cillian glanced over at Honk. "You are sure of this?"

Honk nodded. "She is vulnerable."

Cillian rose from his stone throne and walked over to his balcony. His realm was bare, bereft of life. Just a burnt-orange sky, stone, and brown dying vegetation that his goblins liked to trim into grotesque figures.

It was stark.

Bleak.

His hope, by bringing her here, would mean some life would be breathed back into this desolate place.

Maybe she could breathe some life back into me?

Cillian snorted at that ridiculous thought, though Cali would be the one to do it. She'd always been there, buried in his heart. The only one to really touch it, and every time he saw her die, it killed him.

"Sire!" Honk screeched, staring at the large ornate glass ball. "She's sold her soul."

"What?" Cillian spun around and marched to the looking orb which was spinning and glowing, casting light into the stone chamber. There was a horrible pit in his stomach and he felt her soul being ripped away, as if a piece of himself were being slaughtered.

He could see it all, playing out. She was crying and he could see the soul contract bound over her body. This was not part of his plan. His claws extended, his blood heating like the fires of purgatory itself.

Who had dared to try to buy her soul?

He'd made enough deals with all the beings who could possibly do that. He had numerous contracts. No one was to touch Cali.

No one.

"Gootch made the contract," Honk stated nervously, wringing his little hands together.

A growl grew in Cillian's chest. Of course it was Gootch. His true enemy in the nether region. A goblin demon.

"Well, we'll see about that!" Cillian snapped his fingers and travelled instantly to the netherworld where demons and all sorts of nasty creatures liked to hang out. It was really no different than his realm, just louder, with a lot of shrieking and moaning,

and generally it was a realm full of sneaky assholes, just like Gootch.

He stepped on a few imps that screeched and squelched as he stormed his way up to Gootch's residence. He didn't make it a habit to trounce them, usually. Today, he did because it was fun and he was pissed. Gootch liked to trade in souls, but Cillian knew the damn demon also liked to bet, and he was already working out how to maintain control over Cali and prevent her being damned to the netherworld for all eternity, where he could never get her, a place she'd never come back from.

The thought of her being trapped here with Gootch made him furious and if it wasn't against netherworld politics, he would completely skewer him alive if he could.

Without even waiting to be announced, or have the door to Gootch's palace opened, Cillian barged into the throne room. Gootch reminded him of a big, fat slug from a certain science-fiction movie.

The writer of that movie hadn't been far off when creating that particular space gangster. Gootch was it, even down to the annoying imps that slithered about.

Demons, goblins and wraiths came in varying shapes and sizes, and Gootch could morph into something more pleasing for humans, but for the most part, Gootch was a lazy son of a bitch who just liked to laze around like a big brown squelch of shit. There was a knowing grin on his pancake-flat face, which Cillian wanted to punch.

"Cillian, I thought I might be seeing you," Gootch gurgled, pleased.

"We can cut with the pleasantries. I want her contract." Cillian snapped his finger, producing an orb that had Cali's face floating there.

Gootch chuckled, moistly. The fucker knew exactly what he was doing and that's why he'd pursued Cali. "Do you now? And what will I get, Cillian?"

Cillian smiled, just slightly. "I know you like to wager."

Gootch sat up, sort of. His fat blob mass wriggled a bit. "I do."

"And I know that you don't always win, but you still do it anyways."

"Your point?" Gootch hissed, his reptilelike pupils narrowing.

"I am thinking a wager. A bet. You give me her soul for one year. She has to stay with me that entire year. If she doesn't, then her soul returns to you." It was hard to say those words. The idea of Gootch owning her if he lost this bet made him physically sick.

"A wraith can't bind a human to a realm for a year," Gootch said dismissively. "Your bet is pointless because you'll lose. There's no fun in that."

"Then, she gets a furlough of one day every three months. If she doesn't return to me by sunset on her day of freedom, then you win the bet."

Gootch tapped his chin. "So, for a year, with a single day of freedom every three months. That is more reasonable. However, I already have her soul. I want more if you lose."

Cillian sneered.

Calm yourself.

He expected Gootch to be greedy.

"What do you want then?"

Gootch's eyes gleamed. "Well, being the grandson of Death gives you powers that not all wraiths have. I want those."

"My powers?" Cillian snorted. "Those are not transferrable. You know this."

"Well, sort of," Gootch bubbled. "You have forged a very strong blood spell over the northern realm and I know for a fact you're trying the same things with other realms, all so you can rule over everything from yours. Your realm sits in a very good spot. I never thought it was particularly fair you have your own private realm. So, if I give you this contract and she doesn't stay with you for the year, then you will be banished out of your realm and be locked inside the northern realm for eternity."

There was a slight warning voice in his head, telling him not to take this bet, especially not after all the work he had done, but Cillian couldn't let Cali be lost to Gootch and the netherworld forever. He had to take the risk. Still, the idea of giving up plans of ruling it all and having to be stuck as his sister's neighbor was a bit off-putting.

He liked to be able to come and go as he pleased between time and the other realms. Would he give up all that freedom and power to build a shack next to a bunch of hairy forest apes and his sister?

"Deal," Cillian stated.

So, apparently, he would. The thing was, Cillian was pretty positive that he couldn't lose this bet. Cali had always fallen for him.

And fallen out of love for you too, remember that.

At least he could remedy that, by reminding her of who he was.

“Not so fast, my friend,” Gootch chortled. “I have some conditions.”

“Name them,” Cillian growled.

“You can't win her over by revealing her past connection to you and you can't fuck her into submission either. I know you've tried that before. You can't possess her or bed her unless she begs you to. She has to ask you to claim her. I know sex with a wraith is powerful magic, so I don't want you using some kind of other influence on your little pet.”

“So I can't mate with her. And by mating you mean, penetration?” Cillian hated discussing this with Gootch, but what choice did he have? There were other ways to seduce Cali into staying with him, but he had to make sure that Gootch didn't twist it that way.

“Correct. Until she begs for it, no planting your seed in her womb.”

Cillian tried to hide the smile of satisfaction. He might not be able to make love to her like he'd always done, but at least it wasn't completely off-limits. He could pleasure her other ways, but once she asked for it, then she was his.

“So?” Gootch asked. “Do we have a deal?”

Cillian clenched his fists, his nails elongating and biting into the flesh of his palms. “Very well.”

Gootch tried to clap his short stubby arms together, but it didn't work. It was like watching a tyrannosaurus rex try to clap. “You have a year to make her stay. And it starts now. If I were you, I'd go claim her. The clock is ticking.”

The contract appeared in front of him and he took it, tucking it into his coat.

“Where is she now?” Cillian asked.

“At the hospital. Her soon-to-be ex-husband had her committed, she was going on about selling her soul to save him, begging him to stay with her because of her sacrifice.” Gootch grinned, his eyes flashing red. “She was hoping, I suppose, to convince him to stay. Or she was hoping that I would convince him to stay with her, but all she asked of me was to save his life. I did that. Now, her husband thinks she’s lost her mind and is having her institutionalized. Apparently, mental illness runs in her family. Or so he says.”

Cillian spun on his heel and left Gootch’s and went straight back to his realm, where he could find her through his orb. Unlike other magical beings, he didn’t rely on the portals, but he still needed to be in his own realm to transport himself and see where he was going. He’d need a portal to bring her here though, and he hoped she was in the northern realm.

Last he checked, she was, but then again, he didn’t know she had married and was surprised when she’d sold her soul.

None of his little minions said anything as he stormed his way through his own palace, straight to his looking orb to see where she was. And Gootch was right, she was being strapped down to a hospital bed and injected with something. She was terrified, betrayed, hurt.

It enraged him.

He pulled out the contract and read it all over. It was fairly straightforward. Cali had sold her soul to Gootch to save her dying husband, and Gootch wouldn’t collect unless her husband was killed, or if her husband left her. By having Cali committed and telling her it was over, Cali’s soul belonged to Gootch. At least now, Cillian could kill her ex, but that would come later.

Cillian rolled up the contract and placed it in his vault, where he kept most of his valuable documents, promissory notes and other items. He'd look it all over later. Right now, he had to deal with getting Cali out of the hospital and back here.

And unfortunately, to do that, she was going to have to make another deal with the devil.

Him.

She was angry and beyond hurt.

Emotionally crushed would be the proper term.

Only she couldn't say that she was, because her husband had slipped her something that made it almost impossible to speak coherently. This man she loved, that she literally sold her soul to save, had used her.

Had drugged her.

All those times she sat next to him during rough chemotherapy treatments, bathed him, held a bucket for him while he was sick and cleaned him up after. Everything. She thought he was her heart and soul. So much so, she sold her own soul to save him and now he was having her committed?

And she couldn't even explain herself.

She couldn't argue with him.

And the tox screen—he'd said she used these drugs because she was addicted. They believed him too, which is why she was under a twenty-four watch.

This was not the man she fell in love with. As they strapped her down on a bed, wrapping lambskin around her wrists, she realized that he wasn't the man she thought he was. She'd been duped all along.

Which wasn't new.

She'd been used all her life.

Her parents were never nice to her. They had their own mental health issues that saw them in and out of hospitals, and she'd spent her whole life people pleasing and taking care of them. They both got cancer eventually and died. Then she met Simon and he swept her off her feet. Their romance was a whirlwind and he was a gentleman, telling her that they'd be together for the first time on their wedding night. They got married and then he explained he had cancer too and the meds made him impotent and sterile. She'd been devastated. It meant no children, she'd been crushed and deceived. She almost left him then, but he was sick and she couldn't leave him. She had to help him battle the disease.

Simon was always grateful. Even as it got worse and there was no hope.

He had pancreatic cancer. She'd fallen in love with Simon because he was the first person to ever be truly kind to her.

She was a fool.

All he wanted her for was a caretaker. She saw that now. He used her like her parents did.

Then that demon came, promising a cure in return for her soul. Simon begged her to sign that contract so that she'd have a life with Simon. A family. All of her dreams, because that's all she ever wanted. Simon promised her so much, if she only made the

deal. There was no threat to her soul because he'd be with her forever.

Peace, love and happiness. Everything she'd been denied.

There was an ache in her heart, dreams that she dreamed, of someone who adored her, but was always taken away from her. A face that terrified her, yet she yearned for. She thought, when she met Simon, he was the face.

She'd had those dreams for years and they felt like fragments of past lives, that's why she believed that Simon was the one.

However, her ultrareligious parents said past lives were a sin. Soulmates weren't real. Even thinking of that or anything out of the ordinary meant she was destined for hell. The thing was, it was all real and she was headed straight for there anyways. Her soul was doomed. Simon had broken the contract by leaving her. He got his cure. Then to tell the doctors she was having a breakdown. Then he lied, saying he didn't know about the contract or how she sold her soul.

Now, as she lay in the room alone, staring up at the tiled ceiling of the hospital, she just wanted to scream. Only she couldn't. Everything in her system numbed her.

Why didn't the doctors see that her husband had drugged her? She wasn't addicted to medication. Why did no one believe her?

The room changed and it felt like she was spinning, like she was being pulled away. She was no longer in the original room. It was like she had moved, somewhere dark.

Had she drifted off again?

This was all so wrong.

Maybe hell is a better alternative?

“Not really.”

Cali startled at the voice that appeared out of the shadows of the room. He was dressed in black leather, his skin so pale that it was glowing. Her heart skipped a beat when she looked at him, her eyes locking with those glowing eyes that gleamed in the darkness, and there was a sense of familiarity there.

It reminded her of a face she'd seen, but also not.

Instinctually, her body reacted to him like she knew his touch. Craved his touch, actually.

Where did he come from?

How did I not see him there?

“You're drugged, pet,” he answered, coming to stand by her bed. His hands, which reminded her slightly of claws, wrapped around the side of the hospital bed where she was chained. His nails were black. It was terrifying.

I don't want to go to hell.

She needed to escape. She wanted to scream.

Something.

“Hello?” she cried out, finally finding her voice.

“Hello?” a female voice responded. Instantly, the moment that other woman

responded, the figure by the bed disappeared, like a whirlwind of smoke.

“I don’t know where I am,” Cali responded, weakly. “I’m tied down.”

There was no response from the other woman, but she could hear muffled voices in the hall, beyond the doorway, and then there was a flash of energy rippling in the air. As if there was a power outage, and she could feel something heavy in the atmosphere.

It was almost if something was changing, not for the worse, but for the better.

“You need to remember,” the male creature’s voice whispered in her mind.

As he said it, her body stiffened, like she was about to have a seizure. She hadn’t had a seizure in a long time, but she remembered the feeling well. A bunch of images flashed through her mind. Different places, different points in time, but the one constant that remained in all the images was him.

Only, it couldn’t be. The man she had fragmented dreams about and memories of wasn’t some kind of lurking demon with glowing eyes. He’d been human and loving. There didn’t seem to be anything good about the creature from the shadows.

“Parts of me are good, pet,” he responded, reading her erratic thoughts.

He reappeared then. Her body relaxed. The shadows didn’t do him justice. Her mind was fabricating something far more sinister. Yet, she still had an inkling he was slightly dangerous.

“Oh, but I am,” he cooed.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

“I can’t do that. You belong to Gootch, remember? You sold your soul to him.”

A sob welled up in her throat. “That was a mistake. I don’t really believe in those things.”

“I think you do.”

“I wasn’t supposed to that do. Like I said, it was a mistake.”

The creature grinned. “Indeed it was. For you. Your husband, well, he got his life spared now, didn’t he? Only he didn’t keep his end of the bargain.”

A tear slid from her eyes. “So you’re some kind of minion that’s come to collect, aren’t you?”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing. “I’m not a minion. I’m a wraith.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference, pet, is that I can arrange a new deal if you’re interested?”

“A new deal with another devil? I don’t think so.”

“Think very hard on that,” he said, coming closer to her. “With Gootch, you face a life of eternal damnation. With me, you have an out.”

“An out?” she asked.

“Indeed.”

“What are the terms?” And she couldn’t believe she was asking that.

He nodded. "All I need from you is a year. With me. As my mate. You stay in my realm the year and then you're free."

"Free?" she asked. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it."

"So, your mate..."

"In every way." The way he smiled at her sent a zing of something through her. A ripple of pleasure. Not that she knew what pleasure felt like. She was still a virgin.

A year with a wraith? Giving her body to the demon?

It was better than her soul and suffering for all eternity.

Is it?

"If you can remain in my realm for a year, with no contact with the outside world, save for a day every three months, then you can have your soul and your freedom." With a flourish, a contract appeared out of thin air. "All that's required to seal this new deal is your blood."

She was doomed anyway. Maybe with this, she could be eventually free and, when she started her new life, she'd be smarter and be more careful about who she interacted with.

Cali nodded. "Okay. I'll sign it."

Instantly, the restraints melted away and she was able to sit up. He took her hand in his. She thought it would feel scaly or cold, but instead it was warm and felt familiar.

She extended her index finger and he pricked the tip with his nail, which grew slightly longer, like a talon. It stung, but she placed that drop of blood on his contract.

The moment the blood hit the contract, it began to glow, and it felt like her soul was being tethered to it. Just like before. There was a flash of light and then the contract disappeared and it was just her and her wraith mate standing there.

“You’ve made the right decision, Cali. Now, come and I’ll show you to your new home.” He extended his hand and what looked like a vortex began to swirl and distort her perception of the room. It was a swirling whirlpool of energy and red light.

“I don’t even know your name, or are you like Rumpelstiltskin and I’m supposed to guess?” It was a bad attempt at a joke to try to mask her nerves.

The wraith scoffed. “As if I’m as amateurish as Rumpelstiltskin. Please. You, my dear wife, can call me Cillian.”

A shiver of knowing ran down her spine as one of those weird déjà vu moments washed through her.

“Cillian,” she screamed as a group of people dragged her from her log home deep in a bramble wood forest. Only Cillian didn’t appear.

He’d said he’d come, but he didn’t.

“She’s calling out her devil,” someone shouted.

“Burn her at the stake,” another shouted.

“No,” Cali screamed, but she was being tied down and could feel the heat, smell the smoke. “Cillian!”

Cali shook that thought away. She'd had that nightmare before. Instead, she took a deep breath. "How can I trust you?"

"You can't."

And before she could say anything else, his arm slipped around her waist and guided her into the portal.

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He'd never brought a human to his realm before.

Well, not willingly.

Several of the goblins running around were at one time his siblings, but they were only half human and most of them didn't have a chance at surviving in the mortal world. Some didn't even make it to the mortal world. His father really wasn't the best human and Cillian had taken care of that shortly after Aoife was born.

It was never particularly nice killing one's father, but it had to be done.

His mother was no better. She was a full-fledged banshee and an evil, coldhearted harpy, but he couldn't kill her.

She was slightly more powerful than him.

Regardless of all that, he wasn't shocked that Cali had fainted as they passed through the portal, or what humans liked to call the veil, into his realm. Red guided portals, or evil portals, as his brother-in-law Adam had called them, often didn't mesh well with mortals. The moment they passed through, Cali's knees gave out and she fell into his arms. He'd been prepared for that.

He'd caught her and carried her away from the portal, across the stone bridge that led straight to his tower. She was light as a feather and if his heart wasn't so cold and hard, he might've melted having her in his arms again. He'd pictured this moment a

few times.

As much as he dared himself. He was careful of his thoughts so no one knew his weakness, which was, of course, her.

Gootch had apparently known, because why else would he have made the deal and expected Cillian? Gootch didn't usually go for deals like the one he made with Cali. The sack of shit was up to something and he'd deal with him later. Right now, he had a year to win a bet, so he could keep Cali's soul, his realm, and make his plans become reality.

As he glanced down at her, his pulse began to race. Her long dark lashes fluttered, her luscious pink lips parted, and as he cradled her close, he could still drink in the subtle scent of heather.

Honey and heather.

Reincarnation was funny. Souls were reincarnated all the time, but they didn't always come back the same. They sometimes came back as a different gender, different species. They looked different and never retained their memories. This Cali, this version, was the same as she'd always been. And the memories of their lifetimes were locked in her brain as core memories.

There were so many instances, so many moments in time when he'd picked up her lifeless body, too late to do anything to save her, and he just held her. Each moment that she was snatched away from him, his heart hardened just a little bit more.

There was a quaint little movie about a vampire who talked about crossing oceans of time, and that's what he'd been doing for so long. Always losing her. It was a conspiracy, he was certain of that, but then she'd returned to him in this proper timeline.

Finally.

All he had to do was wait for the perfect moment.

And part of that was manifesting this perfect moment was getting his sister to overthrow her mother, mate with a sasquatch, overthrow King Tiene, and allow the northern realm to be ruled by a democracy. Protected by blood magic.

With all that chaos going on, no one had noticed Cillian working to make it so he could have Cali. So he could overthrow Death, allow magic and monsters to mingle again, and keep Cali forever.

It was forbidden for a wraith to take a mortal mate. Breeding happened, but claiming a mate for eternity, binding a mortal soul to his damned one, that had been against all laws.

Until now, when there was nothing really guiding the world.

Magic was creeping back into existence and it would be only a matter of time before the veil would be shattered, when mortals and monsters and magic would meld once more. The only thing he hadn't counted on was Cali bargaining her soul away to Gootch.

That almost ruined all his carefully thought-out plans. Which is why he suspected Gootch knew.

Of course, bargaining away of his realm had been hard, but he had no doubt that he could keep her here for a year. He was certain he could win her over, and then she'd never want to leave. At least here, he could keep her safe and eventually, he would figure out how to keep her forever.

That was the point of all his planning and manipulation in the magical realms, to get to this point where he could bring her to safety and make her his. Certain things would have to adjust because of this contractual monkey wrench, but he could make it all work.

Cillian glanced down at her in his arms and his breath caught in his throat. It wasn't often that he was moved, but seeing her made it all so real. Even though he had been the one traveling through time, it still felt like an eternity that he'd waited for this moment.

And he had to the contract to prove it.

A goblin, he didn't know who, skittered in front of him and Cillian snarled, making it clear to his minions that he didn't want to be disturbed. It would take Cali some time to wake up and then process what happened to her. He didn't need them hanging around to frighten her.

Any of his minions that disobeyed him would feel his wrath for a very long time.

He raced up the twisting staircase to his room. Or at least, the room that would be hers. Cillian didn't sleep, not really. He had built this place for her, years ago, because he was certain that she would one day become his.

That he would finally defeat the strange fate that wanted to part them, and he would have her. Rules be damned. He laid her down on the velvet-covered bed, her dark-brown hair spread around her like a halo.

All he could do was watch her, just in awe that she was here, with him. Her reached out and gently touched her, revelling in her warmth. He let his finger trail over her soft, supple lips.

Moonlight made it clear for him to spot her. She was running in the darkness and he appeared in front of her, enraged she was putting herself at risk.

“Cillian,” she panted. “How did you...”

“What’re you doing out here?” he demanded, shaking her. He’d lost her way too many times and running around at night on a moor was not safe. “A proper lady shouldn’t be running around on the moors unaccompanied. There are highwaymen, thieves.”

“My father says I cavort with demons,” she whispered. “Are ye the devil?”

Cillian smiled slowly, reaching out to touch her cheek and running his fingers over her soft skin. “Aye.”

She smiled, blood blooming in her cheeks. “I am not scared.”

“You should be,” he whispered ferociously, pulling her closer. “I’m no good.”

“I know who you are. I’ve been here before. Loved you before. I will not let them part us this time around.” Cali laid a hand on his chest. “Your heart beats. You are not a monster.”

“Only for you,” he growled and he kissed her, sinking in the warmth of her arms, her love. A shot ripped through the air, striking her in the back, her blood spilling out over the blue satin of her empress gown.

“No,” he screamed.

Cillian stepped back, hating the memory that came to him. One he’d thought he locked away.

He reached out and ran his fingers through her hair to ground himself and chase away those nightmarish memories of a time she was ripped from him. Touching her head, he could see inside her mind. A flash of an erotic dream she was having. It was him, though blurry. It was a repressed memory of one of their shared moments in time.

A very heated moment.

Her naked underneath him, his mouth on her pussy, tasting her. His blood heated to an inferno, his cock hardening against the confines of his tight leather pants. That was a memory he was all too willing to recreate.

Her eyes fluttered opened, her gaze locking with his. There was a pink flush to her cheeks and he could feel her hot breath on his skin as he hovered over her. No words were said, not that he could formulate them at this moment, which was strange for him.

As much as he wanted to be with her, he couldn't tell her anything, he couldn't have her. She had to want to come to him. And he wasn't going to scare her to death by pouncing on her.

Reluctantly, he pulled away, when all he wanted to do was be with her, to keep her pinned to this bed and make her scream with pleasure. To make her forget everything else so that she would stay with him, but that wasn't the terms of the deal.

He couldn't do that.

This was a game he had to play. A very careful game.

"Where am I?" she asked, scooting up to a sitting position. The flush of arousal from her dreams still stained her creamy skin.

“My realm.”

“Hell?” she asked, her voice trembling.

Cillian rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Do I look like a demon to you?”

“Yes,” she said bluntly.

A smile twitched on his lips and he glanced in the mirror that was in the corner of his room. His pale skin, his dark eyes, his pointed ears—he could see it. At least his horns were hidden. Those only unleashed when he was angry.

“Well, I suppose you have a point, but no, you’re not in hell. You’re in my realm. It’s part of the underworld, but it’s neither here nor there.”

“You rule an entire realm?” she asked.

“Mine. Yes. Each wraith has their own little niche that borders around what you mortals like to call hell and heaven, though it’s a bit more complicated than that. I’m the only one with a realm, however.”

“Well, go on. Explain it to me.” Cali crossed her arms.

Seriously? She wanted an explanation now?

“I think that will wait for another day.”

Cali tucked her knees under her. “So, I have to stay here. What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re my mate,” he stated.

“I’m sorry, that’s not much of a job description.”

Cillian tried to suppress the smile. Her dry wit and sarcasm survived through the lifetimes. “You do have fire. I’m glad to see it. You let your husband walk all over you.”

Red bloomed in her cheeks. “I suppose you know everything about me.”

Oh. How little you know.

“I know enough,” he answered carefully. “Your parents treated you badly and expected you to take care of them. Good thing they weren’t your real parents.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“You didn’t know?” He did find that curious. He thought she would’ve known that she wasn’t biologically related to the people who raised her. She’d been put up for adoption, her mother a pregnant teenager who was told that Cali had died by Cali’s biological grandparents. She had then been sold. As much as people didn’t want to believe in a baby market, it happened.

“No. Apparently I didn’t,” she snapped, her voice trembling slightly. “You’re quite the harbinger of bad news.”

“I am not a harbinger. I have a half sister who is, though.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Look, my apologies if I was a little blunt with that information. For what it’s worth, your real mother, she loved you and she doesn’t know you’re still alive.”

“She’s still alive?”

“Indeed. Though she has other children, she thinks of you often.” He hoped that eased the sting of his blunder.

It apparently didn’t.

Tears welled up in Cali’s eyes. “Not that it makes much difference now. I’m trapped here, aren’t I?”

“For a year, but remember, you do get one day every three months to leave.”

“So, I could see her?”

He pursed his lips together, frustrated. “Yes, but you only have a day. Just a day. You return to me at nightfall.”

“And if I don’t?” she asked.

“Our contract is broken and you go to Gootch, where, I’m sorry, then you won’t have a life. Your soul will be tormented for all eternity.” It was only partly the truth. What Cillian didn’t tell her was that he would lose everything as well. He wasn’t one for trusting too much and he was putting an awful lot of trust in her. Something he had never done, even during all her reincarnations. He wanted to, but never did, it was hard thing to do. Trust meant a loss of power and he loved his power.

The banshee who had birthed him had been a harridan. Or rather, she was, and his father, well, Cillian had taken care of that problem. Especially after his father wanted to do away with Aoife right from the moment their father learned she had magic, so he could claim her powers for his own. Aoife was the only half sibling Cillian stood up for because he needed her, but with parents like he had, Cillian had learned to fend

for himself.

Period.

Yet, he had agreed to this deal with Gootch. He was still trying to figure that one out himself as well. This was a monumental thing he was doing, putting his faith in Cali.

“And if I do what you say, come back to you and stay with you for a year, then I’m free?” Cali asked.

“Yes. Those were the terms we agreed to.”

“Seems easy enough,” she mused. “I can last a year, then leave.”

He grinned. “Of course, if you want to leave after that year, that is.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Cillian stalked toward her and then brushed his knuckles down the side of her face, letting his fingers trail over her flushed, sensitive skin, enjoying the gooseflesh his touch left there. “Perhaps you’ll enjoy being my mate.”

Cali swallowed hard. “Doubtful. It’s a deal though, and I stick to my word.”

Cillian scoffed in disbelief. “Humans never do.”

“I won’t double-cross you.” And there was something in her voice that made him think he could believe her. That she was true to her word on this.

“You’re making the right decision,” he said. “My way offers you freedom at the end. Breaking the contract you have with me only leads to your ruination.”

“I understand.” Their gazes locked and the blood in his veins heated. All he wanted to do was hold her again. Unlock her memories, let her know that they could finally be together, that she didn’t have to go through this whole turmoil of reincarnation, that everything he had been doing up until this point insured that he could have her for eternity.

It’s why he was doing all he could.

It was all for her.

Only, he couldn’t tell her that. He couldn’t. If he did, he would lose his realm.

He would lose everything, including her.

“So, am I prisoner in this room? What do I do? I’m not one for just sitting still.”

“There is a library,” Cillian said. “There is a garden. Whatever you desire, I can make happen. At night, though, you belong to me.”

A shiver of dread, but also excitement that Cali couldn’t quite explain, ran down her spine.

“At night, though, you belong to me.”

There was a dark promise laced in those words and though she should be terrified, it actually kind of gave her a secret thrill. She found it titillating, probably more than she should.

Something is seriously wrong with me.

Cillian grinned at her, slowly, his dark eyes seeming to glow. “There is nothing

wrong with you. It's very natural for you to feel this way. You have dreamt of me, haven't you?"

Her throat tightened, her mouth going dry. "What do you mean?"

"I can read your mind, Cali. I know that you've had dreams of me."

"I've never seen you before," she murmured.

"Ah, but it's me in your dreams. I see snippets of them in your mind. Erotic dreams." He took a step closer and touched her face, his fingers surprisingly warm as they traced her jaw, sending a ripple of pleasure through her. Her breathing became erratic, her pulse pounding in her ears at his touch.

"How can I have erotic dreams. I haven't..." Her face flushed with heat, embarrassed about her admission that she was about to tell him she was a virgin.

"Pet, I know everything." His face hovered above her, his lips mere inches from hers. His hands drifted down her neck and she could feel the slight curve of his fingers on her throat, on her jugular, and it sent a rush of adrenaline through her. He could crush her throat, but somehow, she knew he wouldn't. It was dangerous and thrilling.

He could kill her, but she had this deep instinct that told her that Cillian wouldn't. That she was safe with him. Just like the man in her dreams.

"I..." She trailed off again, not sure what to say, uncertain of these feelings flowing through her. He turned her on. Completely. It was as if she had no control over her body when he was near, like her body knew him. And knew what she wanted.

"You know instinctually what to do. Your body knows what it craves," he whispered against her ear, his breath on skin. He was reading her thoughts again.

“And what’s that?” she asked breathlessly.

“Pleasure.”

Cillian’s lips pressed against hers, light at first, but it sent a flush of heat through her, like liquid fire. Something she had never felt before, and she melted. His kiss deepened and she sank against the mattress, his body over hers. She opened her legs, his body resting between her thighs. It seemed familiar, like she’d been here before. An ache, a longing for that pleasure that he said she would crave built deep in the pit of her stomach, and she wanted to know what it was like to be possessed, to be taken, to be fucked. She’d pleased herself before, but she didn’t want that. It seemed dull compared to being taken by this wraith. She wanted to know what that pleasure he promised, the one her body craved so desperately, felt like and right now she didn’t care if she gave that away to this demon.

“Master,” a voice hissed.

Instantly, the kiss ended and Cillian leapt to his feet, spinning around. His skin changed, pebbling and turning grayish in color, like he was erupting into something else. His claws elongated and horns sprouted from his widow’s peak.

“What?” he growled, in a voice that was deep and almost animalistic.

The creature, which looked sort of like a nonfuzzy puppetlike creature, cowered, its beetle black eyes glittering with fear. “The orb. It summons.”

Cillian’s demeanor changed, his horns retreating, his claws retracting. He ran his hands over his head, smoothing back his long black hair. “Very well. Leave, Honk.”

Honk, the pathetic little creature, scuttled off, shutting the door that neither one of them had heard open, but she could hear it shut with a large thud. A finality. An

unfulfilled ache left gnawing inside her.

Wait, did he just call that creature Honk?

She stifled a chuckle.

Cillian looked at her amused. “What is so funny?”

“Its name is Honk?”

“Yes. That’s what they chose. There are so many of them about, I don’t name them all, but Honk is my right-hand goblin.”

“I see. So you’re leaving now?”

“I’m sorry, pet, I am being summoned. You have the freedom of this castle. I will make sure that Honk is at your beck and call.”

Cali licked her lips, her body still thrumming with excitement, but also mixed with fear at how quickly he had changed, because for one moment she had forgotten he was something from the underworld and she was a prisoner here, but also at the absurdity of the goblin.

“Okay,” she squeaked out.

“Perhaps Honk will bring you something to eat and drink?” Cillian offered, his voice suddenly soft and tender.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. I will see you later.” He turned and marched out of the room, the big heavy

wooden door just swinging open for him, he didn't even have to do anything. When he said this was his realm, it truly was. The door slammed shut again. Everything cowered beneath him, but it was at that moment that Cali decided she wouldn't.

He may appear like a monster, but she wasn't going to be scared of him.

It completely sucked that she was trapped here for a year, save for one day a month, just like a modern-day Persephone. Only, Cillian wasn't Hades. She straightened herself and approached the door, worried that she wouldn't be able to open it, but it opened freely, just as it had opened for Cillian.

She peered out into the darkened stone hallway that seemed bare. The only sound was flames from torches burning, the crackle of fire echoing against the stone.

"Hello?" she called out, unsure.

"Yes, mistress," Honk hissed, scuttling out from the shadows.

She jumped back slightly. "Um, maybe something to eat?"

Honk bowed. "Right away, mistress."

The creature disappeared into the darkness, its hooves clicking against the stone, and Cali stood there, trying to see through the shadows. As she tried to do that, a shudder ran down her spine and she thought that maybe she shouldn't be standing out here alone, as if she wasn't safe. She headed back into Cillian's bedchamber, and there was a small table and a single chair on the balcony where there wasn't one before. She cautiously approached the table and a little covered tray appeared out of thin air with a tall glass of what looked like a rose wine.

Her stomach growled, because she couldn't really remember the last time she ate.

With what had happened with Simon, everything had been a blur and happened so fast. The rational part of her brain told her she probably shouldn't be trusting anything that appeared out of thin air, but really this whole day was kind of surreal and she was freaking hungry.

She sat down in the chair and lifted the lid to the covered tray. Her most favorite meal in the world was there, fettuccine Alfredo with little pink shrimps floating in the creamy parmesan garlic sauce, and then she forgot all about where she was and just enjoyed the meal in peace and quiet. For the first time in a long time, she just felt at ease, which again was kind of weird, given where she was.

Lust was still burning in Cillian's veins. It was like hellfire and it burned white hot. Unlike others in his realm, he really didn't go looking to slake his desires elsewhere. Sure, he had the odd dalliance, but not for some time. Since he met Cali, no one else compared, but there was that deal, she had to come to him freely or everything would be lost. He had to regain control on his lust for her.

Everything had to be controlled. She had to beg for him before he took her. However, it didn't mean he couldn't pleasure her in other ways. Gootch only thought of him taking her virginity, which was so tempting, but he would wait until she gave it to him. And that was powerful magic.

There was a game to be played and he was going to win it. If he didn't, all would be lost. A fiery passion brewed under her surface. She may be a virgin in this reincarnation, but the memories of their times together were still very much imprinted on her soul.

Damn Gootch for imposing all these strict rules on the bet.

He would have to go for a swim later in some cold, cold water. Maybe he'd leave and go to his sister's realm and take a dunk in that lake. He'd seen the unattached bushmen do that from time to time.

As he entered the throne room, the orb glowed a golden fiery color as it spun around, floating in the air. Something was happening. He had a lot of plans to bring the veils crashing down and it all centered around his brother-in-law's family and them finding

their mates. Every time a nonmagical and a magical being came together, it weakened the tight grip on the worlds. Soon everything would be melded.

Just like it was supposed to be.

Cillian waved his hand over the orb and a human female's face lit up in the sphere. She had red hair, a smattering of freckles, and as Cillian studied her more closely, she had a completely wiped mind.

"Interesting," he murmured.

Spinning the orb with another wave of his hand, he saw she was imprisoned in Tiene's dungeon. She had been for years and he couldn't help wonder why Tiene was holding a human hostage in the elven realm. It was no secret that Tiene despised humans, but when he did take them, it was for not for good purposes. As the orb continued to show him more and more, it eventually showed him the face of Caleb the sasquatch.

His brother-in-law's brother. Third born.

So, this was the missing female who had a hold on Caleb's heart.

Cillian had always had a soft spot for Caleb because he understood the pain of losing someone you loved. Although, he couldn't really commiserate with the Canadian yeti, because Caleb would be annoyed Cillian knew the truth of the painful secret Caleb had been hiding. As the orb finished showing Cillian what he was seeking, he saw the young woman caring for a small child. One that had features of Caleb and her. Sasquatch and human.

So, there was a child?

No wonder Tiene had stolen Caleb's mate.

This was all interesting information.

"Who is that?"

Cillian spun around, and the orb went dark. Cali stood in the doorway, with Honk nervous behind her, wringing their hooked fingers and their button black eyes wide with fear.

"Why is she here?" he snarled at Honk.

"Sire, you said she had freedom," Honk squeaked.

Cillian growled and kicked Honk, making the little goblin squeal in pain. "Be gone with you!"

Cali frowned. "That was mean."

"So?" Cillian snapped. "You shouldn't be here."

"Well, then you should've told Honk that. They were just doing what I asked them to do."

Cillian grunted and crossed his arms. "Why are you here? Why did you come find me?"

"I was looking for you. You've been gone some time." She looked over his shoulder at the now dark orb. "So, are you like some kind of peeping Tom or something? Do you have women locked away in a dungeon, because if you do..."

“I am not a peeping Tom,” Cillian snapped, impatiently. “Nor do I lock up women in my dungeon. I was checking in on the woman for someone else.”

“Who?”

“That’s none of your concern.” He really didn’t want to get into the explanation of the northern realm or King Tiene or any of that. All he wanted to do was win the bet, break down the veils, oust his mother and grandfather, and bind Cali to him for all eternity. Was that too much to ask?

Frustrated, he wandered to the darkened orb and put it away. He hoped Cali would leave, but she didn’t. She lingered.

“Was there anything else?” he asked, barely glancing over his shoulder.

“Well, I had dinner. I guess I’m trying to figure what else I do until nightfall. You said I had my freedom until night and then I belonged to you.”

It was the belonging to him that ignited the fire in his veins again.

Patience.

“I could summon Honk and they can take you exploring.”

“I’d rather you showed me your realm. No offense to Honk, but they’re a bit skittish, though now I understand why. You’re kind of a jerk.”

Cillian was confused. “You want me to show you around? I’m not a tour guide.”

“No, apparently you’re very busy, watching people,” she replied back sardonically.

He sighed. “Very well. Let’s go then. Perhaps I’ll leave you stranded in my labyrinth for the rest of the day and then you won’t continue to pester me.”

“Of course you have a labyrinth. Do you happen to have a bog of eternal stench too?”

He could tell she was half joking, but he got the gist of it. He’d seen that movie and he knew what she was referring to.

Cillian crossed his arms. “I’m not a goblin king. I’m a wraith.”

“What’s the difference? Honk is a goblin and calls you sire...so technically you’re a goblin king.”

He glared at her, and a small devious smile curled at the corner of her luscious lips. She had a point, but he really didn’t see the humor in it.

Not at all.

Cillian quickened his pace along the stone corridors, but she kept up. Honk and all his other little minions had disappeared, which was good. He was in a foul mood and honestly, if he saw one of them, he might do some harm to them, but then again, most likely not. For all his whinging on being cruel and coldhearted, he cared for Honk. That’s why Honk resided in the castle and had a name.

Still, he was annoyed that Honk had brought Cali to him. He didn’t have time for this.

Why couldn’t she just stay in her room and let me get on with my work?

And it was a foolish thought to cross his mind, because when had she ever listened to him?

She crumbled against him, her breathing ragged.

“Devil!” her father shouted, brandishing a musket. “You made me kill my daughter.”

“You shot her?” Cillian growled.

“Aye, she was to marry a duke and you ruined her. You evil, foulmouthed demon.”

Cillian growled and moved swiftly, crushing her father’s mortal neck and tossing him away.

“Cillian,” Cali whispered.

“I’m here.” He held her in his arms, holding her head up, watching the light slip from her eyes. “Why did you not listen to me? I said to stay at your home and not to seek me out.”

“I did not want to marry...that...” she tried to speak. “Only want my devil.”

“Hush,” he whispered.

“Will we see each other again?” She gasped.

“We will.” He stroked her face. Then he heard the banshee wail. His mother, who didn’t know he was her son as this wasn’t his timeline. The only one who knew was his grandsire.

Death.

Cillian glanced up to see the dark form appear. Death raised his scythe, his eyes glowing under his dark hood.

“Please,” Cillian begged. “You take her every time.”

Death chuckled. “You are not in the right time. Go back whence you came. Do not meddle in my affairs.”

“You’re a fiend,” Cillian cursed.

Death took Cali’s soul and she slipped from him. All that was left was the cold and lifeless shell in his arms.

Cillian clenched his fists and tried to calm the erratic beat of his heart, because he didn’t much like thinking about those horrible memories, when she was snatched from him. All the times he’d begged Death to bring her back, to not take her, and it fell on deaf ears. Which was the point of all of this. All his plans. He’d show Death a thing or two.

He’d make Death beg for mercy.

They walked outside of his castle and he stopped, allowing her to catch up.

“You move quickly,” Cali exclaimed, panting.

“My apologies,” he replied. “When I’m angry...I’m not used to having a companion.”

“Companion?” she asked. “I thought I was your mate?”

“And what’s the difference?”

“Well, a mate to me feels forced, and a companion is an equal. Am I your equal?”

“You are indeed.” Against his better judgment, because he didn’t much like showing tenderness, he held out his arm, as a polite gesture. He couldn’t win her over if he was mean to her.

“Thank you,” she said, sounding surprised. She slipped her arm through his and he walked down the drawbridge toward the garden area slowly. Not that it was a garden in a real sense. Nothing grew here.

“Though I wouldn’t really call you an equal, but you’re right about one thing,” Cillian said.

“What’s that?”

“I won’t force you. Ever. You said a mate is forced. I won’t do that.”

She nodded quickly. “I appreciate that.”

“It doesn’t mean that I’m not going to tempt you though.” And that was a promise she could count on. He couldn’t and wouldn’t force himself on her, but seduce her, yes, he had plans for that. He just had to take his time.

He was in such a rush to complete his plan, but he had to remind himself that he had a year. Certain things had to align, and then his plan would come to fruition. There would be no need for him to lose Cali again.

There would be no separate realms.

Everything would be melded together and he’d be the ultimate ruler. And she would be his queen.

When Cillian said something about tempting her, part of her want to quip back, I’d

like to see you try, but she resisted that, because she kind of wanted him to. There was a pull toward him she couldn't quite understand, but then again, there were a lot of things that had happened she was still trying to piece together.

Cali was still reeling. Goblins, finding out she was adopted, that her birth mother still was out there but thought Cali was dead, selling her soul to a demon, being a mate to a wraith. Maybe this was a delusion?

The thing was, some things felt very familiar to her.

Deep down.

Just like all those dreams she'd had her whole life.

Seeing his face. The kiss they shared.

She didn't know Cillian, but part of her felt like she knew him intimately. And that part of her yearned for him. When he'd kissed her before Honk interrupted them, she could have easily given everything up to him, right then. There was an ache buried there.

Half the reason she was able to sell her soul so quickly was because of her virginity. And even though she really knew nothing about magic or whatever, she intuitively knew virgin blood was potent. Why else did fiction writers have vampires crave virgin blood so much?

"You're right. Virgin blood is powerful," Cillian said, not looking at her as they meandered slowly past some horrifying topiaries.

"Don't read my mind," she snapped. "It's intrusive."

“I find it quite entertaining.” He stopped and spun her around, holding her by her upper arms. His fingers dug into her flesh as he stared down at her. Those dark eyes bored into her soul. She should be terrified, but instead she was entranced and she trembled. “You are so very beautiful. And yet, you don’t think you are. You think you’re worthless.”

His voice had softened then. Almost like a lover, and she melted.

No one had really told her she was beautiful before. Except Simon, but she learned all of that had been a lie. He was using her.

Don’t give in, a little voice whispered, but she wanted to give in to him.

“I thought...I thought we were going on a walk?” she asked, trying to change the subject so she didn’t have to think about how she found him so attractive. So tempting. How it could be just so easy to just ask him to her bed.

Damn him.

“Then do it. Ask me.”

Hearing his voice in her head snapped her out of that hedonistic spell she seemed to be under. She pushed him away. “So, you can communicate telepathically too, eh?”

Cillian chuckled and let go of her, but tucked her arm under his and continued the stroll. “Telepathy comes in handy.”

As they passed by some more freakishly horrifying brown and dead topiaries of monsters getting tortured, she snorted. “Why can’t you have a normal garden?”

“What? My goblins trim these bushes. I give them free range.”

“Then they’re deranged,” she muttered. “Can’t you have something nicer?”

He snorted. “Like what? Unicorns? I know unicorns, they’re pompous.”

She stopped. “What do you mean you know unicorns?”

“Why are you so shocked by this? I’m a wraith, you sold your soul, you see little goblins and other little squelches of existence scampering around here. You can’t stretch your mind to other beings like unicorns?”

“I suppose not. I never really thought of it. What other beings are out there?”

“Well, I suppose I should start with the family. My sister is a banshee, or harbinger. Her mother was a witch. My mother is a banshee as well, her father is Death. And my banshee sister is married to a sasquatch.”

She froze in her tracks. “For real?”

“Yes,” he replied with disdain. “She likes them hairy, I suppose. Although, and don’t tell them this, they’re quite intelligent. Then you have elves and fairies and mermaids, krakens...so many species and they exist in a realm that is veiled from the rest of the world.”

“You mean they coexist in our world?”

Cillian snorted. “Our world? You mortals see things so black and white and never really think about what’s beyond.”

“I don’t mean to be rude.”

He gave her the side-eye. “It’s true though.”

Cali rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Okay, well then educate me. Help me see beyond.”

Cillian sighed. “Very well. Some mortals see ghosts, but they don’t really see ghosts either. The veil is precarious and thin. How do you suppose you were able to sell your soul so easily?”

She shrugged. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“There are far more beasties lurking around. One time, we all coexisted quite nicely.”

“When was that? I studied history and I don’t recall that. I mean, there are myths.”

“Ah, but you studied the history that the church and state have controlled for a long time. Think, Cali. Where do you suppose your medieval ancestors, your cave-dwelling cousins, came up with the lore of creatures that go bump in the night? There are tapestries woven of great beasts and unicorns, dragons all through the dark ages. Even old books, written by monks, have ornate pictures of anthropomorphic animals. It’s because before the advent of church and state, the veil wasn’t there. As man sank deep into fear, persecuted and burned their own kind at the stake, shed blood of countless magical and nonmagic beings, my kind disappeared behind a veil of forgotten lore and myth.”

A shiver ran down her spine, because everything he was saying was true. Well, what he was saying about tapestries and folk lore. There were legends scattered through every civilization. Similar legends. Anyone who believed in something beyond what the church controlled was persecuted as a witch. A lot of them were burned at the stake.

The moment that thought crossed her mind, she felt warm. Hot. Her skin felt like it was burning and a strange sensation coursed through her. Everything went dark and

suddenly she heard Cillian screaming her name, but it seemed far away and the flames rose higher and higher around her, with shouts of people screaming.

“Burn her.”

Then her knees buckled, and all went black.

“ W here am I?” Cali murmured. She had no real memory, and as her eyes opened, she could see Cillian hovering over her, a cool cloth against her head. There was a look of concern etched into his face. “Cillian?”

“You had a seizure,” he replied. “I brought you back to bed.”

“A seizure?” It had been a long time since she had one. She was prone to them when she was a child, but she took meds for that. And then it hit her, she didn’t have her meds here, wherever she was. Simon had her committed, and she seriously doubted he gave them her medication, or even told the hospital about it.

Simon probably stole everything of hers.

He probably sold off her meds.

“I take medication, I’m probably due...”

“You don’t need to take the medication,” Cillian stated, bluntly.

“So a wraith is some kind of doctor now?”

Cillian smiled, briefly. “No, but I know you don’t need your meds.”

“And why is that?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” He stood up quickly, walking away from her. His back straight, his arms crossed. He almost looked troubled.

“What?”

He shrugged. “It’s something you have to figure out on your own.”

“That’s bullshit. You know that right?”

Cillian chuckled. “Your meds would be useless here.”

“I had a seizure, clearly I need them.”

His eyes narrowed. “You don’t. You had a reaction to something, but it won’t happen again. I’ve taken care of that.”

Cali sat upright, whipping the cloth off her forehead. “What do you mean by that?”

“I know healers and one owed me a favor.”

“You had some kind of demon, goblin thing mess with my head?” she asked, outraged that he let someone make a choice over her body. Especially in light of what happened with Simon.

Cillian had told her he would never force her, that it was all her decision. All she had to do was stay here a year, save a day a month, and she wouldn’t lose her soul, but that didn’t give him the right to have some other being mess with her mind.

“Demons and goblins don’t heal,” he replied. “It was a seraphim.”

Cali blinked a couple of times. “An angel.”

“Sort of. This one happens to be cut off, and like I said, owed me a favor, which I have now cashed in. Really didn’t expect to use it on you, however.”

“Well, thank you, but I’m still kind of annoyed,” she muttered. Angel or not, she didn’t like stuff being done to her without her knowledge.

Cillian crossed his arms. “I do you a kindness, another kindness I might add, and you’re annoyed?”

“I think I have a right to be a little put out. My ex betrayed me, I was almost committed, I sold my soul, and now my soul belongs to you.”

“You’re not the only one who has put a lot on the line,” Cillian snapped, his eyes flaring with a brief flame of crimson. “I—” His mouth snapped shut.

“You...what?”

“Nothing that concerns you.” With a snap of his fingers, he disappeared from the room.

Cali growled in frustration. Once again, stuck in this bedroom. She’d been healed by a seraphim, who did goodness knows what to her mind, and now she was left with no answers again. It seemed like he was hiding stuff from her.

And why wouldn’t he?

There was something he wasn’t telling her. How could she trust him? And she wasn’t sure what a wraith really did. What occupied his time, besides looking at orbs? She knew a bit about different folklores, like there were obvious things about vampires and sunlight, werewolves and silver bullets, but what did wraiths do? She really didn’t know.

She knew what banshees did.

Was a wraith like a male version of a banshee?

Cillian's world wasn't hell, but it didn't seem to be purgatory either, or one of those levels of hell like in Dante's *Inferno*. It was like being stuck in a void. Like in limbo. It was a place she hadn't even known existed. Not from any legend she'd read or anything.

She got up and wandered back over to the balcony where she'd eaten earlier. The table and chairs were gone, and she walked out to overlook the hideous garden of grotesque topiaries that were carved into really brown and dying looking trees.

The sky was orange, like dusk on a summer day, but there was no wind. Nothing but scurrying sounds as little creatures scuttled across the stone and hard packed dirt. There was a stone maze in the distance that seemed to stretch and bend. And as she leaned over the side of the balcony, it almost seemed like they were inside of an orb.

"Astute observation," a melodic voice said, reading her mind. "Although, if you make it to the center of that labyrinth, you can escape this all."

Cali spun around to see an angelic woman in white standing there. It was as if she was glowing, almost. Was this the seraphim that had healed her? If anyone seemed like a seraphim, she did, and she had just given Cali the location of an exit.

Why though?

"Who are you?" Cali asked.

"Elodi. I'm an elf," she remarked, her violet eyes looking Cali up and down. "Who are you?"

“You can read minds, so I’m sure you know.”

Elodi smiled, but the smile was cold. It didn’t reach her eyes and Cali took a step back, because suddenly, in a realm full of goblins and demons, she didn’t feel particularly safe around this beautiful elf.

Run.

“You are a mortal. That’s all I care to know. You’re really not worth the effort,” Elodi replied with disdain.

“Then why are you here?” Cali asked.

Elodi stepped forward, still smiling that cold, calculating grin that made Cali uneasy. “I’m here to see your master. He was here a moment ago. Did he get bored with his plaything already?”

“I’m not his plaything.”

Elodi rushed at her, gripping her by her hair. Suddenly, that smile and beautiful face morphed into something else, something evil and dark. “I should kill you now, but I cannot.”

“Why is that?” Cali asked.

“Cillian is hiding so much from you. You’re nothing but a pawn in his game. We all are,” Elodi hissed. “Maybe I will kill you after all. A mortal speaking to an elvish princess so flippantly.”

“Elodi!” Cillian growled. It was a deep, guttural snarl, which made Cali tremble, even.

Elodi let go of her hold and stepped away. Cali was relieved, but what had the elf meant by she was a pawn in Cillian's game?

"I didn't mean any harm," Elodi stated. "I was coming to check on her."

"For what reason? I didn't ask you to."

"I heard she was healed by Gotzone," Elodi stated. "I wondered what kind of deal you would've made to gain such favor to have Gotzone heal your...human."

Cali was relieved it wasn't Elodi who had healed her. It was bad enough Elodi could read her mind for that brief moment, but she was glad that the elf hadn't gone deeper into her mind. The idea of that just didn't sit right with her.

Elodi would kill me.

"And since when do I tell any elf, especially Tiene's daughter, my business?" Cillian asked.

Elodi's eyes narrowed, but she still had that simpering smile on her face as she approached him. "Oh, come now, you've told me lots of things."

Cali watched as Elodi sidled up to Cillian, wrapping her arms around his neck and then kissing him, pressing her scantily clad body against him. It made Cali slightly jealous, because she remembered what it was like to kiss him. For a brief moment she had a flare of jealousy that said mine .

And she wanted to rip that blonde bitch out of his arms and maybe try and rip a chunk out of her head. Elodi had tried to do that to her only a moment ago.

Cillian pushed Elodi away with disgust, tossing her, so she stumbled to the ground.

“Keep your claws off of me,” Cillian snarled.

Elodi’s smile disappeared then, as she picked herself up. “You should be careful how you treat the daughter of King Tiene.”

“And the daughter of King Tiene should be careful who and how she associates with others. He’s already lost hold on one realm, it would be bad for you all if he lost his hold on the elven kingdom,” Cillian snarled.

Elodi’s eyes narrowed, her lips pursing together in a line. “It would, but I would be careful as well, wraith.”

“Get out of my sight,” Cillian snarled.

Elodi tossed her hair over her shoulder, her head held high as she exited the room. Cillian followed and then sealed the door with magic, or what looked like magic, because it glowed gold.

Cali didn’t say much as he turned and headed back toward her. The way his body was so stiff and rigid, she knew he was still holding on to a lot of anger. Cali knew she should be terrified by him, but she wasn’t. There was something about him that drew her in. She approached him cautiously and she did what instinctually came to her—she placed her hand on his back to try to comfort him.

Cillian jumped away from her touch, almost startled, and glared at her in disbelief. For someone who liked to touch her, it seemed funny how he was so shocked by the simple act of sympathy.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

“You seemed upset.”

“I am. Angry more than upset, but it still doesn’t explain what you were doing.”

“I was comforting you, letting you know you were okay. Has no one ever shown you affection before?”

Cillian’s eyes narrowed. “Do I seem like a person who had a particularly affectionate mother?”

“No. I suppose not. Actually, I’m having a hard time picturing you having a mother.”

A smile teased on the corner of his mouth, a twinkle in his dark eyes, like she amused him. “I do have a mother in fact, but in reality, she only gave birth to me. I wouldn’t classify her as maternal or caring.”

“Honestly, I’m having a hard time picturing you young.”

“Wraiths mature quickly. I am a year younger than my half sister Aoife, but I was fully grown by the time I hit a year.”

“That’s harsh.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Accelerated puberty. Yikes.”

Cillian hugged with indignation. “I’m not discussing this with you.”

“Well, sorry if you don’t want me to touch you.”

“I never said that, pet.”

“Well, you jumped as if I were poison.”

“As I said, you surprised me. Besides, that’s not what I call a good way to comfort me.” His voice was husky, and the way he devoured her with his gaze made her body tremble in anticipation.

She highly doubted they would be interrupted this time and she wouldn’t mind that in the least.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Oh?”

And before she had a chance to react, she was in his arms and being carried off to bed.

Her body trembled with anxiousness, but also anticipation. The way they had been before, when he had been kissing her and she’d wanted so much more, until they were interrupted.

She’d never done anything before and she was nervous, but Cillian said he’d never force her, and Cali was curious. She quivered as he laid her down on the bed.

“You’re shaking,” he said, leaning over her. “Don’t be frightened. I just want to pleasure you.”

“If I ask you to stop?”

“Yes. I will stop.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Cillian grinned, his dark eyes twinkling. “First, let’s get these clothes off.”

With a snap of his fingers, she was naked, but he wasn't. He still wore his leather pants, but his muscular chest was bare and his long black hair hung loose over his shoulders. It was like something off a romance cover. It made her pulse race. This whole situation was surreal, but she wanted to experience wicked pleasure for the first time. Surprisingly, she didn't feel awkward being naked in front of him.

"You're so beautiful." Cillian leaned over her, running his hands over her body.

Grabbing her hips, he pushed her legs open, kneeling between her thighs.

She trembled, her pulse pounding in her ears.

"Tell me," he said huskily. "Have you ever touched yourself?"

"Yes." Her blood was burning.

"Has a man ever used his tongue on you before?"

"No," she whispered, a coil of pleasure building deep in her belly. "I'm a virgin."

"So? You can make out. You can do things like this."

"No. Um...Simon didn't want to do anything because...his meds."

Cillian leaned over her and kissed her lightly on her lips, his weight heavy between her legs, making her ache with need.

"Well, it was his loss, and I'm going to show you exactly what you've been missing." Cillian ran his tongue down her body, over her nipples, sucking them into hard pearls. It felt so good. His tongue continued its path down over her body, until she felt his hot breath against her inner thighs.

She was shaking with anticipation.

“Spread your legs for me, pet,” Cillian commanded.

She did what she was told, opening her legs wide.

“Yes, that’s exactly how I want you.” His mouth mere inches from her, then his tongue swept up her center, licking her, sending a jolt of pleasure through her.

“Oh God,” she moaned.

His tongue was so hot and wet.

Cillian chuckled. “Yes. Exactly, pet.”

He dragged his tongue up her pussy again, so slow. She rocked her hips, instinctively revelling in the sensation of his tongue teasing her. His tongue circled around her sensitive clit and she cupped her breasts. His tongue slipped inside her, tongue fucking her.

Heat burned through her veins like an endless onslaught, and she could feel that coil of pleasure tighten deep in her belly, until there was nothing she could do but ride the wave as she came hard against his mouth.

The moment she climaxed, a memory of a dream hit her like a flash of light, and it was Cillian’s face, clearly over her, his cock inside her, riding her. It was all so overwhelming. The bed rocked under her before she felt her legs go weak, and she slipped into a deep sleep.

5

This was absolute torture.

Being with her had been amazing, but not being fully with her was painful. It took all of his strength to not make love to her. The taste of her orgasm on his tongue was so sweet. His cock was hard just thinking about how she came on his mouth, her body grinding against him. All he wanted to do was bury himself deep inside her tight little pussy, but he couldn't.

Stupid stipulations.

He watched her all night, sleeping peacefully. Easing himself from the bed, so he didn't disturb her sleep, he watched her as his heart swelled. She was here.

She was home.

With him. And she still desired him. She stood up to him and wasn't afraid.

Only, he couldn't let his heart get overly complacent by letting his guard down. Every time he did that in the past, he'd lost her. And he only had to put up with this for a year. After the year was up, when he won and his realm and Cali were no longer threatened, then all bets were off. She'd be safe and his forever.

He crept from the room, the scent of her still permeating his skin. His cock ached, unquenched need still burning through his blood.

This is getting ridiculous.

Cillian snuck away to his bathroom and the moment he walked in through the doors, the tub filled with hot water, just the way he liked it.

He undressed and sank beneath the warm water. Closing his eyes, he pictured her naked, legs splayed wide on the bed. Her bare pink pussy wet and waiting for him.

He palmed his cock, gripping it, and began to stroke down the hard length of it. The warm water was wet and felt like he was inside her. He quickened the pace of his strokes, grunting as he came in the water.

“Oh,” Cali said, softly.

He turned and saw her standing at the door. A sheet wrapped around her naked body.

“Ah, pet.” He stood up from the bath, wrapping a towel around his waist, not quickly, as he was allowing Cali to drink in the full sight of him naked. “I thought you were asleep?”

“I was, but then...you were gone and I felt scared,” she stammered, her gaze locked on his cock, which pleased him.

He tried to hide the smile of satisfaction.

“Would you like a bath?” he asked, the tub instantly filling with clean water, scented with oils that he knew she would like.

A blush tinged her cheeks. “I would love one but...”

“Ah, pet, there is no reason to be shy. Not with me. Not after I’ve tasted you.”

Cali let the sheet drop and he drank in the sight of her. It made his blood burn with lust. Cali quickly climbed into the tub and slowly sank beneath the bubbles, closing her eyes. Cillian crept to the side of the tub and swirled his fingers in the water, watching her.

So, this is your amusement, eh?" she teased.

"Not completely, but this is very pleasing," he agreed.

"I do have a question." She hesitated, biting her lower lip.

"Why I didn't claim you?" Which was a nicer and less crass way of asking why he didn't fuck her, especially when he very much wanted to.

She nodded. "No one has...well...you know."

He grinned lazily. "You never asked me. A wraith I may be, but I don't need to force myself on women. That gives me no pleasure."

"But reaping souls does?" She teased again, splashing him slightly.

"It's all about power," he replied.

"The root of all evil."

"That's money, pet, and a mortal consequence."

"Souls are currency, are they not?"

He frowned, because she was right and he wasn't enjoying this line of questioning. He stood and, with a snap of his fingers, dressed himself again. "I'll leave you to your

bath.”

As much as he wanted to stick around and drink in the sight of her languishing naked, he didn't want to divulge too much information, because if she knew, her simple mortal mind could be easily read and easily broken. Gotzone the seraphim had pretty much confirmed that when they healed Cali.

As he made his way down to his throne room, Honk came scurrying up the hall in a panic, their beetle black eyes wide and their tuft of hair standing on end.

“Sire, your mother awaits you.”

Cillian groaned. “My mother?”

“The banshee. Yes.” Honk wrung their hands together nervously.

Cillian grunted and balled his fists, but before he opened the throne room door, he turned to a cowering Honk. “Honk, make sure the mistress Cali has all she needs.”

Honk bowed. “Yes, sire.”

Cillian took a deep breath and opened the throne room doors. His mother sat in his chair on the dais, her pointed chin resting on her hand. Her eyes white, without pupils, prevented him from knowing how she was feeling, and her usually flowing silver hair was tied back in a plait.

Aoife's line descended from his mother's sister, so there were some similarities there, but thankfully Aoife and he both took after their human father, bastard that he was. Aoife was nothing like her diabolical witch mother or her great, great, great-aunt, his mother. It's why he tolerated Aoife.

“Mother, what a surprise,” he said sarcastically.

“Oh, come now, I know your imp Honk told you of my presence. We don’t have to exchange pleasantries.”

“Fine. What’re you doing here then, Mother? You haven’t visited me in years.”

She shrugged. “I heard things.”

“What kind of things?” Cillian asked, crossing his arms.

“The human,” his mother hissed, sitting up straight.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His mother’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t play games with me! She’s here, in this realm. Reincarnated once more. There is powerful magic to be had with that kind of bond.”

“Is there?”

“Don’t be coy and flippant with me.” His mother rose off the dais and floated down to him. “You’ve been playing with time, all for a human.”

“You forget, I’m part human too. You had a penchant for your great, great, great-niece’s mate. Remember? So, I suppose, like mother, like son.”

His mother sneered, baring her fangs. “Be careful with the power it yields. You may lose her yet.”

“Is that a threat?” Cillian snarled.

His mother smiled, cold and calculating. “No. Just a warning. You don’t ken what you are playing with, Cillian.” With that final warning, she vanished, turning into vapors and drifting away.

He cursed under his breath. She knew Cali was here and how she was connected to him. His mother’s words were absolutely a threat and he couldn’t help but wonder if it was Gootch or Elodi who had betrayed him?

Either way, it mattered not. He’d seek his revenge and in the end they’d all pay, but for now, he had to protect Cali. He couldn’t lose her again.

Cali was sad, just a for a moment, when Cillian left, and then she was annoyed, because he was so stubborn. Any time she questioned him, just a little too much, he would take off. The conversation would be over. He was so closed-minded.

Of course, the last time a conversation had abruptly ended had been one of the most pleasurable moments of her life. Just thinking about his tongue licking her made her body tingle with anticipation, because she didn’t know how soul-shattering amazing it could be to have that done to her. And then she’d watched him stroking himself, and it had made her throb with need. He said that he wouldn’t claim her unless she asked, and seeing him this morning in the bath and his naked body, it made her want to beg him for it.

Stop thinking about it.

As much as she wished she could lie in this bathwater, that didn’t seem to cool, she was going to turn into a wrinkly prune, and she had decided when she woke, she was going to explore more of this realm. Even on her own.

The little creatures or goblins or whatever scurrying around here seemed to cow to to her just as much as they did Cillian. She actually felt safe in this realm. Although, she

wouldn't go far and she wouldn't go beyond the stone maze, but she wanted to keep busy. She wasn't going to spend a year locked away in Cillian's bedchamber, waiting for her freedom.

She wasn't one for sitting still for long.

Cali got out of the bath, dried herself off and tied back her long hair. Then she pulled on her clothes and walked to the door to do some exploring. The moment the door opened, one of the little goblins jumped from the shadows, causing her to startle.

"My apologies, mistress," it said. "I am here to serve you."

"You're Honk, right?" Cali remembered them from before.

"Yes, mistress. What do you require?"

"I would like to go for a walk. Would you like to show me how to get to your...to the gardens?" Although, she really wouldn't call a bunch of dead brown bushes a garden, but at least it was outside.

"Yes, mistress." Honk nodded vehemently. "Follow. Please."

Honk scurried along the corridor of the bleak stone castle that Cillian called home. It was hard to keep up with them. It wasn't long before she was practically jogging to keep the pace Honk liked to operate at.

"Here, mistress. The gardens." Honk bowed with a flourish as she stepped under an archway to the place where she and Cillian walked around before. The horrible topiaries of anguished mythical monsters, but she guessed in reality they weren't really mythical beings at all.

They were very much real.

Honk kept a pace behind her. She could hear them scuttling along. They were actually kind of cute.

“Honk, did you create one of these topiaries?” She was curious and she also wanted to talk to someone.

“I did,” Honk replied, scurrying up beside her. “This one in fact, mistress.”

It wasn’t one she had seen before. It was a unicorn and didn’t look like it was in too much agony. It was one of the less grotesque ones.

“Oh, the unicorn. You did that?”

Honk beamed at it with pride. “My mother was a unicorn, my father is the same as the master’s, but blood did not mix well and Honk would’ve died had it not been for the master.”

Cali blinked a couple of times. “You were a unicorn human hybrid?”

Honk nodded. “But I could not live. Father was evil human, trying to control magic. I died and killed my unicorn mother.”

There was a hint of sadness in Honk’s little voice, their scaly tail flicking back and forth. There was no way she would guess that Honk was part unicorn, but she never really got a look at them before, and now she could see the subtle elongation of their face, the tiny nub of a horn.

“So, you died and Cillian saved you?” Cali asked.

Honk nodded. “Yes. Saved me, but other half siblings were not so lucky. Some died, lost into the Styx, and then others, he turned because they displeased him. Honk he saved from mother’s dying womb.”

There was complete admiration in Honk’s voice for Cillian, but there was also sadness as they gazed up at the topiary of the unicorn. A longing that she knew now, well. There was always a part of her that longed for a loving and caring mother. Growing up with her ultrareligious zealot parents, she never really felt loved or like she belonged. Now, she knew there was someone out there who thought she was dead, that was mourning her.

Maybe a mother who would love her.

“You can always find out.”

Cali recognized that voice and it sent a ripple of dread down her spine. Honk squealed as if in pain and ran away, completely bolted and left her alone in the presence of the being she had originally sold her soul to. The one Simon had conjured up.

Gootch.

He was brown and moist, like a rotting sponge or slug thing as he slithered across the pavement toward her, leaving a trail of slime.

Her skin crawled, and she backed up against the unicorn topiary, because there was nowhere else to run or turn. She felt trapped, an energy was holding her captive there.

“What’re you doing here?” she questioned, trying to put on some false bravado. Of course, the last time that happened, that elf princess almost tore her scalp off and threatened to kill her.

“Just checking in on an asset,” Gootch replied, and she immediately got the insinuation that he was checking in on her, but she wasn’t his anymore. Her soul belonged to Cillian and she was ever so grateful for that.

“I don’t believe I belong to you any longer,” Cali replied.

Gootch grinned. “For now.”

She didn’t like the way he said that. It sent a chill down her spine, and then she felt a scratch from the topiary, the sting as it sliced through her skin, and she glanced down to see a bead of blood.

Gootch’s eyes lit up as if it were Christmas and he grabbed her arm, painfully. “Virgin blood? So, he is living up to his end of the bargain.”

“Bargain?”

Gootch chuckled, but wouldn’t let go of her. “You don’t realize that he has things at stake do you, or that I wouldn’t have stipulations? He paid the price for you.”

It was a cold slap to the face, but really no surprise, because she signed a deal with Cillian too. “I don’t care. In a year I’m free.”

Gootch let go of his grip on her. “Who says that?”

“Cillian. It was the terms of our contract. He doesn’t demand eternity from me.”

“Oh, he doesn’t, does he?” Gootch chuckled, more like a gurgling sound. “Well, he might not want you, but I can relieve you of your magical blood. Your virginity.”

Cali winced and closed her eyes and could feel Gootch’s fetid breath on her neck.

“Gootch!”

The roar echoed across the courtyard. She opened her eyes to Cillian standing there. His black fingernails had elongated to talons, his eyes burned like red flames, and horns had erupted from his scaly gray skin. It was terrifying, but also a relief. Behind Cillian stood Honk, wringing their hands as they peeked out from behind Cillian’s calf.

Gootch let go of his grip on Cali and moved away. It was then Honk dashed across the courtyard and grabbed her hand, pulling her toward Cillian, and she had no problems being pulled by this little goblin unicorn thing.

“I meant no harm, Cillian. I was just checking in on things. I heard that Cali had found out about her mother and I was going to offer some assistance.”

Cillian snorted. “You mean by tempting her to leave and break the deal?”

Gootch shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“You never said anything about my mother,” Cali snapped back. “You were going to force yourself on me!”

Cillian growled. “She is not yours. She is mine.”

“Only for a short time,” Gootch growled, his shit-like skin glowing a darker shade of brown-black along with his eyes. “When this is mine, I will take her.”

“She is mine,” Cillian roared.

“Then you better relieve her of that virgin blood. Others will want it and you can’t protect her always.” There was a burst of flames and Gootch disappeared.

Cali's heart returned to a normal beat. "Deal?"

Cillian didn't respond, but his nails shrunk back into their nail beds, though his horns were still very prominent. "What were you doing out here alone?"

"I wasn't alone. I had Honk and if it wasn't for them, well...I don't want to think about it." Cali smiled down at Honk. "Besides, you should be nicer to your half brother."

Cillian's eye color returned to normal and he looked at her quizzically, and then down to a cowering Honk. "You told her?"

"Yes, sire. She asked which topiary was mine and I showed her my mother," Honk replied nervously and pointed at the unicorn.

"Huh, I guess I did forget you were part unicorn at one point." Cillian sighed and then walked over to the topiary, staring at it curiously. "Cali, did you bleed on this?"

"I scratched myself." She held up her arm.

"It's growing a flower," Cillian remarked, amazed.

"A flower!" Honk exclaimed with glee. "Sire!"

Cillian rolled his eyes. "Honk, don't get over excited."

Cali found the whole exchange kind of cute. "You need to thank Honk for saving me."

Cillian frowned. "I suppose a thanks is in order, Honk. You did well."

Honk's smile wobbled. "Thank you, sire."

"Now, be gone. Scuttle off somewhere else," Cillian growled.

Honk squeaked and took off.

Cillian continued fingering the flower blooming on the bush.

"You need to be nicer to your siblings."

"I am nice!" Cillian stated. "My shit of a father wasn't so nice. He'd bang anything that was magic."

"Gross. Honk said something about trying to control magic."

"Yes. When my sister Aoife was born, he was going to kill her when she came of age to take her magic, but I took care of him to protect her."

"He's dead?" Cali asked.

Cillian nodded. "Very much so. Like I said, I'm the one who killed him."

For one brief moment she forgot what he was and who he was. He was not a fairy-tale prince. He was cold and very secretive, and yet she was completely drawn to him. She didn't know why, but she was, and then there was the way he pleased her. Although he was mercurial, he did take care of her in his own way.

"Gootch said that others will be drawn to my blood. Is that true?"

Cillian nodded. "Virgin blood is potent. It's why your husband was able to make such a deal with Gootch in the first place."

“Well, then why don’t you just take my virginity and be done with it?” It was an honest question, but one that made the butterflies in her stomach flutter wildly, because who better than Cillian to take her virginity? She wanted him to. He had been so gentle with her last night. Brought her so much pleasure.

She’d be with him for a year and she wanted to give that to him, because the truth of the matter was, there was no one she could really trust and why not hand it over to the wraith who was going to protect her. If there was magic in her untouched blood, she didn’t want it.

Cillian walked toward her slowly. “I do not take. I have told you this. You need to ask me.”

Her pulse was racing wildly and she licked her dry lips, certain with her decision. She didn’t want other beings like Gootch coming around. She didn’t want her blood, her innocence, to be used as a commodity any longer.

She was done with it.

“Ask.”

“Yes,” Cillian replied. “You need to ask. Are you asking me, Cali?”

She nodded. “I am asking you, Cillian. I want you to claim me. I want you to be the first.”

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Cillian couldn't believe she asked him. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to their bedroom. His blood was rushing through his veins with anticipation. With a snap of his fingers, they were naked, both of them. He could feel her tremble in his arms, hear her heart racing.

"Are you sure you want this, Cali?" Cillian asked. "Please, ask me again."

"I want you to take my virginity, Cillian." She kissed him tenderly. "Just be kind to me."

"Of course, pet. Always." He set her on the bed and went down on her again, to make her wet and ready for him. He licked her, to make her ready for him. As much as his burning lust wanted to just bury his cock inside of her tight, warm sheath, he didn't want to hurt her.

He wanted this to last.

Besides, he liked the sweet taste of her. She began to arch her hips and he gripped them, controlling her movements because he didn't want her to come just yet. He wanted her to come around his cock.

"Cillian, oh God."

"Wait," he growled possessively. He spread her legs wide, placing the tip of his cock at the entrance of her pussy. His body tensed because she was so soft and wet. It was

hard for him to hold back knowing he was so close to bliss.

“Please,” she begged.

“This will hurt,” Cillian warned. “It will get better. I promise you that, pet.”

“I’m okay. Please.”

He eased himself in, sinking deep into her. She was wrapped around him like a glove.

“You’re so tight.”

“Fuck,” she cried out, wincing slight, but he reached down and touched her, taking away her pain as he slid fully into her, until he was buried deep in her hot, wet cunt.

This must be what heaven felt like. It was like home. Cali couldn’t believe the feeling of him deep inside her. He was so big. It had hurt at first, but when he touched her, the pain instantly vanished and only pleasure remained. His thumb worked her clit as he began to thrust in and out. It felt amazing being possessed by him. Her orgasm building as Cillian fucked her.

“Cillian, I’m so close,” she moaned as he quickened his pace.

“Then come,” he panted. “Come for me.”

The orgasm took her, the bed began to shake, and blinding white light overtook her. Something in her mind snapped, and all these memories came back. Hundreds of lives, sprawled over time, playing out in rapid succession. The one constant was Cillian. He was always there, always crushed after every time she was taken from him. Then man she’d always loved.

Cillian came as her vision returned. He stilled as his hot seed filled her.

Tears stung her eyes as she looked up at him, knowing him for the first time, but not really. She'd known him all along.

"Cali? Did I hurt you?" He bent over her, a worried expression etched on her face.

"No," she whispered, touching his face. "It's you."

"Yes." He cocked his head, pulling her across his chest to hold her. "Do...do you remember?"

She nodded. "I do. All of it. You are the love of my life. My lifetimes."

He smiled and kissed her possessively. "Yes. Welcome home, Cali."

All night she talked with Cillian and then fell asleep in his arms. Cillian kissed her sweetly when she woke up. For the first time in her life, she really was wide awake, and still reeling with the knowledge of all the past lives that came flooding back the moment when they both climaxed. She knew him, completely. And she also saw her adoptive parents were always there too. Versions of themselves, dark souls that were always snatching her away from her biological parents. It was like some kind of sick twist of fate.

Including her last time in this world, when she died on the Titanic of all places.

No wonder she didn't like boats.

"What're you thinking about?" Cillian asked.

"I thought you could read minds?"

"You asked me not to, pet."

She rolled over onto her side. “I was remembering all those times I died.”

He winced. “I tried to be there...but there were times I couldn’t.”

“I know. You were kept from me. I won’t leave you this time.”

“I know you won’t, but you still have that day of freedom. It’s a stipulation in the contract and you need to abide by it.”

“And if I don’t want to?” she asked, snuggling closer to him. “It’s safer here, in this realm with you.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know about safer.”

“How can I not be safe with you?”

“Have you forgotten that associating with me sometimes led to your death?”

“I remember now, but I never regretted that.” She kissed him slowly, feeling the need to be connected to him again. Now that she remembered who she was and the fact she was back with him, she never wanted to let this feeling go. “In all seriousness, what happens if I don’t take the one day of freedom from this realm?”

“It could null and void the contract. It’s built in there and it has to be followed,” Cillian responded. “If I had my way, then I would keep you here, but...”

“I get it.” She sighed. “It’s just like how I had to ask you to make love to me. Correct?”

He grinned. “Exactly.”

Cali lay back. “Then I suppose I have no choice but acquiesce to the stipulations of the contract I signed.”

“Indeed.” Cillian climbed out of bed and with a snap of his fingers, got dressed.

“Where are you off to?”

“I have business to attend to. Wraith things. You can relax here and if you need anything, give Honk a call.”

Cali chuckled softly. “You need to be nicer to Honk. I quite like them.”

Cillian rolled his eyes, but there was a hint of a smile on his face. “I will try. Honk has been the more faithful of my...goblins. I do tolerate them as well, but if you like Honk, then Honk shall be yours.”

“I don’t get why he’s all black and scaly, though. His father was human and his mother a unicorn?”

“Unicorns are like all horses and come in a variety of shades. Besides, Honk died and I made do with what I could to save their life. I don’t think they mind.”

“I don’t think so either.” Cali lay back against the pillow. “Try not to be too long. I have a lot of questions.”

“Already nagging me.” Cillian snapped his fingers and he was gone.

Cali laughed to herself softly and then closed her eyes. Thinking about all the lives she lived before and what purpose they served, and also how mad she’d been taken countless times, made her tired, but now all the dreams made sense. The ones that had plagued her, her whole life, and now the mystery man from her dreams was Cillian

all along.

Everything made sense.

The question was, why did the universe seem so intent on keeping them apart? Of stealing her from her biological parents, time and time again.

A cold breeze blew in through the room and she opened her eyes, sitting upright, pulling the satin sheet around her tighter. A dark presence, one she had felt before, was filling the room. Only it wasn't Gootch and it wasn't Death.

"Who's there?" she asked, her voice shaking.

Vapor spilled in from outside and formed a figure in front of her. One of pale skin, hard features, eyes that were free of pupils, and silver hair. Something told her that this was Cillian's mother, the banshee.

"I think you have figured that out for yourself haven't you, Cali?"

"You're his mother."

She nodded in acknowledgment. "And you have regained your memory."

"Yes."

"I see." His mother flitted across the room. "I don't suppose you know what he might lose should the contract be broken? If you leave before the time is up."

"Me."

His mother snorted. "Not only you, but his realm. All his powers. That is what he

sacrificed to save your soul from Gootch. All because you fancied yourself in love with your mortal husband.”

“I didn’t know who I was then,” Cali countered. “And I won’t leave Cillian. Not now.”

His mother scoffed in disbelief. “You and he aren’t meant to be. He’s immortal and you’re not.”

“That doesn’t matter. Time has proven you wrong, because I’m here. Again. He was able to travel through time and find me. It’s clear that nothing is going to stop that.”

The woman flew at her, her eyes flaming. “You will be separated again. I guarantee it. You will ruin it all for him and when your soul is gone, lost to time, because your time on this mortal plane is running out, he will die.”

And before Cali could respond further, his mother disappeared in a puff of smoke. All Cali could do was sit there, reeling at the news imparted on her. Was their love doomed? She didn’t want to believe that, but one thing she had learned was that history repeats itself, time and time again.

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It had been the most idyllic three months of Cali's life, also the most surreal, and she was still trying to figure it all out. She had her memories of this life, not that there were many good ones, and then everything else in between.

So many lives lived, but the only constant was Cillian. And he made her happy above all.

And he was a pleasant constant indeed. During the day, they would spend time together, and if he couldn't be with her, at least she had Honk to keep her company. She was growing fond of her little goblin/unicorn companion. She and Honk liked to walk around the garden and the maze, and the thing she noticed the most was that life was creeping into the realm.

At night, much like the contract she signed stated, she belonged to Cillian and she didn't mind that in the least. In the comfort of his arms, she was safe. Unlike the times before when she had existed in the mortal realms and at the mercy of anything. In Cillian's realm and with new protections in place, she was safe.

Ever since she had regained her memories, Cillian was softer with her, but he was still hiding the truth from her as well. Not that she could blame him. She knew what was at stake, his mother had told her as much. The banshee had basically insinuated that Cali would be the complete ruination of him. So, she let him have his secret, because she wasn't telling him that his mother had told her everything.

Even though it was hard to believe anything bad could possibly happen, because life

just seemed to get better as the days went on, there was one thing niggling at the back of her mind—the enforced day of freedom that would fall once every three months. If Cali had her way, she wouldn't take it.

She was worried about what it would mean. If she stepped back into the mortal realm, would someone try to kill her? It seemed to be her eternal fate.

And as she sat down by Honk's topiary, that they were lovingly trimming as it had fully bloomed after she bled on it, she couldn't help but worry. She didn't want anything to change.

"Mistress seems upset," Honk stated, flicking their tail back and forth.

"Honk, I told you to call me Cali."

Honk shook their head. "Cannot do that. Not right."

Cali sighed. "Fine. I am a bit concerned."

"About what?" Honk asked.

"The day of freedom. I don't want to go."

Honk's little mouth pursed together. "I don't want you to go either, mistress. Tis not safe."

"What's not safe?" Cillian asked, walking toward them.

Honk looked away and continued trimming the topiary as Cillian came over and kissed her on the top of her head, before sitting next to her. He was dressed head to toe in black leather, certain pieces studded with sharp silver metal rivets, and she

couldn't help but wonder where he'd been. When he left that morning, he once again stated "wraith business."

Although, she wasn't complaining about the look. She quite liked the way the leather molded to his body like a glove.

"I was telling Honk that I'm not sure about this day of freedom. I don't really want to go," Cali said, taking Cillian's hand in hers.

"I do understand," he replied gently. "You must, though. We cannot break the stipulations of the contract. It's binding and I won't have the contract put in jeopardy for anything."

"What do I even do when I'm there? My adoptive parents weren't exactly great and they're dead. Simon probably would have me committed again if I showed up. There's really nothing left of my life, because I'm pretty sure that whatever I owned, Simon has sold off."

Cillian squeezed her hand, his eyes flashing briefly at the mention of Simon. "If I ever..."

"No. You won't do anything to him. No revenge killing."

Cillian growled. "Fine."

"And no random accidents or killing that way. You leave Simon alone."

Cillian frowned and nodded. "Agreed. You caught me on that technicality."

"Apparently, I've known you many lifetimes now and I know how you think." She smiled and then touched his face. "I'll go, but I don't know what I'll do there."

What she didn't want to tell him was that she had this dread gnawing in the pit of her stomach. This sense of foreboding that was overcoming her that she just couldn't shake.

"I know what you're thinking," Cillian whispered. "It will be okay. You have more protection now."

"How so?"

"Well, you gave your virginity to a wraith and in this realm. There were times you weren't always so innocent when we were together, and it was never in this realm. There is some magic that flows through you and that can never be taken away. Not even by the breaking of the contract. Does that ease your worry?"

"Yes." It was a lie, because she still couldn't shake that sense of foreboding.

All she needed right now was to be with Cillian, before she had to step off into the unknown tomorrow.

"What would you like to do now, pet?"

"I would like to spend my last day with you, before I have to leave tomorrow."

"You say that with such finality," Cillian teased gently.

"It's not finality, it's just I want to be with you. Only you." She leaned over and kissed him.

He smiled and ran his fingers through her hair. "I think we can arrange something."

She stood and he scooped her up in his arms, where she was able to wrap her arms

around his neck. Her body thrummed with anticipation, because if she only had this one last night with him, she was going to make sure that he knew how much she loved him.

How much she had always loved him.

Cillian carried her to their bedroom. Her body was thrumming with anticipation. He set her down on the floor, she pressed her hands against his chest and she could feel his heartbeat under her fingers.

“Cali, if you...” he trailed off, running his fingers through her hair.

“I know,” she whispered. “I love you, Cillian. I can’t...I don’t want to lose you.”

“Never.” He kissed her fiercely. His lips pressing against hers. It was overwhelming. As she melted in his arms, she gave all to him. Even more than her soul. His arms wrapped around her as she surrendered herself to him.

She was his.

Forever, and nothing would ever separate them again.

“I want to devour you,” he murmured against her throat.

“Then do it,” she answered breathlessly.

His hands ran down her back, cupping her bottom and squeezing. She could feel his hard arousal. She didn’t want anything between them, because she wanted to feel it against her skin. She wanted him inside her, claiming her, possessing her completely.

He chuckled, clearly reading her mind. “Your wish is my command, pet.”

Just like that, they were naked. He ran his hands over her body, teasing her, trailing kisses over her as he sank to his knees.

“I can smell your sweet arousal.” His breath hot against her thighs. Her body quaked, her knees felt weak.

Standing upright was hard. All she wanted to do was lie on the bed and spread her legs so he could fuck her senseless.

“I need...” She couldn’t finish her thought.

“Tell me what you need.”

She moaned and ran her fingers through his silken hair. “Oh God.”

“Me. You need me.” He chuckled, scooping her up again and laying her on the bed. He spread her legs wide with his hands and buried his face in her pussy, teasing her with light kisses before dragging his tongue up her center.

“Oh God,” she moaned again. She bucked her hips as his tongue traced her clit, flicking it and licking it, before it slipped inside her as he tongue fucked her, all the while his thumb rubbed her sensitive clit. She rocked her hips, urging him to take her faster.

“Easy, pet,” he teased.

“Take me,” she begged.

He grinned, leaning over her, her thighs quivering as his cock sank into her. It was achingly slow, stretching her, filling her completely.

She thrust her hips against him, urging him to take her hard, but he continued his tease of slowly entering her, each thrust causing him to sink deeper. It was absolute torture. When he was fully buried in her, she rolled her hips and Cillian growled possessively. His hands on her hips, his nails elongating like he was going to mark her.

And she desperately wanted to be marked by him.

“What do you want, pet?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

With another deep growl, he began to pump against her, hard and fast. Angling her hips up to meet him as he fucked her hard, like an unbridled beast. Her body thrummed as her climax built, her blood pounding, and there was a moment of something deeper, almost like a connection and she could read his mind. Like she became part of his soul. They were fused in a blinding light.

She cried out as she came, her pussy squeezing him.

Cillian roared, spilling his hot seed inside her as she released fully. Her body was boneless as he slipped out of her and fell back against the bed beside her, panting. She rolled over to rest her head against his chest.

I can't lose you.

Tears stung her eyes, and he held her, and she clung to his moment, hoping this time she'd be with him forever.

The next morning came so fast and that dread she had been feeling the day before was still gnawing at her like a ravenous dog. Cillian had closed himself off again,

almost like he too was worried about this whole situation.

“Funny,” she remarked. “When I signed this deal three months ago, I was really looking forward to this day.”

“And now?”

“I think you know the answer.” She put on the clothes she wore the day she was brought to this realm. It was just jeans and a tank top, but Cillian had left the realm and retrieved her purse from the hospital storage. She was a missing person in Thunder Bay, but he had smoothed things over so that no one would pester her.

She could end what was left of her old mortal life.

“Well, this is the first of four. Once the year is up, you never have to go back,” Cillian stated. “Oh, and it’s winter in your realm now.”

“Now you tell me.”

He smiled. “Well, I didn’t think it was relevant last night. I was focused on something else.”

“So, once this is all done, I can stay with you forever?”

He nodded. “Yes. I want to go with you now, but I cannot. This is your day of freedom from my realm and from me. Our binds won’t hold, but you must return to the portal by sunset or else...”

“I know and I will,” she stated emphatically.

Cillian didn’t look convinced, all he did was nod. “Well, come then, and I’ll take you

to the center of the maze and you can be on your way. You have to walk through the portal before the sun comes up in the mortal realm.”

Cali nodded and took his arm, but she was shaking. They walked out of his castle and through the now blooming garden. Honk was standing out there with a great big red handkerchief and was dabbing at their shiny black eyes.

“Honk, don’t be sad. I’ll be back,” she reassured, kneeling down to stroke their furry head.

“Yes, mistress,” Honk replied, their voice wobbly while Cillian just rolled his eyes.

“Pull yourself together, Honk,” Cillian growled, gently.

Honk nodded and scampered behind them, like a pet.

Her pulse was thundering in her ears as they approached the center of the labyrinth. She could hear the hum of the portal. It was a golden one. It moved like water and flame. Cillian took a deep breath and she looked up at him, his long black hair swirling around in the air from the portal.

“I love you, Cali. I have loved you for a long time.”

“I love you too,” she whispered.

His arms wrapped around her as he pulled her into a deep, tender kiss. One that she didn’t want to end, but did as he pushed her gently toward the portal.

“I’m scared,” she said, taking a step toward it.

“Don’t be. I may not be able to come to your rescue, but I have friends keeping an

eye out. You won't be able to see them, but if you get in trouble, head to the docks, to The Lusty Kraken , it's a bar owned by a realm being by the name of Coraliane. She'll take care of you."

Cali nodded. "Okay."

Honk was crying loudly as she turned on her heel, closed her eyes, and was sucked out of Cillian's realm, then unceremoniously dumped back into her own, right by the hospital. Right where she'd made her deal with Cillian.

"Fuck," Cali murmured and she rubbed her arms as it was a frosty morning.

He could've given me a coat.

"It is chilly, isn't it?"

Cali spun around and a gorgeous woman with coral-pink hair was standing there, holding a jacket. She had a pleasant enough smile, but there were some similarities between her and Elodi that made Cali a bit suspicious. She took a step back.

"Relax," the woman said. "I'm Coraliane. I own The Lusty Kraken. I believe Cillian told you about me?"

Cali relaxed. "He did."

Coraliane nodded. "Good. You looked ready to run and I'm not much of a runner in my mortal form, so I wanted to reassure you I'm safe. However, if you want to go for a swim, well then I could catch you."

"What are you then?"

“Mermaid. Though, I do have siren blood in me.” There was a malicious glint to her eyes that caused a shiver to run down Cali’s spine.

“I see.”

Coraliane just laughed. “I will not harm you. Cillian and I are...close. Though, I prefer females over males. Who do you think taught him some of his more female-gratifying tricks?"

For one second Cali grew a bit jealous thinking about Cillian with this mermaid, but he was pretty upfront about who he’d been with, and since her memories were restored, she remembered she hadn’t exactly been a saint through the ages, either.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Coraliane held out the coat. “Cillian thought you might need this.”

“Thank you.” Cali took the warm winter coat and slipped it on. “I don’t plan on doing too much today. I don’t really have a place anymore.”

“No, not really. I looked into that for Cillian as well. Simon seems to have sold off your life and taken most of your money, but again Cillian has provided well for you. You just have to be mindful to be back here by sunset.”

“Could I spend the day with you?” Cali asked. “At your place of business? I like to keep busy and I can work, it’ll help pass the time and maybe I can borrow a computer to look up someone.”

Coraliane smiled, and this time Cali got the feeling it was more friendly. “I would like that, and then at sunset, I can make sure you get back here. It’s your day of freedom, are you sure you want to spend the day with me?"

“Yes, that’s what I want to do.”

“Good, maybe you can help me pick out a wedding present,” Coraliane said, as she hooked her arm through Cali’s and they began walking away from the hospital, down toward the docks.

“A wedding present?”

Coraliane nodded. “For a wolf bride and a sasquatch groom. Maybe they need some kind of grooming device. I have no doubt their child will be hairy.”

Cali laughed and breathed a sigh of relief, feeling instantly better about being in Coraliane’s presence and off the streets. At least she’d be safe at The Lusty Kraken. Cillian had said so and she wouldn’t be bored senseless, just wandering around Thunder Bay. She’d have something to do and something interesting to keep her busy.

Maybe she’d learn more about Cillian’s world, which was about to be part of hers.

Cali completely missed Cillian, and Honk, too. She’d gotten used to their presence when Cillian wasn’t around, but she was glad that Cillian had mentioned Coraliane and that the mermaid had met her when she arrived back in the mortal realm, and had let her work at The Lusty Kraken for the day.

She had never noticed the world beyond the veil, as Coraliane had called it, before. Now that she had been awakened by Cillian, she could see the veil shimmering. She could see how regular mortals didn’t notice all the beings around her, and she got to hear all the gossip about how this realm, known as the northern realm, had been freed from an Elven king’s rule. And she was able to use a computer and locate her birth mother. The woman wasn’t in Thunder Bay anymore, she was farther north in Kenora, but at least it was a start.

It was a long day and it seemed that time was moving slowly. She wondered what Cillian was doing while she was gone, but then it was more enjoyable to think about what they could do when she got back.

She hoped so.

“You ready to go?” Coraliane asked.

Cali nodded. “Yes. I hope when I return again, on my next day of freedom, I can come here and help you out again.”

Coraliane nodded. “I would like that. You’re a good worker and I’m glad you don’t hold an ill will toward me and my past dalliance with Cillian.”

“We all have pasts. Some of us have more...detailed ones.”

Coraliane chuckled. “That is true. Come, I better get you back to the portal before the sun sets, and then I have to get back and get ready for that wedding tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

Cali grabbed her stuff and followed Coraliane outside. It was dusk, and the sun was getting ready to set. She could feel the panic rising in her, and all she wanted to do was get back to the portal.

She and Coraliane walked back up to the hospital, but the closer they got to the hospital, the more she felt uneasy. Like someone was watching them. Coraliane grew quiet too, like she was sensing the shift in the air, and she quickened her pace.

They made it to the portal and Cali could see it glowing, just beyond the shimmering veil.

“I’ll see you in a few months,” Coraliane said.

“Yes.” Cali took a step toward the portal, then there was a burst of energy that tossed her back.

Coraliane screamed and was thrown back too by the blast, knocking her unconscious. Cali opened her eyes to see Elodi standing there, smiling.

“So, you think you can go back to him?” Elodi stated. “You think your love will break the veil and destroy us? I think not. His mother warned you what would happen if you stayed with him. I’m going to kill you, Cali.”

Cillian paced nervously by the portal on his side. He knew that something was wrong and the moment that the sun set in the mortal realm, his instincts were proven right. It felt as if there were a slice through him. His realm was lost then.

Honk was crying and the realm began to shake. Everything that had grown and was alive because of her presence began to shrivel up and die. His realm was no longer his.

“Honk,” Cillian called out. “You need to stay close to me.”

“Yes, master.” Honk scurried forward, shrinking themselves and climbing up into his pocket. He couldn’t take all the other goblins with him, only Honk, because Honk seemed to care about Cali and vice versa.

Cillian knew that Cali had not broken the promise. Something had happened to her. He’d find out what, but first he had to deal with the bet he lost. The realm that was about to be taken away from him and his plans that had been dealt a serious monkey wrench. As his realm was transferred over to Gootch, he felt some of his power fading. So much for time travel. He could feel invisible chains locking him to the

northern realm.

Gootch appeared, grinning, and then his mother followed slowly behind.

“Well, well. It seems she didn’t return like she promised,” Gootch said gleefully. “You have lost, Cillian, and your realm is now mine!”

“I concede that, but I know that Cali was waylaid by another. She remembers who she is and has protection. So she didn’t break her promise.”

“Not for long. Not when I fully take control of this realm,” Gootch stated. “She has powerful magic protecting her now, but soon she will be mortal again and helpless. And mine.”

A shiver of dread ran down Cillian’s spine as Gootch said that word. As Cillian looked to his mother, floating there with a smug expression on her face, he knew that it was her who had betrayed him and that Cali’s life was in danger.

“So, Mother, you have set this up. Haven’t you?” Cillian snarled.

“You need to learn to not bind your heart and soul to a mortal. You’ve played with time for far too long and I know the reason why. You want to overthrow my father. You want to control all the realms and have mortal and magic mix once more. It’s what you’ve always wanted. So like your father.”

“I’m nothing like him. Spineless mortal he was,” Cillian snarled.

“Well, you’re stuck in the northern realm now, but I can give it all back to you,” his mother stated.

“How?” Cillian asked.

“Your mother has agreed to give me most of your powers, but I’ll hand this over and some of your freedom back, if you keep away from Cali,” Gootch stated. “You need to let her die and let her soul cross over the Styx. She won’t come back.”

Cillian’s blood boiled. “Why would I do that?”

“Her hold on you is not good for you,” his mother snapped. “You’re a wraith. Act like one.”

“Is that so?” Cillian tapped his chin. “And how would a wraith act?”

“You’re playing with things you cannot comprehend,” his mother howled. “You don’t want to give up your realm, your powers. You’re Death’s grandson. Do you really want to walk away from all of this?”

Cillian looked around at his realm. The place he grew up. The sanctuary he provided to his half siblings who were lost, never born, or just plain evil. It had been his since the day he was born, but here it was stone and bereft of life. Magic and mortals were supposed to mix and didn’t mix enough. He wasn’t sure how he was going to bring down the veil without his powers, but he knew one thing, he couldn’t live this eternity without Cali.

“No. I don’t want this. Gootch may have my realm.”

“But Cali is mine!” Gootch hissed.

“I offer you a trade,” Cillian stated.

“Oh?” Gootch asked.

“My immortality. I’ll age and die once Cali ages and dies, but she belongs to me. You

free her.”

“No!” his mother shrieked.

“Why would I care if you die?” Gootch asked.

“Then you’ll be the most powerful in the Netherworld you blubbery twit. Now, do we have a deal?”

“Deal,” Gootch agreed.

Cillian smiled. Cali had spilled her virgin blood in this realm, extending her mortal life, binding her life to his the moment their souls really connected when they made love the last night she was here. He’d protect her in the northern realm and they could live their life together, happily for centuries. And when it was time for them to age and die, it would be together. Their souls bound forever.

“You better hurry,” Gootch warned. “Her life is in peril.”

Cillian turned and walked away from them.

Gootch was laughing and chortling with glee, but Cillian didn’t care. He had to find Cali and save her. His heart couldn’t take losing her again and he knew if he didn’t save her in time, her soul would be lost forever.

The love, the bond that Cali and he shared was strong. It was a threat to all those who wanted to control the realms. Just like it had been too powerful for him to completely control, he saw it all now.

His mother floated in front of him. “Are you mad? You’re giving up everything for a mortal?”

“I guess I am mad,” Cillian stated. “But this isn’t an eternity I want to live. Without her, I am nothing.”

“You’ll eventually die,” his mother warned. “Too much time in that northern realm and the bits of your father will take over.”

Cillian shrugged and stepped toward the portal, before the connection was lost and his realm became fully in possession of Gootch. “I don’t care anymore. Good-bye, Mother. Oh, and since none of the beings in the realm belong to Gootch, I release all beings under my control. Except Honk. They’re coming with me.”

And with that final word, he stepped through as his mother screamed her banshee rage from the other side.

I knew something bad was going to happen.

Cali stared up at the Elven princess. It was dark, the sun had set, and she knew that by not passing through the portal back to Cillian's realm, he had lost everything, just like his mother had warned her would happen.

She just hoped that Cillian could forgive her for what had happened. Though, this wasn't her fault.

Coraliane was nowhere to be seen and Cali was no longer in front of the portal by the hospital, but she wasn't far. She was down an alleyway.

"What have you done with Coraliane?" Cali asked Elodi.

"Wiped her memory and sent her on her way." Elodi grinned. "I know how her pretty little mermaid mind works."

Had Coraliane slept with everyone?

"Cillian will come looking for me," Cali stated, although she knew that was probably far-fetched.

He wouldn't know where to find her and she'd been moved away from the portal. There was also the fact that if he lost his realm, he might not be able to come through the portal. She didn't know the extent of the bet he had made with Gootch to take

control of her soul, but she bet Cillian's hands were tied.

Cali had been a fool to let her guard down. Like she did countless times over her lifetimes. Now, she was going to die.

Elodi brandished a silver knife. She was grinning wickedly and it sent a chill down Cali's spine. "Oh, how I'm going to love killing Cillian's plaything. Only this time, you won't ever be coming back, and Cillian will have power no longer."

Cali closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable, the bite of blade which was a better way to go than being burnt at the stake.

Cillian, I love you.

"Elodi, drop the knife. Now."

Cali opened her eyes and saw Elodi spin around in surprise. It was Cillian, fully enraged, horns and talons and flaming eyes.

"Cillian, but how? You should be back in your realm. Your mother and Gootch..."

"I didn't take their offer," Cillian roared. "Drop the knife, or I kill you. Tiene would be very sad to learn his princess has died."

Elodi's spine stiffened. "You kill me and he'll send his army to avenge me."

Cillian shrugged. "What, is that supposed to scare me? Seriously. Your father's so-called army was defeated by lesser beings."

"If I drop the knife, you'll kill me anyway. So why shouldn't I just do away with her?"

“If you drop the knife, I’ll let you crawl back to your realm, and you better not darken my doorway any longer. I don’t want to see you again. Do I make myself clear?”

Elodi looked back at Cali and then dropped the knife. “Your love of this mortal will be the downfall of us all.”

“Or the beginning of change, which I know your father doesn’t want. Know this, Elodi. Your realm will change and not for the better. Your realm is dying. Slowly.”

Elodi uttered a word which Cali didn’t understand and then disappeared.

Cillian rushed to her side, still a bit of a monster devil rather than his old self. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I tried to come back...”

“I know. I found Coraliane with her memory wiped. I couldn’t restore her memory, my powers are limited more, but I was able to see her memories.”

Cali nodded and Cillian helped her to her feet. “You gave up your realm for me?”

“Of course, I wasn’t going to let you cross over to eternity. Not without me,” Cillian sighed. “Unfortunately, I’m stuck here. We’re stuck here.”

Cali smiled. “I don’t care. So, what does this mean?”

“It means you’re free.”

“You and I can stay together?”

Cillian touched her cheek gently. “I love you, Cali. I would give up eternity and my

plans to take over all the realms for you.”

“Take over all the realms?”

Cillian rolled his eyes. “I admit I love you and that’s what you focus on?”

“Well, it’s a lot to take in, but...I love you too, Cillian. I always have.” She kissed him and he wrapped his arms around her. She felt safe in his arms, like she was finally home, where she belonged.

“How did you manage to save my soul from Gootch?”

“I gave up my immortality.”

“What?” She gasped.

“Our souls are bonded, though. Some of my realm is imbued in you. We’re not dying anytime soon. We have a long time to be together.

She sighed in relief. “I just want to be with you.”

He kissed her tenderly and she clung to him. He gave up everything for her. That was love. Truly.

“What about Honk?” she asked, panicking.

Cillian chuckled. “They are safe. They’re in my pocket. I know how fond you were of them and vice versa.”

Cillian stepped back and opened up his jacket pocket, the little black goblin jumping out and returning to normal size.

“Mistress,” Honk cooed.

“Honk, I’m glad you’re okay.” She turned back to Cillian. “So now what do we do?”

“Well, we’re going to find a place to stay tonight. Probably with Coraliane, and then we’re going to attend a wedding tomorrow and make a call on my sister and brother-in-law. We need a place to live, don’t we?”

“Even Honk?” Cali asked.

Cillian rolled his eyes. “Yes. Even Honk.”

“Stay back here until I ascertain the temperature of the situation,” Cillian explained. “Honk will keep you safe.”

Cali nodded and Honk clung to her shins as they stayed close to the tree line. Cillian knew no harm would come to them now and even though Cali seemed to be okay with his world, she wasn’t fully immersed in it yet, and there were a lot of creatures milling about. Including all the yard apes his half sister Aoife was related to by marriage.

At least Benjamin had heeded his cryptic advice months ago and seemed to be happy. And Cillian was happy too. The veil was still intact, but he’d find a way to bring it all down. It might take longer, but all that seemed a bit trivial now that he had Cali.

All he needed to do was give her everything that she deserved.

Even if it meant being neighbors to a bunch of sasquatches.

There was cheering and clapping. As Cillian watched Bernadette kiss Ben again, big fluffy flakes of snow began to fall from the sky. It was perfect.

It made him want to puke a bit.

“Isn’t that just beautiful?” he said in a syrupy sweet voice, clapping slightly.

Everyone went quiet and turned to watch him as he leisurely walked up the aisle toward the newly mated couple.

“Cillian?” Aoife asked. “Where have you been?”

“It doesn’t matter, dear sister,” Cillian responded. “I’ve just come with a happy announcement.”

Aoife looked at Adam, who crossed his arms and frowned. Ever the protector of his sister.

Ben kept Bernadette in his arms, holding her close.

As if Cillian wanted to break them up. He was the one who’d brought them together.

“What’s the happy announcement?” Aoife asked carefully.

“I’m moving into the neighborhood,” Cillian stated.

“You have a realm,” Adam replied stiffly.

“Alas, no longer,” Cillian replied.

“What?” Aoife asked, stunned.

“I lost it, but it doesn’t matter how. I’ll be living here soon enough and settling down. With my wife.”

Aoife's eyes widened in shock. "Your...what?"

Cillian smiled saucily. He loved shocking his sister. "I know you're pregnant, dear sister, but try to keep up. I have a wife. A mate, like what you forest apes call your significant others."

Aoife winced. "Oh. I don't...I don't feel so good."

Adam caught her as she fell back in pain. "Aoife, what's wrong?"

Cillian chuckled. "News about her little brother probably upset her."

"If you've hurt her," Adam growled.

"Relax, dear brother," Cillian stated. "My little nephew is about to make his entrance. And I'm glad I'm here to see it."

Bernadette and Ben exchanged worried glances as Aoife doubled over in pain. Adam scooped up his wife and hurried off with her. Coraliane ran after Adam, just rolling her eyes at Cillian as she passed.

"I need to go," Bernadette said.

Cillian stepped in their way.

"Move," Ben snarled.

"That's the thanks I get for restoring your beloved's memories?"

Ben huffed and Bernadette clung to her mate's arm.

“Why are you really here, wraith?” Ben asked.

“To congratulate you both. Weddings are magical, aren’t they?” He brushed the snow off his shoulder and grinned wickedly at them. “I can’t wait for you to meet my new bride. We’re all going to be neighbors and such good friends.”

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One month later

Cali found Cillian outside on the deck. He did have enough magic left to build a nice cabin, with the help of some of his sasquatch relatives.

Aoife also asked her husband Adam to take care of Cillian and her unexpected new sister-in-law. Plus, Honk had ingratiated themselves into their half sister's heart, too, and completely doted on little Aren, who resembled his mother more than his father, except for a prominent brow.

Their home didn't take long and Cali loved her life in the woods with all the sasquatches and wolves and other assorted magical beings who were moving into the neighborhood. Cillian was quite grumpy about it, but she found ways to make him quite happy. Nightly. Daily. Often.

Right now, he was staring out over the snow-covered clearing and drinking a cup of coffee.

"How do you like coffee?" she asked, knowing he didn't really eat much before, when he was in his realm, but some of his human traits were taking over.

"It's tolerable." He gave her a half smile. "Did you make it or Honk?"

"I did." She sat down next to him.

"Honk's is better," Cillian mumbled, teasing.

Cali nudged him playfully. "Shut up."

Cillian chuckled. "Are you happy here?"

"I am. I adore your sister and Bernadette."

Cillian grunted. "Not sure I'm well-liked."

"Well, you are still a bit grumpy."

"You would be too if you lost your realm."

"But it was worth it, right?" she teased.

His expression softened. "Yes. It was."

She kissed him softly. "So, what're you thinking about so intently?"

"Oh, whether I tell Caleb some news I've had for some time. I mean, it could start a conflict. It'll probably start a conflict."

"Does it have to do with that woman in the orb?"

Cillian nodded. "Caleb usually passes by about now. I'm waiting for him."

"You've grown soft." Cali kissed him on the tip of his nose. "I like this caring Cillian."

He grunted again. "No. It's a matter of power."

"Uh-huh, nothing to do about love?"

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, maybe a little bit about love.”

Just then, Caleb walked through the tree line. Cali had only known him for a month, but she always thought him sad, and if he was separated from someone he cared about, then she could understand why.

“Caleb,” Cillian called.

Caleb glared at them, but walked over. “What do you want, wraith?”

“Oh, that’s not nice. I was going to be nice to him,” Cillian teased.

Cali elbowed him in the ribs. “No games.”

Cillian winced. “Fine. I have some information for you.”

Caleb crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “Really? I’m listening.”

“Colette is alive,” Cillian stated. “And, she has a child. Your child.”

Caleb’s eyes widened. “How do you…”

“I used to read minds,” Cillian explained. “I found her, before I lost my realm. She is alive, as is your son. He’s about two now, but they’re both being held captive. As collateral.”

“Where?” Caleb asked, his voice cold, which sent a shiver down Cali’s spine.

“Tiene’s prison. Elven realm. Before you march off there, you’ll have to formulate a plan and you’re going to need help. Not hotheaded punching and chest beating. You’ll need your brothers.”

Caleb's eyes narrowed. "Why are you telling me this? What do you want?"

"Nothing," Cillian stated. "Tiene did you wrong. It is your revenge to take. I know what it's like to be separated from a loved one. You deserve your happiness. You all do."

Caleb nodded. "Thank you, Cillian."

Cillian nodded. "No sense in hiding your secret any longer. You might as well tell your siblings. Go save your loved one, Caleb."

Caleb disappeared, back toward where Adam lived.

Cillian sighed and turned to Cali, finding her eyes filled with tears. "What?"

"You are a softy."

Cillian groaned. "I think I should be rewarded for my good deed, don't you think?"

Cali chuckled and stood up, pulled her sweater off and tossed it at him. "Oh, I think we can work out an arrangement."

The next day

"I can't go up to the door with you," Cillian said, standing back.

"I wish you could meet my biological mother," Cali said.

"I think I might scare her and I don't have enough powers left to hide what I am." He brushed back a strand of her brown hair. "You have to do this on your own."

She took a deep breath. "I know. I'm nervous."

“What’s there to be nervous about? You have contacted her and she’s excited to meet you.”

“Lots to be nervous about.” She wrung her hands together. “You’re going to be waiting here for me?”

Cillian smiled. “Yes. I’m going to fetch Honk some ingredients at the local store here in Kenora. It’s run by a particularly grumpy vampire.”

Cali chuckled. “Ingredients?”

Cillian rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask. Now, go. Go meet your mother.”

Cali kissed him one last time and then walked up the sidewalk to her mother’s home that overlooked Lake of Bays at the end of a serene street. She looked back, but Cillian had disappeared, but she wasn’t worried. She knew he would be back.

Her body was shaking with nerves and she knocked.

It was the longest minute of her life, but then the door opened and a woman, about seventeen years older than her, but with a familiar face, opened the door.

“Cali?” the woman asked softly.

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Me neither. I...I didn’t know I was adopted.”

Her mother nodded. “I thought you were dead. I thought of you...I dreamed of you.”

“I’m sorry you were lied to.”

Her mother wiped away a tear. “I’m sorry you were lied to as well. You said you are happy?”

“I am.” Although she really couldn’t tell her mother yet about Cillian, but she planned to. She just had to get to know her mother first, before she fully trusted her with the secret world that seemed to coexist in the world she was raised in.

“I’m glad. Your brothers and sister are so excited to see you. Would you like to come in?”

“I would. I’m...sorry it took me so long to find you.” Cali’s voice broke. “It’s been a long journey to get here.”

Her mother’s brown eyes filled with tears. “Can I hug you? I’ve dreamt of hugging you for so long. Ever since I was pregnant with you. When I woke up and you were gone...I never got to see you, so if you wouldn’t mind a hug, I would really like that.”

“Yes!” Cali exclaimed, her voice breaking. “I would love a hug.”

Her mother wrapped Cali up in her arms and Cali closed her eyes. Between finding her mother, remembering who she really was, and having the love of her life, she realized she had everything she wanted.

Everything she had sold her soul for months ago.

She just had to go to hell and back to get it.