







# Claimed By Night (Shadow Guardians #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** One angel. Three powerful kings. And a forbidden desire that could destroy us all.

I woke up naked, vulnerable, and with no memories—only the burning certainty that something was hunting me.

They tell me I'm an angel. But the forbidden markings on my back hide a secret that shouldn't exist—wings that should have been burned away long ago by the tyrant Variants' decree.

When Dragan, the formidable King of Shadows, rescues me from a life of forced submission, my body awakens to desires I never knew existed.

Now thrust into a dangerous world where the balance between three realms hangs by a thread, I find myself the central object of primal, and possessive hunger.

I don't know who to trust, especially when every inch of my flesh craves not just one, but three devastatingly powerful men:

Dragan—the Gargoyle King: brooding and dominant, he radiates raw darkness. His gray eyes could devour me whole, promising pleasures beyond my wildest imagination, but can I trust him?

Cambion—the exiled Seelie King whose ethereal beauty leaves me breathless, but Cambion detests me...

Baron—the Vampire King: he's the seductive shadow connected to my past, his dark presence sparking something primal within me that recognizes him, yearns for him, though we've never met in the flesh

The deeper I fall into this shadow world, the more my body responds to each of them. But these powerful men were never meant to share, and I was never meant to crave them all. Yet in their arms, I discover parts of myself I never knew existed—dark, hungry parts that match their own ferocious needs.

As I struggle to understand the power awakening within me—a dangerous, intoxicating blend of light and shadow—my enemies draw

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

## The Oath of Devotion

As there is light, there must also be dark. As there is life, there must also be death. As there is the mortal world, there must also be the realm of light and shadow...

In the beginning, there was balance.

Then, with the coming of the Singularity , light was nearly sacrificed by dark when a rift in the Shadow Realm resulted in darkness spilling into the mortal and fae worlds. Humans were completely wiped out until only the magical remained, and the balance of the natural order was left hanging precariously.

The Mortal, Fae, and Shadow Realms were the charge of the Midnight Queen. In order to set the equilibrium right, she chose four representatives—two from the Shadow Realm, and two from the realm of light.

These four soldiers pledged to maintain the balance between shadow and light by taking the Oath of Devotion . Thus, they were bound to protect this delicate equilibrium by making a pact, through blood, and witnessed by none other than the Midnight Queen, herself.

The first to take the pledge was the King of Shadows , a gargoyle.

The second was the King of Light , an angel.

The third was the King of Nature, an elf.

The fourth was the King of Death , a vampire.

With the rise of the Midnight Queen's Protectors, balance was achieved anew. But that stability was short-lived, as greed and envy upset the equilibrium once again...

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

EILISH

Mortal Realm

I shiver.

Drops fall from the sky, big ones that make it difficult to see the road.

I don't know where I am. Or how I got here.

My stomach rumbles and nausea threatens to send bile up my throat—a throat which already feels strangely raw. It stings like I've been repeatedly vomiting.

A second wave of chills shoots through me, shaking me from head to toe, thrashing me forward and then back again. Heaving, I'm forced to bend over as my body does its best to eject the contents of my stomach... now just acid.

You have to run, a woman's voice yells at me.

I glance around, but no one's there.

Run, Eilish, the voice insists.

I don't recognize the name but since the voice seems to be addressing me, I figure it must be mine.

Go, now, Eilish, run! The voice grows more insistent, panicking even.

I don't know where it's coming from, if someone I can't see is talking to me or if the voice is just in my head. Or if I'm just imagining the whole thing.

"I can't... run anymore," I say out loud, panting with the exertion it takes to speak. My voice sounds strangely foreign—high pitched and terrified. Inhaling, I shake my head as I face the road ahead of me—asphalt that stretches for what seems like miles, with only the loneliness of a dark forest on either side to keep it company. And the occasional broken-down car, mostly reduced to a skeletal, rusted frame.

It's coming, the voice warns.

I can hear it . Tree limbs snap behind me, accompanied by growling and the sound of something sniffing, catching my scent on the wind.

Move, Eilish!

My heart beats like a frightened bird trapped in a tiny cage. The chills are growing stronger now, refusing to let go. Beneath my armpits, my sweatshirt is soaked, and still more beads of perspiration bleed from my hairline. I'm so exhausted, the idea of continuing on makes me want to pass out.

If it finds you, it will rip you to pieces, the voice cautions.

A long stream of snot drips from my nose, and I wipe it on the sleeve of my torn sweatshirt. The drops of rain come down harder now and I stand up, forcing my fatigued legs forward. The chills continue to throb, echoing the pain that envelopes my entire body.

Move, Eilish, the voice commands. Move now!

"There's... nowhere to go!" I sob, wiping away tears. Ahead of me, I see only empty

highway. Who knows where it leads? Who knows if there might be more of them up ahead? Who knows anything...?

More breaking branches in the distance. It's getting closer.

Take that path, the voice orders as soon as I turn my head to the side and notice a narrow aisle leading between the trees, weaving a barren trail between the foliage.

I won't make it, I think as more panic begins bubbling up inside me—or it might be the sickness. The nausea. The vomiting.

Move faster!

Seizing the cresting wave of hope that swells through me, my energy surges. I make a furious run down the path, forcing whatever drive I still possess to my aid. The sounds of the forest around me heighten, as if my hearing is suddenly amplified.

Branches break in the distance, the heavy sound of footfalls of someone or something in pursuit. And the grunting of something big, something angry.

The trail bifurcates at an enormous pine tree, the path splitting ways around the trunk. I could go right, or I could go left. Right or left.

RIGHT OR LEFT?

At the sound of grunting, my blood freezes. When I turn around, I feel my heart start thundering again, but I see nothing there—only the dark outline of the skeletal tree trunks that surround me. But I can still hear the snapping of branches underfoot. Whatever is after me, it's even closer now.

I face left and follow the trail around the tree, then down a small hill of loose dirt. I



lose my footing and start to stumble, but right myself on a large rock before continuing forward. The trail is interrupted by a small trickle of water, but picks up again just beyond the stream and parallels it. I jump over the water and follow the path.

It's still behind you. You haven't lost it, the voice tells me.

I keep going, trying to keep my balance even as my worn tennis shoes sink into the mud at the side of the stream. Once I've reached the bottom of the hill, I notice the path takes a sharp right, disappearing around an enormous boulder. I follow it, doing my best to keep my shoes from being sucked into the mud. As soon as I turn the corner, around the boulder, I'm greeted with a massive gate constructed of sheet metal, barbed wire looped across the top.

Above the wire is a crudely erected outpost, jutting out beyond the line of the tall gate. Rusted vehicles are piled high, flanking either side of the entry. And on the platform someone is dressed in military fatigues. The someone is also armed with a large weapon, and he's wearing a helmet so I can't see his face.

"Help me!" I yell as I emerge from the forest and stand before the gate, waving my arms. I suddenly feel lightheaded.

You have to remain aware, the voice insists.

I focus on the platform above me. From my standpoint, I can't tell what type of creature the soldier is. All I can hope is that he's friendlier than whatever's behind me.

"Who are you, an' which precinct you comin' from?" the soldier asks.

At the question, the shadow that shrouds my memory lifts enough that I can

confidently tell him who I am. At least I know my name, anyway. Or, at the very least, I know the name the voice keeps calling me.

“My name is Eilish,” I answer. My tone of voice is bordering on frantic. As to precincts, though, I don’t know what he’s talking about.

“What you doin’ here?”

“Something is following me!” I yell, feeling lightheaded again. I have to drop my attention back to the ground, because my knees are starting to sway and my vision is blurring again.

“What precinct you comin’ from?” the soldier repeats.

“I don’t know!” I admit before glancing behind me, certain I hear the sound of something coming. But nothing is there. Whatever it is, it’s still in the forest. I face forward again. “Please, open the gate!”

The soldier turns to another one who appears on the platform and the two speak. The second one shakes his head, and the one I briefly interacted with shrugs as he turns back to face me.

“We ain’t gonna let you in unless you tell us what business you got here,” he says.

“Something is following me in the woods!” I scream up at him. “Please!”

“You got currency?” the other one chimes in.

“What?” I ask, shaking my head.

“Coins. Somethin’ to make it worth our while?”

I thrust my hands into my pockets and come up with nothing. Not even a stray piece of lint. I look back up at them and shake my head.

“We can’t help you,” the first soldier finishes and starts to turn his back on me.

Take off your hat and show them your hair, the voice instructs me.

With no alternatives, I follow the directive and reach up, only just now realizing I’m wearing a hat. I pull it off and a mess of matted white hair, complete with leaves, seeds and other forest debris, falls down around my shoulders.

“It’s an angel,” I hear the original guard yell to the other one.

Just then, the sound of metal against metal screeches through the air, and my attention is drawn forward as the gates begin to open.

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## SILVANUS

I watch the female disappear behind the man-made gates of the precinct and curse my bad luck. I am too late.

I do not know how it is possible that she moved as quickly as she did, owing to the foreign intoxicant that bubbles within her veins and causes her confusion. It should have been easier to overtake her.

Morrigan must have emblazoned her with enough power to outrun me, I think. Never mind, the female will be in my custody soon enough. I will see to it. And when she is, I will make up for lost time.

When I hear myself snort, I realize I am still assuming the shape of the boar. Shaking off the creature's likeness, I return to myself.

It will be more difficult to reach her now that she is within the precinct, but I will not give up.

She can only hide for so long.

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EILISH

"Get Anona," the first guard says to the other one, who obediently takes off. I turn around to make sure whatever was following me isn't still there. But, no, the gates are nearly closed, operated by two guards on either side of them. As I watch them slam shut, the gates suddenly seem farther away than they were, like I'm looking at them through a thick glass lens.

I shake the visual away and face forward. Once I realize I'm safe, my knees give out and I collapse to the ground. Inhaling deeply, I spread my fingers in the wet dirt and feel like kissing it.

I'm panting. My heart's racing and I feel lightheaded and... strange. My eyes are still blurry and it feels like the rain is coming down harder, which makes them even blurrier.

Someone grips me by the upper arm and hoists me to my feet. I look up to see the first guard from the platform. His face is still covered by his helmet, a broad iron covering that only reveals his black eyes. I look at his hand where it's wrapped around my arm, still trying to decipher his nationality, but his leather gloves hide his skin.

“Where... am I?” I ask, but the words barely make it off my lips. They feel heavy and thick in my mouth. I try to make my feet work, but my legs feel like jelly. The guard has to drag me up the dirt path that leads into a town... of sorts.

“You’re in Precinct Five,” he answers, his voice deep and throaty.

Precinct Five means nothing to me.

“What you doin’ out there by yourself?” he asks as he continues to pull me along the dirt road. On either side of us are buildings—some as high as three stories. A few are still intact, but the others bear the signature of the bombs that went off a decade or so earlier. Even so, the insides appear tidy enough—all evidence of the Singularity has been removed. Now, the remains of the buildings just look like empty caskets.

The Singularity...

The word repeats in my mind and I suddenly don’t know what it means or how it got into my head. I’m not even sure how I know what the Singularity is, but the information sits in my brain all the same.

“You hear me?” the guard demands, and I remember he’s just asked me something. “What you doin’ out there alone?”

“I don’t know,” I admit as I try my best to remember, try to understand the events of the last hour. But there’s nothing but a black void inside my head.

“What? You got memory loss or somethin’?”

“Something,” I answer, then take a deep breath and try to force the vertigo away. I feel sick to my stomach. Weak.

“You’re lucky we let you in,” he continues, seemingly determined to make conversation. I’m grateful he opened the gates, but I’m not in the mood for small talk. I’m not in the mood for any sort of talk, actually.

There’s a pounding right between my eyes that wasn’t there before. Or maybe it was but I was so panicked I didn’t notice it.

“Why did you let me in?” I ask, craning my neck upward to look at him. It’s the first time I notice how massive he is. Maybe nearing seven feet, and his girth is almost as wide. He’s probably a demon.

How I know any of this, I can’t say.

“You’re an angel,” he answers with a shrug, like the reason should be obvious. Well, nothing is obvious to me.

An angel. The word holds no meaning to me. It’s as foreign as my name, this stranger, Precinct Five, the voice inside my head...

“Did you check her for the markings?” A woman’s voice sounds from in front of us, and I glance up and into the face of an Opalite Demon.

How do I know what she is? I ask myself as I study the pearlescent quality of her skin. I don’t have any answers.

The woman is wearing form-fitting pants, combat boots, a sleeveless camouflage t-shirt, and a machine gun strapped across her chest. The only hint at her lack of humanity, aside from the fact that humans are extinct, is her eyes. Her orange pupils aren’t pupils at all—they take up the entirety of her eyes.

The guard mumbles something unintelligible and the woman responds with a frown,

grabbing my arm and forcing me to stand in front of her. She's tall, though not as tall as the demon guard. But she's still a head or so taller than I am. And she's uncommonly thin, with a long, narrow face, a generous nose, and wide lips.

"What's your name, gorgeous?" she asks, her triangular tongue coming out to swipe at her lower lip.

"Eilish," I answer calmly. The pounding in my head is making me sick again.

"I'm Anona," the woman responds. "And welcome to Precinct Five." She takes a breath and studies me with a curious smile. Then, she rotates me around so quickly, I feel dizzy. "I just need to check you're legal, otherwise we can't have you here. But you already know that."

I don't know that, but I also don't respond. Instead, I just stand there as she pulls my loose shirt up from my waist, all the way up until my stomach is in view. I pull it down to my belly button so I won't risk flashing my breasts to no one in particular. The guard is still behind me. Anona runs her fingertips across the skin of my upper back, then drops my shirt back down and she wheels me around so I'm facing her again. She nods.

"You're legal, which means everything's okay," she says with a clipped smile. Thunder breaks out overhead as another onslaught of rain comes down even harder. She looks upward, appearing to notice the inclement weather for the first time.

"Let's get you out of this rain," she adds with a polished smile.

I can't even feel it. "Okay," I answer, allowing her to pull me up the now muddied road and into one of the handful of buildings that hasn't been blasted into oblivion. The demon guard follows us.

I want to ask her what she meant by my being legal, but I can't seem to open my mouth. It's like my brain isn't communicating with my body. Instead, the headache increases and pulses inside my head, feeling like larvae ready to pop out of my eyes.

"How did you end up here?" Anona asks. She holds the door open, and I walk into the dark room. A second or so later, a lightbulb flickers overhead and bathes us in artificial halogen light. I take stock of my surroundings and find a wooden table in the center of the room with four chairs. Anona motions to one of them and I sit down, feeling exhausted all the way to my toes. In the corner of the room is an unattended cot and a dirty-looking pillow. There are no windows.

"She don't know anythin'. Her memory's gone. Probably wiped so she can't tell us nothin'," the guard says from where he stands beside Anona. She looks at him with a discouraged expression before she sits down across from me and tries to smile. It looks more like a grimace.

"You don't remember anything at all?" she asks, and I shake my head. She continues, "You don't know why you were on the road or how you got there?"

I shake my head and wince as the pain behind my eyes becomes intolerable. "I... do you have anything for a headache?" I shield my eyes from the suddenly blaring light overhead.

"Hmm," she mumbles, reaching forward and gripping my arm. She pushes my long, tattered and soaking wet sleeve all the way up to my elbow and nods once she spots the veins in my wrist, which travel up my arm in glowing neon-green branches.

"She's going through withdrawals," she announces to the guard, who doesn't say anything. I don't know when he did it, but he's taken off his helmet so I can clearly see him. Not that I want to. With his scaly red skin, underslung jaw, beady black eyes, and the ten or so horns protruding from his head, he's an ugly son of a bitch.



“Get the Atacomite ,” she orders. He nods and turns around, hulking out of the doorway and disappearing into the pounding rain. “We’re going to get you fixed up real soon, gorgeous,” she says as she turns her attention back to me.

But I can barely register that she’s even there. Even though she’s sitting right across from me, it’s like I can’t concentrate on her—can’t see her. But I can see everything around her. Until the room starts spinning, and the headache along with it. I drop my head into my hands and squeeze my temples, trying to will the pain away. Or maybe I’m trying to shove my fingers through my skull so I can shred my brain.

“Just a few more seconds and the pain will be gone, gorgeous,” she assures me.

I don’t respond.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

FLUMPH

Mortal Realm

“Flumph! More wine!” Anona yells. Then she lean back in her wooden chair, all casual-like, an’ plops her feet up on the table in front o’ her like she think her shit don’t stink. She stretch her arms out an’ laughs. I can’t stand the ugly bitch but she’s in a good mood, which is good for me.

“Comin’ right up, mistress!” I say as I fly up to the counter an’ grip the bottle o’ wine, my arms barely circlin’ it. My little wings beat like crazy an’ I’m airborne for a few seconds while I get near Anona’s table. Then, I’m all strugglin’ to get the damn bottle (which be the same size as me) up in the air agin, but I does an’ I get to refillin’ the ugly bitch’s glass without spillin’ a drop.

“You see that?” I say with a big-ass smile as I put the bottle on the tabletop an’ cross my arms ‘gainst my chest, real proud-like. “Didn’t spill a drop!”

“Refill me too, winged pig,” Dravon say, slammin’ his fist into the table while he face me.

Dick.

I glare at him, ‘cause he know I hate bein’ called a “winged pig.” I ain’t no pig. Maybe I’m a little chubby, but still... I ain’t no pig. An’ definitely no winged pig. I’m a sprite, an’ a damned good tavern-keep, too.

Dravon, the ugly bastard, is gonna pay for that one. Maybe I'll take a ripe piss into his wine—or maybe I'll ask Godwin to take a ripe piss into it, 'cause everyone knows there ain't nothin' ranker than ogre piss...

'Course, I'm not sure how I'm gonna get my todger anywheres near Dravon's wine when I'm floatin' right in front o' him an' he's askin' for a refill. Really, the only place you can piss in someone's drink be behind the counter.

"Winged pig!" Dravon shout. All the ugly bastard has to do is reach 'cross the table, lift up the bottle, an' refill his glass hisself. But nooooo. He doin' this on purpose.

Anus face.

I lift the bottle an' float over to the fucker. Then I refills his glass but I ain't careful 'bout it an' end up spillin' some on his lap.

"You little shit!" Dravon rail, but I'm already flyin' back 'cross the main room o' the tavern an' Dravon is so damn slow, there ain't no way he gonna keep up with me. I land safely on my counter with a big ol' smile. Dravon look at me real angry-like, an' I stick my tongue out an' then flip him the bird.

That's what you get, dick.

Anona reach out an' put her hand on Dravon's arm, like she tryin' to calm him. But calmin' a demon ain't no easy feat. Especially one as stupid as Dravon.

"No time for yelling," Anona say with a laugh. "Not when our luck has turned so much for the better."

Dravon grunt an' turn away from me toward his mistress. He down the glass o' wine in one gulp an' slam it into the table with a thunderin' echo. He be the ugliest of all

Anona's men: scaly red skin, little black eyes, an' shitloads of horns coverin' his head an' face. An' he smell like a fresh goblin shit.

"Dravon, do you realize what this angel will mean for business?" Anona continues while Dravon shake his head real slow-like. "An angel beneath this roof, Dravon. Do you understand the money she'll command?" She take a breath. "And she's the most beautiful angel I've ever seen."

Not that she seen many angels. None o' us have. Angels be rare 'round these parts. An' for good reason—they been rounded up ever since Variant took control o' things. Rumor got it that all them girl angels are bein' purposely put on the extinct list. Same thing happened to the boy angels a long-ass time ago, an' there ain't none o' them left.

"Then you ain't gonna turn her over to Variant?" Dravon ask in his big, dumb voice that matches his dumb expression. I hope he chokes on his tongue.

Anona laughs, but it's a cold sound. "Turn her over to Variant?" she repeat an' shake her head like Dravon gotta be the biggest idiot she ever met. He definitely the biggest idiot I ever met.

"And forego the fortune I'll make on her? Why would I even consider such a foolish thing?"

Hmm, not turnin' the angel over to Variant would be considered an even foolisher thing. Variant ain't someone you want on your bad side. An' he don't exactly like Anona as it is. For reasons jist like this one. Anona's always tryin' to ride the line 'tween doin' what Variant orders an' doin' whate'er she want.

"Ain't it the law, mistress?" Dravon ask.

“She’s legal,” Anona tells him as she downs another gulp o’ wine an’ then belches real loud. She ain’t much o’ a lady. “She has the markings on her back. That’s all I care about.”

“But, mistress, Variant’s edict says all angels gotta be turned over to him, markings or not.” He pause for another second before he open his big, ugly mouth agin. “An’ ain’t you worried that once our customers realize what she is, word gonna spread and get back to Variant anyways? Or maybe someone goes to him direct to tell him we keepin’ an angel?”

“It would be in every one of my customers’ best interests to keep their mouths shut if they want to continue enjoying her, right, Dravon?”

“Yeah, but gossip still gossip, mistress. An’ gossip get out.”

Anona shrug. “Even if Variant were to find out I had an angel, I doubt he’d do much. We have a long history, Dravon. Perhaps he’d even allow me to keep the girl, if he knew she was no threat to him.”

Dravon look like he don’t believe a word she sayin’ which show he’s smarter than he look ‘cause Anona talkin’ all kinds o’ shit. “Seem like a risk ta me, mistress.”

Anona wave her hand in Dravon’s face like she tryin’ ta say Variant can go fuck his edict. “Your conversation bores me, Dravon.” She downs her wine an’ pounds the glass on the table. That’s my cue to refill it, which I do. While I float past Dravon, I let out a rippin’ fart which, owin’ to my size, sounds more like a zipper openin’. But the smell ain’t gonna be good; I spent my mornin’ eatin’ farringer mushrooms.

Hahaha, the twat.

“But what ‘bout all that ramblin’ the angel was sayin’ ‘bout someone or somethin’

followin' her? It coulda been Variant's soldiers after her?" Dravon ask, turnin' his head to the right an' then to the left, sniffin' real hard an' suckin' my fart up through his nose.

Got you, ugly prick!

Then I think 'bout what the dickhead just said. Someone was followin' the angel? Interestin'. Maybe Variant's emissaries were after her, or maybe the bounty hunters? Or maybe just some hungry-ass creature wantin' a little meat?

"You told me you saw no one and nothing following her," Anona answer him with a shrug. "Those were the ramblings of an addict, Dravon. You saw how bad her Atacomite withdrawals were."

"Bad," Dravon confirm with a heavy nod. "And now?"

Anona smile real broad like an' motions to the top of the stairs. "Now, she sleeps like a babe. And sleep, she'll need, because her vacation here ends tomorrow."

"Vacation?"

"Tomorrow, she goes to work," Anona say. "Tomorrow, she starts making me my fortune." She take a deep breath an' stands. "And on that note, I'll check on her." She take a step forward an' face me. "Flumph, prepare our guest a plate of food."

"Yes, mistress," I answer.

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FLUMPH

I float behind Anona while she take the stairs. I'm busy balancin' the plate o' radishes an' stewed beef she got me carryin' 'tween my small hands. When Anona reach the hallway, she stride forward an' pull out a skeleton key from her pocket. Then, she rattles with the lock 'til I feels like I'm ready to drop that heavy-ass plate! Finally, the stupid bitch unlock the door an' walk inside, me flyin' jist behind her.

I heard Anona's got a great ass but far's I can tell, it look like anybody else's. I ain't exactly an ass connoisseur though 'cause as a sprite, I'm asexual. It's a damned good thing too, 'cause I seen plenty o' males with female problems an' I want none o' that shit.

I put the plate down on the rickety-lookin' chair next to the cot where the girl be. That's when I look at her. She's passed the fuck out, but now I get why Anona be in such a good mood. The girl real beautiful. Easily the most beautiful girl I ever seen. An' that be sayin' a lot since I'm asexual, 'member?

"Rise and shine, gorgeous," Anona say, but the girl don't move. Her veins are thrummin' with the bold, green lines of Atacomite . That mean it probly gonna take a while to wake her up.

Anona lean over the girl an' put her hands 'neath the girl's armpits, liftin' her into a seated position. The girl's head flops forward like she ain't conscious.

"We need to get you cleaned up for your busy day tomorrow," Anona goes on, mostly to herself. "Once word gets out about you, you'll have a long wait list."

The angel don't open her eyes. Anona frown an' inhale real deep—it's what she do when she feelin' impatient. She shake the girl 'til the girl open her eyes. An' her eyes are like two crazy blue jewels glowin' in her face.

"Flumph, order her a bath," Anona bark at me, an' I dutifully fly out the room an'

stall over the railin’.

“Godwin!” I yell, but ‘cause I be so damn small, my voice don’t carry over the noise o’ the tavern. I float a few feet forward an’ yell for Godwin agin. The bastard’s hard o’ hearin’.

Someone on the floor tells the ogre I’m hollerin’ for him an’ the enormous creature appear a few seconds later. He look up at me with a dumb expression. His body be so big, it take up the whole door frame, but he also got this ridiculous little pin-head on top. He look like a giant tick.

“Fill a tub an’ carry it up to the middle room,” I command. “An’ don’t go sloshin’ none o’ the water out.”

“Yessir,” Godwin say in his dopey voice.

I turn ‘round an’ flap back into the angel’s room. By this time, Anona got the girl standin’, though she don’t seem too stable on her feet. Anona’s holdin’ her upright with a hand on each o’ the girl’s hips. They both facin’ a mirror on the far side o’ the room. The girl’s eyes are barely open, an’ she swayin’ from one side to the other like she’s tryin’ to get her footin’.

Poor thing’s so high, she probly thinks she’s on a ship somewheres.

“Yes, you’re quite the sight to see, aren’t you?” Anona ask as she release one o’ the girl’s hips in order to brush her matted an’ filthy white hair away from her face. It one o’ them faces you don’t forget. Her skin’s pale an’ the shape o’ her facial bones is a perfect heart. Her eyes be large, fringed with black lashes that match her arched eyebrows. Her nose be real small, an’ her cheekbones look like they’d stick out when she smile. I ain’t seen an angel before soze I can’t comment on what the others look like, but this one kinda reminds me o’ a faerie. Her mouth’s the color o’ a rose an’



she got some plump lips. Even with the dark circles 'neath her eyes, she be stunnin'.

"We'll get you fixed up in no time," Anona prattle as Godwin appear at the doorway, carryin' the metal tub o' warm water. "In the middle of the room," Anona say to him an' he obediently place the tub to her specifications. Then, he look from Anona to the angel an' it like his brain just stop workin'.

He standin' there, lookin' like a bigger fool than I already given him credit for.

"You can leave, Godwin," I tell him as I push 'gainst the back o' his tiny, dumb head, an' he finally remembers hisself an' trudges toward the door.

Meanwhile, Anona busyin' herself with removin' the girl's ripped an' dirty clothin'. Once the girl is nekked, Anona jist look at her in the mirror, a small smile turnin' up the corners o' her mouth. It's a smile, sure, but it real ugly-like. She cup each o' the girl's big titties an' nods.

"These will make your clients very happy," she say. "My clients very happy. How lucky I am." Anona's eyes follow the shape o' the girl's stomach 'til they rest on the thatch o' white hair 'tween her thighs. Anona bite her bottom lip an' look like she thinkin' 'bout somethin' real hard. "I wonder just how far my luck extends," she say as she move her hand from the girl's titty down to her thighs.

The girl, meanwhile, is comin' in an' out o' awareness. Just now, her eyelashes drift down an' her head slouches forward, like she be asleep. Or dead. Hopefully not dead.

"If you're intact," Anona continue. "We'll have an auction for your virginity."

Usin' her index finger, Anona parts the girl's lips an' inserts her finger inside. The girl don't even flinch. The smile on Anona's face drop a little when she pull her finger back out.

“Seems someone has already gotten to you.” She look put-out. “Oh, well, you’ll still command a mighty sum.”

She lead the girl to the bath an’ help her settle into the water. Then, Anona turn to me. “Flumph, bathe her and do something about that hair. I want her stunning for tomorrow morning. Trim the hair over her mound, as well. Feed her by hand if you must, but see to it that she eats every last bite on that plate. Then, she needs her beauty sleep.”

“Yes, mistress,” I say as Anona start for the doorway. I flutter ‘round to watch her leave an’ notice she shut an’ lock the door behind her. I ain’t worried ‘bout bein’ locked in, my hands’re small enough to fit inside the lock an’ I be a master locksmith.

When I’m alone with the girl, I take a deep breath an’ begin washin’ her, feelin’ sorry for her all the while. Yeah, Anona saved her from whatever the hells was followin’ her but now, her life will be this—bein’ whored out to whoever bids the highest. Day in an’ day out. I wonder if, once she be coherent, she’ll wish she was dead. If she ever get coherent...

What happen next shock the livin’, lovin’ hell outta me, an’ I still can’t really believe it happened. I dunno if I hit a magic button or what, but no sooner do I think ‘bout the misery o’ this girl’s new life than fuckin’ wings sprout out her back!

White, feathered wings twelve feet long! An’ they sprout right where the markings are! Markings that supposedly reveal she had her wings burned off. But burned off they ain’t! ‘Cause they be flappin’ right in front o’ me, sure as mine are flappin’ right back!

“Thunder butterfuck!” I say as my heart start poundin’, an’ I look back at the door to make sure no one comin’ in. Anyone see this angel with wings an’ it’s an immediate death sentence for her, right here an’ right now!

“You gotta put them things away, girl!” I whisper right into her ear. Her wings jist beat back an’ forth like a dumb dog excited to meet me. “Girl!” I insist. “You gotta hide them things or you gonna get killed!”

I dunno if she hear me or if it jist be coincidence, but as soon’s the last word is out my mouth, the girl’s wings fold up an’ disappear into her back, leavin’ jist the dark black tattooed markings.

When I float back ‘round to the front o’ her, I notice her head’s slouched forward an’, by her breathin’, it seem like she sound asleep. I just hover in the air for a minute whiles I try to figure out what the fuck shit I should do.

If I tell Anona ‘bout the girl’s wings, she’ll kill her ‘cause she knows that edict ain’t something she can mess with. Or maybe she’ll try to burn the wings off herself, which’ll jist mean a longer an’ worser death for the poor thing.

I sigh when the answer come to me like one o’ them nasty burps that remind ya o’ what ya ate for lunch.

I gotta go to the Shadow King an’ tell him we got ourselves a real angel down at the tavern in Precinct Five.

Fuck me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

### DRAGAN

#### Shadow Realm

“What do you want, sprite?” I ask the irritating creature as it flits before me, buzzing incessantly like a bloody mosquito. At its full height, it stands just above my ankle.

Frankly, I’m shocked as fuck to see it here, in the dark realm and in the middle of my throne room. But here it is, all the same.

“I... oh shit... I got me some big... I got big news,” it answers in a tinny voice, its breathing so erratic it can barely get the words out. Its wings beat madly, creating a hissing sound and causing the tiny thing to shift up and down, back and forth.

The news must be big considering the sprite came here, to the Gorge, to the land of Shadow filled with Shadow Magic. Creatures such as this one are not found in this realm of darkness—nor are they welcome.

“Spit it out,” I say, leaning back into my throne and observing the silly creature with disinterest. “I’m a busy man.”

The sprite looks around, appearing anxious when its gaze rests on the centurions posted along either wall. Gargoyles. Their complexions are as stony as the rock from which they’re made. They appear as lifeless statues, perched along the perimeter of the room. Some are larger than others, some hunched over and others standing up straight. Some maintain their mortal forms, appearing carved from stone, while others reveal their gargoyle form—underslung jaws with pronounced canines, beady

narrowed eyes, and round, misshapen heads.

To the untrained eye, they pose no risk, similar to empty armor lining the walls of a corridor. But, in this case, the untrained eye becomes the dead eye.

Yes, they're stone, but such stone is capable of animation, such stone rescinds into the warmth of flesh and blood. Such stone isn't stone at all. And such stone is deadly.

"They won't harm you," I assure the sprite as it returns its attention to me. "Without my order."

The creature clears its throat nervously. "Lord o' the Shadow Lands," it starts, clearing its throat at least another three times in quick succession.

"Call me Dragan."

It nods and takes a deep breath before proceeding to blast me with so many words spoken at once and at such extreme speeds that I can't make out what the bloody idiot is trying to tell me. "Again," I say, shaking my head and doing my best to dampen the swelling tide of anger that's beginning to crest inside me. "I couldn't understand a fucking word."

The sprite immediately closes its mouth and nods, then takes another deep breath. "I came here from freakin' Precinct Five 'cause I couldn't think o' no one else to come to." Apparently realizing I could choose to be offended by its comment, the sprite pauses for a moment before opening its mouth to speak again. "Wait. That didn't come out right. What I meant to say is that I couldn't think o' no one to give this information to who would be powerful enough to actually do somethin' with it. But you're the only person I'm aware o' who possesses Arcane Magic. Soze I'm here."

Precinct Five. Interesting. "Does Anona know you've come to see me?"

“Fuck no!” the sprite nearly shouts, and its wings begin to beat double-time. “I snuck out quick as I could. Word get back to Anona an’ she’ll have my balls served on a platter.”

“An unimpressive meal, to say the least.”

“Right,” the sprite continues, clearly unoffended by my low opinion of his testicles. But, truly, given the creature’s size, his testicles would be little to make note of. “Anyways, Anona probly hasn’t even noticed I’m gone yet. But it only be a matter o’ time ‘fore she do, soze we gotta make this little visit real quick, Demon Lord.”

“I’m not a demon.”

“Whatever. Shadow Lord.”

“Call me Dragan... for the second time.”

“Yeah, that’s easier to ‘member.” It takes another deep breath and faces me with eyes too large for its small face. “Anona got herself a real angel, Lord Dragan.” Its voice is haunted.

“That’s what you’ve come to tell me?” I shake my head with a mixture of surprise and irritation while I stand up, letting my wings fan out behind me and arch up to ten feet in either direction. The sprite’s eyes go even wider. “You’ve risked your bloody life—albeit a useless one, but your life all the same—to tell me Anona’s keeping a fucking angel as her newest pet?”

The sprite nods, then shakes its head and its wings beat even more madly, presumably over my display of bad temper. “No, Dragan Shadow, you don’t understand...”

“I understand you’re a fool, sprite,” I announce as my wings begin to beat back and

forth and the immense current throws the creature back two or so feet in the air.

His own wings beat furiously as he attempts to remain airborne. “I ain’t no fool.”

I shake my head. “Even down here, I know about Variant’s edict that all angels are to be returned to him, but I don’t give a fuck, sprite. So, if you’ve come here thinking I’ll reward you for backstabbing your mistress, you’re sorely mistaken. She can keep her fucking angel and deal with the consequences when Variant finds out.”

“This ain’t got nothin’ ta do with Anona!” the little creature rails at me, apparently forgetting its place. “An’ the girl’s not jist an angel,” it yells against the current I’m creating. Losing interest and not wanting the thing to drop dead from exertion, I stop beating my wings and watch as the sprite inhales a much-needed breath.

“Does she bear the markings?” I ask, irritated to be further wasting my time. I’ve half a mind to feed the bloody sprite to the demons, imps, ghouls, and goblins that roam the dark mists beyond the walls of this fortress.

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Then you are wasting my time.” I inhale deeply as I motion to the two centurions closest to me to escort our winged guest out. “Allow him to exit through the Pyre of Shadows and see to it that he leaves unscathed,” I add. The Pyre of Shadows is the portal in and out of the Gorge, my realm. Although maybe I should call it exactly what it is—the realm to which I’ve been banished for over a century now.

The sprite’s annoying and has wasted my time, yes, but I don’t care to have the creature’s blood on my hands. Especially if he belongs to Anona. Our truce is an unstable one, and anything untoward is likely to set her off. I don’t have the interest nor the wherewithal to fight that battle.

“No!” the sprite yells as the two guards shed their stone exterior to become animate. “Listen, Lord Darkness! She ain’t jist a marked angel! As Satan’s your keeper...”

“Satan isn’t my keeper.”

“She has wings!”

“Halt.” I hold up a hand and each of the guards immediately stops walking, taking their stone form again. The sprite is now captured between them, its tiny hands clasped in the stone of the guards’ hands. The creature’s wings stop beating and it slumps forward, obviously exhausted and no longer finding it necessary to keep itself airborne.

“What did you just say?” I demand with renewed attention as I close the few steps that separate us.

“The angel got wings, Dragan Lord,” the sprite repeats nervously, apparently ill at ease with being so close to the King of Gargoyles, the King of Shadow, the master of Arcane Magic.

“That’s impossible,” I say as I continue to study the creature narrowly. “You know as well as I do that all angels’ wings were removed from them long ago.”

“I know it sound crazy,” the sprite tells me, nodding emphatically. “But I’m tellin’ you, this one still got her wings. I saw ‘em for myself.”

“ You saw them? ”

“Sure did,” it confirms. “I was tryin’ to give her a bath, an’ that angel was so outta her mind on Atacomite that her wings jist sort o’ blasted right outta her! I don’t even think she realized what the hell was goin’ on.”



“But you said she had the markings?” I ask, shaking my head in disbelief. I don’t understand how this could be true. If it is true, it’s an oversight—and Variant doesn’t do oversights.

“Yeah, she do! Someone marked her, but that same person musta left her wings intact. Maybe on purpose, maybe not, I dunno. All’s I can tell you is that angel’s got her wings an’ that’s a pretty big deal, righty-oh?”

I shake my head. A “pretty big deal” doesn’t even begin to describe it, should this sprite’s information be accurate. “If what you’re saying is true...”

“It be true. All o’ it.”

“Then the fake markings were no oversight,” I finish as something important occurs to me. “Did Anona see the angel’s wings?”

“Negatory. That be why I came to you, Lord Shadow,” the sprite manages.

“Why didn’t you tell Anona?”

“I couldn’t. You know Anona.”

“I do.”

“Well, if you do know Anona, then you knows that angel’s in trouble the longer she stay in Anona’s care. The tavern’s the wrong place for an angel. ‘specially one with her wings.”

“Is Anona whoring her out?” I ask, knowing Anona and her opportunism all too well. Angels, as rare as they have become, are the most beautiful of creatures and, as such, they’re highly sought-after. But one with her wings intact... I can’t even comprehend

what her street value would be.

“That be Anona’s plan,” the sprite responds. “Startin’ tomorrow. That’s why we gotta free her tonight, Dragan Shadow Master.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” I answer him immediately as I cross my arms against my chest and try to decide what the fuck I should do. If the sprite speaks the truth and there really is an intact angel at the tavern, then I have no choice but to go after her. “I take orders from no one.”

“Right, right. Forgive me for my insolence, Shadow Demon,” the sprite says, then takes a deep breath.

“And stop with the titles.”

“Time’s of the essence, Dragan Lord. An’... an’ that angel needs yer help.”

I’m quiet as I consider what this means. If the sprite’s telling the truth and the angel really does possess her wings, she could be the answer to the imbalance between shadow and light. She could be the only weapon against the power and madness of Variant. A power and madness that’s quickly changing life as we know it—and not for the better.

But if the sprite’s lying or has his facts confused, this will be a colossal waste of my time. Not to mention, Anona isn’t someone I want as my enemy.

“If you’re lying to me,” I begin as I stare him through.

He interjects quickly “I ain’t, you gotta trust me. I’m tellin’ you the truth.”

I maintain my expression. “If not, your ending won’t be a pleasant one.” Then, I turn

away from him and face the ten or so soldiers who line the room. “We have an errand this evening,” I explain. “Thoradin.” I address the head of my centurion guards.

“Yes, my liege?”

“Assemble another ten or so men. We’ll be paying a visit to Anona in Precinct Five.” Thoradin nods as I face the guards still holding the sprite. “Release him,” I order before starting down the long expanse of stone that leads from the throne room. My centurions take formation behind me. Seconds later, the sprite floats up beside me.

“What’s your name, sprite?”

The creature beams from ear to ear. “Flumph, Your Shadow Highness.”

This is going to be a long evening.

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FLUMPH

“How did you get into the Gorge, sprite?” Dragan, the Demon Shadow Lord or whatever the hells he calls himself, ask me. I don’t notice ‘til now that his eyes be as gray as the stone surroundin’ him.

He’s definitely an evil-lookin’ guy with his longish black hair, heavy eyebrows, an’ the way he snarls at me whenever he talks. He wear this long ass black cloak over his shoulders an’ it trail on the ground. He ain’t got nothin’ underneath it ‘cept for a pair o’ black pants an’ his shoes.

I heard tell he’s a gargoyle which I dunno much ‘bout, but what I can say is he’s freakin’ huge. He’s got muscles bigger than my body which, I guess, ain’t sayin’

much.

“The keeper of the Well of Shadows owed me a favor,” I tell him with a shrug.

The Well of Shadows be the only way to reach the Gorge an’ it’s guarded by Keepers—creatures whose sole purpose is to guard the comin’s an’ goin’s o’ visitors to an’ from the Gorge. For good reason. In general, this ain’t the type o’ place you wanna go on vacation. It be cold as warlock balls, an’ shrouded in mist so it’s real hard to see. That, an’ it’s always dark. Guess that makes sense, though, ‘cause it be the Shadow Land.

I follow Dragan through the dark hallway, doin’ my damndest to keep up with him but his stride’s so fast, my wings feel like they gonna rip right outta my back. Not that Dragan takes no notice. That bastard’s as cold as his goddamn castle. An’ he arrogant, too.

Dick.

Either side o’ us are his gargoyle soldiers, who look like rocks come to life. Rocks with real bad attitudes, anyways. An’ that’s basically what they are. Dragan animated the stone gargoyles with his Arcane Magic. Or at least, that’s how the story been told since I was a young’un.

None o’ them soldiers look at us, they just stare straight ‘head as they march through the castle, or whatever the hell this place is called. Whatever it is, it’s real big an’ it’s real cold. It be like four stories high an’ made outta stone. The stone match the soldiers an’ the king o’ the place, so maybe the castle’s made outta them too an’ comes ta life? I don’t really know but it wouldn’t surprise me. An’ there ain’t no comfortable furniture, neither. Dragan’s chair-thingy he was sittin’ on was the only piece of furniture I’ve seen yet an’ that was made outta stone, too. I’m guessin’ he suffers a bad back. An’ probly a sore ass.

An' he definitely don't get many visitors down here. But that's how Variant wants it. Dragan an' his militia o' gargoyles was banished into the Gorge way long ago, when Variant broke the Oath an' decided he didn't want to share power no more with the other three protectors. Since then, life as we know it's been a hell o' a downer.

"How we gonna make our way outta here?" I ask, 'cause I been wonderin'. It be true that the keeper o' the Well of Shadows owed me a favor, but that got me a one-way ticket into the Gorge. I ain't sure it's gonna get me back out agin.

I don't get no response, soze I look up at Dragan an' he's seriously like the biggest fuck I ever seen. Like, even bigger than Godwin, an' Dragan ain't got a little, shrunked-up head. An' he's gotta back that's like the width o' a wall an' his hands are as big as I am, probly.

I've heard tell that he's handsome, or used to be before Variant took control an' banished Dragan an' his gargoyles down here. Now, this guy has a chip on his shoulder the size o'... hisself. The whole time I been here, he ain't smiled once. Makes me half wonder if he even got any teeth.

Dick.

We march outta Castle Death, Dragan in the middle o' all his stone soldiers an' me flyin' right next to him. I notice his wings only show up sometimes. Like right now, as we're walkin', you'd never guess he had none. Maybe they only come out when he's pissed off or somethin'?

"When we arrive at Anona's," Dragan start an' his voice be super deep, so deep it kind o' sounds like rumblin' thunder. "I'll proceed by myself," he continue. "The rest of you will keep sentry around the tavern in case I require your assistance. As you're all aware, we only have an hour from the time we step foot into the Mortal Realm."

No one say nothin', but I figure they hear him loud an' clear 'cause he jist shut his mouth an' keeps walkin'.

“Why’s you only got an hour?”

He look at me like he angry at me for existin'. “After an hour, we turn to stone.”

“Huh?”

“When Variant banished us here, he knew I’d attempt to escape. He took care of that little problem by ensuring that once we leave the Shadow Realm, we have one hour before we’re forced to shift into our gargoyle forms.”

“What happen once you take yer gargoyle form?”

“We can’t shift back until we’re returned to the Shadow Realm.”

“Soze we got an hour?”

“We’ve got an hour. No more questions.”

My wings are gettin’ real tired, soze I float over to his shoulder an’ try to take me a seat on one o’ them enormous things but he flick me away with a big finger right to my gut. Which make me feel like all those mushrooms I ate this mornin’ are gonna come back with a vengeance!

“Don’t do that,” he warns with a glare.

Well, excuse the fuck outta me for gettin’ tired an’ lookin’ for the nearest bench! I don’t say nothin’, though. I just start up flyin’ again, feelin’ real sorry for myself.

Part o' me feels like callin' him out on bein' a prick but then I'm thinkin' he might flick me harder if I does. Plus, he sort o' doin' me a favor, I guess. Well, more like he doin' the angel a favor. But I know this ain't for her, neither. Dragan ain't exactly the charity type. Soze it's really more like he doin' hisself a favor, 'cause he must realize this angel could be the answer to overtakin' Variant.

Not that I think Dragan's all bad. One thing I hears over an' over agin 'bout the King o' Shadow is that he be honorable. An' before Variant took control o' the three realms, it was common knowledge Dragan was the most powerful o' the four o' em. I just hope he's still got some o' that power left—an' I really hope he got some o' that honor left, too.

We walk through stone hallway after stone hallway 'tils we reach a wide-open room o', you guessed it, more stone. In the center o' the stone floor's a whole bunch o' branches all piled up, like the God o' Kindling just airdropped Dragan a gift.

Soon as Dragan walk into the room, the branches suddenly start consumin' theyselves in fire. The flames engulfin' the branches ain't really burnin' the wood, though. It's like they're ghost flames, 'cause while they lappin' at the wood, they ain't burnin' it. An' the flames are blue which is kinda weird, too.

“What's that?” I ask.

“The Pyre of Shadows,” he answer like I should know what the hell that mean.

No sooner do he say the words than I watch his guards start shufflin' toward the pyre in single file. They're walkin' at a good clip, like they ready to jump over it or somethin'. 'Course, the pyre's pretty high. Like, it would reach their waists easy, soze I dunno what they're thinkin' but they definitely ain't gonna make it if they try ta jump. They'll have some deep-cooked balls though, that be for sure.

They keep walkin' closer to the pyre like they ain't too worried 'bout their gonads. As soon's the first one touch the flames, he disappear! Like "poof," he gone!

"Where'd he go?" I ask as I turn to face Dragan, who don't look too concerned.

"The flames transported him to Anona's. Once all of them go through, we'll follow."

"An' the pyre ain't gonna burn me?"

"Did it burn the others?"

"I dunno. I can't see 'em, 'cause they be on the other side."

"You won't be harmed," he answer with little interest.

Dick .



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

FLUMPH

Shadow Realm

Soze we go through the Pyre of Shadows, even though I ain't rightly sure why it be called that. It ain't like it be burnin' with shadows. It should be called the Pyre of Blue Fire or maybe the Pyre that Ain't Gonna Burn Ya Balls . Regardless, after I crosses over, I'm happy ta see I still be the same Flumph I was from the other side.

“Well, I'll be a witch's titty,” I say when I recognize the backside o' Anona's tavern. I turn to my right to see Dragan standin' there. “That Pyre jist takes you wherever?”

“You preconceive your destination before you set foot into the fire and then, yes, it takes you wherever you want to go.” He clear his throat. “Only if you possess Arcane Magic, that is.”

“I thought the whole idea o' Variant banishin' you to the Gorge was to keep you banished?”

Instantly, Dragan's jaw tighten 'til it look like he gonna crack his demon molars. “I'm a master of magic,” he grind out.

“So?”

“So, the Pyre of Shadows was my answer to finding a way out of my banishment,” he say, all pompous-like. “Variant can banish me all he wants but there's nothing he can do to keep me from honing my craft.”

“cept turn you to stone after an hour?”

I almost laugh but I keeps it in. Dragan look surprised that I said what I did an’ honestly, I’m kinda surprised, too, but it were funny. He don’t respond.

I don’t say nothin’ more, neither, but instead jist watch as Dragan’s centurions disappear ‘round the tavern. As in, they literal disappear from sight. Like I can’t see them no more.

“How the fuck they do that?”

“Arcane Magic,” Dragan answer, but his focus is on the tavern. His eyes be narrowed like he tryin’ to decide which be the best way in.

“You keep sayin’ that. What you mean, Arcane Magic?”

“I mean Nethermancy .”

“Who Nancy?”

Dragan sigh. “Shadow Magic blended with arcane energy results in Arcane Magic.”

“Soze what that got ta do with your soldiers jist disappearin’?”

“The centurions are still standing within eyesight but, through a trick of your senses, you can’t see them. It’s called The Untraceable Step , pure gargoyle magic, sprite.”

“Well, I’ll,” I start.

“Remain quiet until I say otherwise,” he interrupt an’ then close his stone-gray eyes.

“I must concentrate in order to locate our captive.”

“Our captive?”

“The angel,” he grumble as he open his eyes an’ looks real annoyed like. Actually, he always look that way.

“I can tell you where she is...”

“You could tell me where she was before you came to see me. Since then, Anona could have moved her and I don’t want to waste more time. This must be a speedy enterprise, because my magic isn’t as potent in this realm.”

“An’ you only got youze an hour.”

“That, too.”

King Shadow Dick close his eyes agin an’ hold his hands out in front o’ him like he suddenly an old, blind beggar. No sooner do he do that than his huge wings come flyin’ outta his back an’ nearly give me a fuckin’ heart attack. The things are black, rubbery, an’ ribbed like bat wings. No wonder I thought he be a demon. With those things archin’ outta him, he damn sure as hell look like one.

“I detect her,” he announce in a deep voice. Then he open his eyes again. “Sprite, you’ve done me a service but, from here, we part ways.”

I clears my throat. This be the part I need to talk to him ‘bout—but was hopin’ for a better time, a little later. “Yeah, about that,” I start. “I had me a gig with Anona which meant I worked for her an’ she gave me housin’, but once she figure I sold her out, it ain’t like I can jist go back there with my tail ‘tween my legs. Especially ‘cause I ain’t gotta tail, anyways...”

“Bloody hell,” Dragan grumble as he shake his head an’ face me real cross-like.

“We’ll discuss it later.”

Then he disappear, jist like his team o’ gargoyle soldiers who be still surroundin’ Anona’s tavern only you can’t see ‘em.

I ain’t ‘xactly sure what ta do with myself an’ I really don’t like missin’ out on the action. That’s when I remembers the broken window on the side o’ the tavern that lead into the storage room where Anona keep all the rations. Just so happens, I’m small ‘nough ta fit inside. No use in me waitin’ out in the cold when I could be packin’ me things, ‘cause after Dragan bust that angel outta here, it ain’t like I can come back. Nosiree—I’ll be on the run.

I fly to the rear o’ the tavern, squeeze through the broken window, then fly up the wooden staircase to the door. I listen ‘gainst the wood, tryin’ to hear if there be voices anywheres nearby. But all’s I can hear is the sound o’ loud music an’ bad singin’ an’ even louder laughter an’ voices. Sound like a full house. Word ‘bout the angel musta already got out.

I reach my lil fingers in the keyhole an’ play with the latch ‘til I hears it click. Then, I rotates the knob ‘til it open an’ I push the door forward. Pokin’ my head out, I see every table is full o’ Anona’s customers an’ they be all drinkin’. Some o’ ‘em are dancin’, too. An’ no one’s payin’ any attention to the door that lead to the storage room.

Quickly, I pop out an’ float down to the ground, realizin’ I’ll be less noticeable if I’m beneath most o’ these creatures’ lines o’ sight. I push the door closed an’ then start for the staircase. I can hear the sound o’ heavy footfalls on the stairs as soon’s I reach ‘em, but since I can’t see no one, I figure it must be Dragan bein’ all invisible an’ shit.

“That you, Shadow Master?” I whisper.

All's I hear back is a shushin' sound, soze I figure it must be 'cause no one else be that rude.

I follows the sound o' his footsteps an' I'm pretty surprised when he turn to the left at the top o' the stairs 'stead o' the right. Guess Anona did move the angel!

"Do you see Anona?" he whisper, which is kinda weird 'cause he ain't got a head or body soze it's kinda like a ghost is talkin' to me. If there be one thing I don't like, it be ghosts. Soze I gets scared for a second 'tils I remind myself it ain't no ghost, but it's really jist the Shadow Demon King.

I float over to the railin' an' look down at the same times I hear Anona's raucous laughter that pinpoint her to the middle o' the room. I floats back to Dragan an' nod. "She downstairs."

I don't get no response, but I notice the doorknob start turnin' all on its own which make me think 'bout ghosts agin an' my little wings start beatin' faster. I watch the door push itself open alls the way an' then I'm facin' the inside o' the room where the angel's passed the fuck out on the bed an' she's totally nekked. Some asshole's tryin' to get his todger into her mouth an' his white ass is facin' us.

Dragan shuts the door behind us an' suddenly pops back into sight whiles his wings shoot out his back an' one of 'em smacks me right in the goddamn face! I go flyin' back like five feet an' check my nose ta make sure it ain't broke. It ain't, but it hurt like a bitch.

What a twat face.

I'm 'bout ta get real angry-like when Dragan grip the guy whose white ass is still hangin' out his pants. Dragan's got a handful o' the guy's dirty gray hair an' yanks him back so hard, the guy can't even make a sound. Then, Dragan flip him 'round an'

glare down at him.

The guy's an elf—I can tell by his pointy ears.

The elf's eyes be so wide, they mostly white, an' I'm wonderin' if he gonna shit hisself right there.

Dragan pull the guy closer 'til it almost look like he gonna kiss him. Which I hope to hells he don't, 'cause I ain't prepared to see none o' that.

But Dragan don't kiss him, an' instead jist stares at him an' the elf jist stares back. It's kind o' an awkward, weird moment soze I jist focus on rubbin' my sore nose whiles I wonder what gonna happen next.

“You believe you got what you came here for,” Dragan say in a monotone, his eyes drillin' into the elf's. “You'll dress in the hallway and, once the time you paid for is up, you'll return to Anona and tell her it was the greatest experience you've ever had,” he continue, clearly usin' his demon powers o' suggestion.

The guy jist nod an' once Dragan release him, he collect his things an' make his way out the door. That be when Dragan's attention turn to the nekked angel on the bed. To his credit, his eyes don't leave her face. But when he look at her, his expression go right blank. It be like there be a mix o' awe an' wonderment, an' he kind o' look like he jist got struck by lightnin' or some shit.

“Didn't I tell you she was beautiful?” I ask, figurin' his reaction's the way every man must feel when they see her. Well, 'cept for me.

“No, you didn't,” he bark back an' his bizarre expression drop clear off his face, replaced with his general grumpy look. He wrap the angel up in the bed linens an' throw her, sack style, over his shoulder. Then, he an' the girl go invisible due ta his

Nancy Magic an' he start for the doorway.

The angel don't make a sound.

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DRAGAN

The girl is fucking beautiful.

I've long known that angels are the most stunning of creatures, but I find myself ill-prepared for the sight of her.

Her hair cascades around her in pure whiteness, the color mimicked in the tone of her skin. I've never seen another creature with hair this shade. It's alluring—almost as alluring as her pink cheeks and the way her rosebud mouth purses into a near heart.

I steal a glance at her naked body: her breasts are heavy, her hips wide, and her legs long and slender. It's the body of a woman built for a man, built for fucking. It's perfection.

Immediately, the shadows within me urge me to take her, to slake myself within the folds of her feminine flesh. I close my eyes, forcing the dark urges back. My hands fist at my sides as my cock strains, eager to feel her wetness. I'm surprised by the power of my reaction to her. Granted, I haven't had a woman in longer than I can remember, but this need is shocking, all the same.

It's a struggle to keep my darkness confined. The shadows within me grow stronger and I worry that soon, they'll completely overtake me, turning me into a creature as cold as the stone I can become. I've mastered the shadows thus far, forcing the power back, subverting it. But it rebels and now, as I look at this sleeping beauty, it's all I

can do to keep myself from thrusting repeatedly inside of her.

I can feel the shadow power within me accentuating the greed, the desire. It's building, fueling my need with every second that lapses. I wonder if the day is fast approaching when the shadows will master me, when I become a mere fucking puppet to them.

I've noticed myself becoming victim more and more often to bouts of uncontrollable rage and as the faceless years have progressed. I've felt my goodness rescinding, my sense of compassion and gentleness the first to be stripped away. Now that coldness is the primary emotion I register within myself, I know that true evil isn't far away.

I'm a taciturn shell of the man I once was, before I ever answered the call of the Midnight Queen to become one of her four protectors. Before Variant killed Baron and broke the Oath. Before life became the hell it now is.

Once I feel the sprite's eyes on me, I'm able to shake off the hold the unconscious girl has on me. But before I'm willing to abscond with her, I must know the truth.

I narrow my eyes as I stare at her still form and immediately notice the black ink markings against her white skin. They appear as two swirls that take up half her back and mark the location where her wings should be.

Allowing my shadows to rise up within me, to fill me with their age-old magic and wisdom, I close my eyes and reach out with both hands until I'm touching the girl in the plane of shadow.

Reveal yourself, I order, compelling her to prove she is what the sprite believes she is. Show your wings.

Nothing happens.



Reveal yourself! I think the command again, harsher this time.

But still, nothing.

Time is slipping through my fingers like sand... I'm stuck with a decision. Do I leave the girl to her fate, or run the risk of Anona revealing to Variant that I've broken through the figurative walls of my prison?

I open my eyes and look at her one last time. Then, I turn around, ready to leave the girl.

She isn't my business. She's not my concern .

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

EILISH

Mortal Realm

Behold him , a voice compels me. A woman's voice.

I'm swimming in a balmy sea, floating on an endless tide of elation. I can't open my eyes, but I also don't want to.

See him , the voice insists.

And while I feel myself still floating in the warmth of my bubbly sea, the images around me are different, now. I know my eyes aren't open, yet I'm still able to see. How this is possible I don't know, but the reason doesn't particularly matter. Instead, I can see a room through my closed eyelids. Seconds later, I focus on a huge and winged man who appears above me.

Shadows cling to his skin, to the rubbery, black wings that arch out of him, bathing him in darkness. He's impossibly large and broad. Muscles litter the landscape of his body like afterthoughts. He's power and menace, strength and danger. He embodies the night just as much as the night embodies him.

I'm nothing but afraid of him. He's terrifying. But the longer I study him, the more I realize there's something lurking beneath his imposing exterior... something that speaks to me, something fleshly, carnal.

My body begins to respond to him, to the smoldering way he looks at me. And, in

turn, I can see his body responding to mine: the way his cock begins to strain against his pants, the way his mouth opens and he scents me on the air with his tongue.

Yes, the voice says, inside my head. Call to him. Appeal to him. Use the power within you to pull him, to force him closer.

Staring up at this mountain of a man, I realize how immense he really is. He could break me in half with nothing more than a thought... Fear begins to echo through me again, beating a wild path inside me next to... exhilaration.

He leans down until only inches of air separate us. His heady, masculine scent invades my senses, filling me with a driving hunger, a need to touch him. He's so close. He causes my heart rate to increase and I feel my chest expand as I take a deep, excited breath.

His face is hard, and anger vibrates off him. He's rough and battle worn.

But it's the light gray of his eyes that draws me. There's something in them that's beautiful, something that hints at a code of honor that still exists within him. I realize then that he won't hurt me.

I want to reach out to him, to touch his olive skin, but my body won't comply. Instead, I stare at him, taking in the angular lines and planes of his face. His black hair reaches his shoulders and matches the darkness of the stubble decorating his strong jaw, chin and cheeks. He's stunningly handsome, but not in a beautiful way. Everything about him is harsh, rough, beyond masculine. Everything about him is darkness, shadow, and intrigue.

More than anything, I want to feel his shadows and darkness plunging into me. I want to feel him burrowing himself so deeply inside me that I scream out in a mixture of pain and pleasure. I want this barbarian, this beast, to own me, to imprint me with his

seed.

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## DRAGAN

I take a step away from the beautiful woman, intent on leaving both her and the annoying sprite, but something pulls me back, as if invisible arms are pushing me to her. The shadows within me are pulling, struggling to maintain their grasp on the unconscious girl. I can feel them wrapping their tendrils of dark mist around her, holding onto her tightly.

“Bloody fuck,” I grumble under my breath as I realize I can’t leave her here, though I also can’t say why. A woman has never had this effect on me. Maybe it’s a sign I need to fuck. I haven’t fucked a woman in so long I can’t remember, and this must be the indication that my body needs it.

I wrap her in the bed linens. As soon as I touch her, though, something happens. I feel power pulsing through her tiny body. It envelops my hand and weaves up my arm, into my chest and causes my breath to freeze. It feels like a legion of ants dancing over every inch of my skin, but the energy is beneath my skin, not on top of it, thrumming and crackling electricity.

I pause momentarily, surprised. There’s strength in her. Power. Yes, I can detect the Atacomite, as well. Anona gave her a hefty dose, no doubt to keep her immobile and, as such, an easy victim. But there’s something else, just beyond the Atacomite . By touching her, I feel my own magic begin to boil up as if it answers her silent call. But this time, the shadows aren’t trying to force me to take her—they’re responding to her, stimulated by her, drawn to her.

I can’t explain it, but I feel captured by her, by the magic that undoubtedly flows

within her.

Using the Arcane Magic that's part of me, I throw her over my shoulder and imagine everything surrounding me in black. Then, I whisper the words to allow myself to become invisible in the eyes of those who would perceive me.

Blind from sight.

I imagine myself fading into the darkness around me, becoming one with the shadows, one with Shadow Magic that infiltrates me—that is me.

I take the stairs slowly, not wanting my footfalls to be detected. But the tavern is a busy and loud place, so maybe I'm being overly cautious. When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I start for the rear of the establishment, the same way I came in. But then I realize the doorway is blocked by a large and buxom woman who's busily kissing a centaur.

"Go to the right," the sprite's voice offers, and I realize he's hiding beneath the bed linens, just on top of the angel's hair.

Little bastard.

Given no other options, I follow his suggestion and find myself facing an empty corridor.

"At the end of the hallway's a door leadin' outside," the sprite continues.

No sooner do I reach the end of the hallway than I hear Anona's high-pitched scream as she presumably discovers her treasure is missing. The panicked sounds of her footfalls overhead meet my ears as she runs down the stairs and announces to the tavern that the angel is missing. Then, the entire room is a cacophony of noise.

I run down the remainder of the hallway and watch as the sprite flies from his perch on top of the girl and attempts to open the door, only to find it locked from the outside. I could use my Shadow Magic to unlock the door but in this realm, my magic isn't as strong as it is in the Shadow Realm. And the last thing I want to do is waste my reserves.

With time dwindling and our options shrinking before our eyes, I pull my leg back and release it, kicking the door open. The sound of the wood splitting is louder than I would've liked. It grabs the attention of Anona and one of her guards, because she appears at the mouth of the corridor a split second later.

"She heard you an' she comin' after us! Go!" the sprite orders and I lurch forward, clinging to the girl as I bolt outside. My magic is weaker in the mortal plane and I can't manage the invisibility facade any longer, so I shed it. But by the time I do, I close my eyes again and pull the shadows to the forefront of my mind.

Summon Mists , I command and when I open my eyes, I'm surrounded by a bank of thick fog that obscures my soldiers and me from view. By this time, I'm ensconced in the forest that borders Anona's tavern, now hidden in part by the trees.

"This way, liege!" one of my centurions, Hlin, calls out from my right and I run in his direction, the sprite remaining airborne just beside me.

At the same time, Anona appears outside.

Arcane Eye! I command, and I can no longer see from my right eye as the magic within me borrows my vision, thrusting the eye far above the line of the trees where it floats, invisible, and homes in on Anona. Once the mists of my magic recede, she tracks me, her eyes latching onto me immediately.

But she's too late. My centurions have already prepared the Arcane Gate , a portal

spell that will allow us reentry into the Gorge.

The Arcane Gate appears as a two-dimensional glowing ring filled with the dark mist of the Gorge. It hovers an inch or so above the ground and, at my signal, my centurions begin filling it, crossing over into our home territory.

As the Arcane Eye disposes of itself, my vision returns.

“Dragan!” Anona squeals behind me as I jump into the Gate and feel the coldness of the Shadow Magic of the Gorge enveloping me, recognizing me and becoming one with me.

I’m home.

Unfortunately, however, Anona has spotted me and I know what this means. The angel won’t be safe in the Gorge. Once Variant learns that I’ve taken an angel hostage, he’ll wonder why. Of course, he won’t imagine she still possesses her wings (and I’m beginning to doubt whether she truly does) but there’s a reason his most recent edict included the return of all angels. He’s planning something—and, whatever it is, I’m convinced it’s terrible.

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DRAGAN

“Where to, Shadow Master?” the sprite asks with a wide grin once we’re safely ensconced in the darkness of the mist, in the plane of shadow.

“You’re still here?” I respond, pausing to set the angel down before me.

“I ain’t got nowhere’s else ta go,” he answers with a shrug. “Anona’s place was my

home an' clearly, I can't go back theres no more. So, looks like I'm stuck with you. You need a servant or somethin'? I'm real good at servin' drinks without spillin'."

"No," I answer but I can't say my attention is on him at present. Instead, I want proof that I haven't just made a crucial mistake. One that could cost me more than I'm willing to pay. I need to find out if this angel is truly intact.

Admittedly, I tried doing the same back at Anona's, but my magic wasn't at its strongest then. Here, I should have no issue in summoning the angel's wings—that is, if she truly possesses them.

Once I place the girl down on the ground, she's immediately enveloped by the roving mist. I reach down and roll her over, pulling the linens down to reveal her backside.

"What you doin'?" the sprite asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Ensuring that I haven't been sold a bill of goods," I answer without looking up at him.

"What the fuck's that mean?"

"We'll soon find out," I respond as I hold my hands above the angel's back and allow the shadows to rise up within me, invoking the power of my magic. Tendrils of dark energy erupt from my fingertips and surround the still girl.

Reveal your true form.

But my magic is buttressed against something that surrounds her. As I push against whatever this reinforcement is, my magic seems to dissipate, growing weaker. I summon more of my shadow forth, but it simply dispels once it reaches whatever invisible barrier envelops her. Though I can't see the forcefield, I can feel it. My



magic can feel it.

“I don’t understand,” I say aloud, anger consuming me.

“What’s there to understand?” the sprite responds as Thoradin appears beside him with another of my legion, Gurdis, beside him. I look up at them and shake my head.

“What perplexes you, liege?” Thoradin asks.

“She has a magical barrier,” I explain as I study the unconscious girl, trying to ascertain just how powerful she is.

“Her veins are swimming with Atacomite ,” Gurdis says.

“Yes, but that’s not the reason she’s unresponsive,” I respond, shaking my head because my power should be strong enough to force the girl to respond. I then face the sprite, who leans over Gurdis’ shoulder to inspect the girl. “Unless there’s nothing for her to respond to,” I announce, my eyes narrowing on the sprite.

“What d’you mean?” the creature asks.

“If the angel has no wings, there’s no amount of my Shadow Magic that could make them appear,” I say.

It takes the sprite a moment or two to understand what I’m getting at. Once he does, his eyes go wide and he begins shaking his head, holding up his hands in obvious supplication.

“I dunno why yer magic ain’t workin’ but I’m tellin’ you what I saw. This angel got her wings. Maybe she be too high on Atacamite an’ it be gettin’ in the way o’ your little spell...”

“She’s not. Atacomite has nothing to do with it,” I interrupt. “And it’s not a little spell, as you put it. Shadow Magic is hardly little nor can it be categorized as spells .”

“Give it some time,” the sprite says, but he appears nervous. “I can prove to you that you’re thinkin’ be wrong.” He nods emphatically. “You’ll see. Besides, it ain’t like yer jist gonna leave her here, are ya?” He glances around and seems to become frightened by his surroundings.

The Shadow Realm is hardly safe, littered as it is by bloodthirsty creatures and the undead. Were I to leave the sprite and the girl here alone, they would undoubtedly be killed within a half hour, at most.

And even I’m not that horrible.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

BARON

One Hundred Years Earlier

Mortal Realm

The darkness embraces me, rocks me in its dark cradle.

“Arise my chosen one,” a melodic, sweet voice interrupts the nothingness of my slumber.

“Arise my champion of darkness, of shadow.”

Then the peace, warmth, and tranquility of the void is lost to me as a chilling cold takes its place, enveloping me with the breath of ice.

“Arise my Revenant,” the saccharine female voice continues, beckoning me forth. I am unable to deny her whisper, to resist her compulsion.

I can feel again. And all I feel is a chill that emanates from deep within me. My chest is heavy, constricted.

“Come, my Shadow Knight.”

The words, as soft as fluttering wings, are an order to a body that cannot refuse them. And I am locked inside that body. My eyes snap open of their own accord. And though it is pitch blackness, I can see.

But what I see does not make sense to me. It is the top of something round that surrounds me on all sides. I am trapped beneath it. I turn my neck. No, I am trapped within it.

“Call on your shadows, Revenant, tell them to free you.”

Something burns within me. Determination, perhaps.

I do not understand what the voice is saying but I feel something welling up within me all the same. It flutters and fills me with a buoyancy I struggle to describe.

I feel my hands come up on either side of me, and my palms place themselves flat against whatever is encapsulating me. I push.

What feels like wood begins to splinter beneath my hands, breaking away as something dark and crumbly falls against my face and into my mouth.

Dirt. And worms.

I close my eyes as I continue pushing against the wood, cracking it with the sheer force of my strength.

I feel myself sitting up as more of the wet earth pushes against me, trying to drive me back into the cold and moist darkness. I claw at the dirt, digging through it as I force myself into a standing position. The dirt falls around me, filling the cavity of the hole that holds me captive.

I dig upward, never pausing, never stalling, even when I realize I am not breathing—there is no expansion in my chest, nor the feeling of air filling my lungs. I do not breathe and yet I am animate. I cannot explain it.

Instead, I dig for what feels like an eternity. And when I finally feel nothing but air beneath my fingertips, I do not pause. I pull myself from the crevice even as it attempts to suck me ever downward.

“Open your eyes and behold a world you have not seen in far too long,” the voice announces, but its mistress is nowhere to be seen. “You have arrived, Revenant.”

The dirt falls away from my eyes as I blink, allowing my vision to adjust to the bright moonlight that acts as a beacon upon me. I do not understand where I am. Colors are dim, as though bathed in a wash of gray, and every sound is foreign, new. The world appears strange.

I glance around myself and feel a shudder pass through me at what I see.

Headstones, old and broken.

Some are nothing more than crumbling masonry. The ground is uneven, sprayed here and there with tufts of mostly dead grass.

I am in the hallowed ground of the dead, surrounded by those engaged in a sleep that has been denied me.

Brief images suddenly splatter through my confused mind. Before this place, I existed somewhere else. That place was dark, too, but the darkness was not akin to this. It was not so cold. A fleet of faces, scenes, and feelings blast me at the same time—all jumbled and confused.

“What has happened?” I demand, my voice sounding scratchy. As though I have not used it in decades. But it is my voice all the same; I recognize it.

“You have returned upon my dictate,” the voice answers. “I have awoken you from

your forever sleep, Revenant, because I have need of you.”

My forever sleep? I try to understand what this means, to understand what came before this moment, but my memory is a blank slate. There is nothing there, other than the flood of images that feel more like a half-forgotten dream.

I do not understand how it is possible, but I understand what has happened.

I was dead.

Perhaps, I still am.

I attempt to stand, but I am wobbly on my feet and must grasp onto a large headstone so I do not lose my footing. As I do, a gentle rain begins to fall, bathing me in cold tears.

Looking down upon myself, I find the dirt that coats me becoming mud, successfully camouflaging my ripped and mostly disintegrated clothing. I wonder how long I was buried within the unforgiving ground.

Somehow, I have been returned to a world I vacated long ago. How long ago, I am uncertain, as the hollowness of my memory is unreliable at best.

I throw my head back and open my mouth as wide as it will go as a scream blasts from my lips, echoing through the headstones of the city of the dead.

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BARON

Mortal Realm

I sit in a plush, velvet lounge chair with a woman in my lap. I don't know her name. She wears only stockings, held up by a black lace garter belt, and her breasts are in my face. Not that I mind. I busily drink from the generous artery in her neck. Her blood tastes like earth, which is unsurprising since she's a satyr.

The woman isn't the reason I'm here—the man just behind her is. He's my target: a half-orc who looks mostly human, except for his immense height and girth, pointed ears, underslung jaw, and fangs. He's beyond ugly.

The target sits perhaps ten feet to my right, with a faerie on his lap who is one-quarter the size he is. I'm not exactly certain what he plans to do with her or how he plans on doing it, but because this is a brothel, perhaps I'm just being ignorant.

Regardless, I have a job to do.

Once I have satiated myself on the satyr's blood, I stand, feigning the need to visit the restroom. As I'm a bloodsucker, I have no digestive system of which to speak of, thus it's unnecessary for me to relieve myself.

The satyr is so high on Atacomite , she isn't bothered when I separate myself from her. In fact, I doubt she even realizes I've been feeding on her for the last ten minutes. And, no, the Atacomite has no effect on me. Over the years, I've developed a tolerance for most poisons.

Using the shadows that animate me, I bathe myself in a cloud of night, appearing as a space of relative darkness to anyone who cares to look my way. It would not behoove me for anyone to remember my face. Not that anyone in this room could, anyway. Prior to becoming shadow, I had used my inherent magic to alter my image, ensuring no one would recognize me if the need for such discretion ever arose.

I start towards my target, the half-orc.

He is busily kissing the faerie, nearly consuming her entire face and slobbering all over her in the process. Revolting. But also, not my business.

I move with the shadows until I'm standing just behind him, but he and the faerie are no more aware of me than anyone else in the room. Just as I planned.

I hold my hands together until my shadows take shape between them, then release the Death Mark—a black sigil of Shadow Magic. The mark latches onto the back of the target's head, and the sigil pulses with my shadows, creating a bond between executioner and victim. I will be able to track him now, wherever he goes.

But my business here isn't quite finished.

I glance down and unwind the leather reticule from around my waist. Opening the flap, I behold the array of vials of liquids and powders contained within it—my poisoning kit. I run my fingers across them until I reach the one I'm searching for: Spined Devil Venom. I pull the glass vial out.

The liquid is a deep midnight blue, oily and thick. Once it travels into the target's blood stream, it will cause his body to become sluggish as the poison attacks the muscles and essential tissues that aide the body in movement. The Spined Devil Venom simply makes it easier for me to finish my job later.

Pulling the smallest of my daggers from within my shirt sleeve, I tug the cork from the bottle and dip the pointy end of the blade into the blue liquid until it coats perhaps a quarter of an inch. It's not much, but I don't require much—a slight scratch on the target's neck will do the trick.

I replace the cork in the vial, then place the vial beside its brethren and tie the black, leather cord around my waist once again. Then, using the shadows to blind my activities, I approach the target. My feet don't make a sound as the shadows surround



me entirely, acting as misty buffers beneath my soles.

Holding the edge of the blade to the target's neck, I graze him only slightly. It will feel like he's been bitten by a pesky insect. As I imagine, he immediately scratches his neck before continuing to grope his acquaintance.

The target stands a few seconds later. His breath is already slowing; the poison works quickly. He lifts the tiny faerie and she wraps her legs around his waist with a high-pitched giggle. They exit the room, heading to the bedrooms upstairs to further their carnal pleasures. Or so he believes.

I'm quick behind my target, though I'm uninterested in watching his bedroom antics. But it will be easier to escape unnoticed if I make my exit where there are fewer onlookers. Upstairs provides an empty hallway.

Once I reach the top of the stairs, I start forward, my Shadow Magic allowing me to walk directly through the brick wall ahead of me. I do so and gently float down to the cobbled street below, my feet making no sound at all when they touch down.

I hide in the shadows, allowing them to envelop me in their welcoming embrace. And then I simply await my target to empty from the whorehouse. I finger the chain of bones I wear around my neck and wonder how much longer this bastard will be. I'm a busy man.

The target will not be long. The Spined Devil Venom will see to that.

I feel a pull from the Death Mark, alerting me that the target is coming closer.

I know nothing about the half-orc's identity, other than his species, but neither do I care. All I care about is payment. And that will come soon enough.

The target walks past me, where I lurk in the shadows of the alley. His gait is already sluggish. I step out from my hiding place and follow him. Using the shadows that pollute me, I weave them around myself until I simply blend into the darkness and no one can detect me, all the while running my fingers over the bones that decorate my neck.

I watch him unlock his vehicle and take a seat behind the wheel. He starts the car and proceeds forward. No matter. As a vampire, I'm known for my exceptional speed. It's no feat to keep up with him.

He pulls into the garage of a well-to-do home in one of the few prestigious areas still remaining. I imagine he works for Variant. Otherwise, he wouldn't enjoy such blessings. If such is the case, I'll enjoy finishing this job more than I thought I would.

He turns his vehicle off and throws the door open, lurching to his feet. He sways before struggling to his front door and, once inside, collapses on the floor. I'm seconds behind him.

Before entering, I close my eyes and send my shadows out to detect if there's anyone else here—anyone I haven't planned for. There isn't. The place is clear. I proceed after the target.

He still doesn't know he's being followed. He drags himself across the marble floor. Even though we're bathed in the pitch of night, I possess Darkvision and, thus, can see. And this bastard is loaded. I'm certain his riches are ill-gotten.

He stops moving once he reaches the center of the room and then just lays there. Then he flips himself over until he's facing the ceiling, his chest rising and falling with his elevated breathing. No doubt he's wondering what's happened to him.

I stand above him and allow my shadows to melt away. In the guile of night, he won't

be able to decipher the features of his executioner. And even if he does, it won't matter much longer.

I untie the leather straps from my waist and glance down at my family of poisons.

“Who do you work for?” I ask as I lean over him. Of course, he's too far gone at this point to respond, so I do it for him. “Variant? Blink twice if the answer is yes.”

He doesn't say anything. Doesn't blink. Just stares straight ahead.

I chuckle, a menacing, ugly sound. “We can do this one of two ways. Either way, you're going to die. But I can make that death a fairly pleasant one or, with the help of Ghoul Oil , I can ensure you suffer a long bout of insanity before the Death Knight finally claims you. Or perhaps you'd prefer to be eaten from the inside out, courtesy of my Lich Dust?” I pause, mainly for dramatic effect. “I don't advise death by Lich Dust. It's painful and messy.” Leaning down, I put my mouth right next to his ear and whisper, “so I shall ask you again, do you work for Variant?”

He blinks twice.

I stand up with a quick nod. “I thought so.” Then, I shuffle through my menagerie of poisons. Yes, I could simply drain him, but the Spined Devil Venom will have spread through his entire system by now, and it's not the most pleasant taste.

Instead, I reach down into my reticule and produce the vial of Unknowing Death . To the ignorant onlooker, it appears as though the vial is empty—but therein is the Unknowing Death's beauty. Quite the contrary, it's full of an invisible agent that, once inhaled, provides death almost immediately.

Owing to the fact that I have no respiratory system, I'm safe when handling airborne poisons.

I uncork the vial, then bring it just below the target's nose. Gripping his jaw with my free hand, I press his mouth shut. It's a matter of seconds before he's forced to breathe through his nose. As soon as he inhales the Unknowing Death, I recork the vial and place it back in my armory, then stand to watch the poison take action.

The Unknowing Death kills by evaporating all liquid from a target's body, reducing him to a pile of bones. And it does so within perhaps two minutes.

The paymaster who hired me for this job requires proof of the target's death. Thus, I must take the extra step of securing what's left of the half-orc's body. Releasing the clasp, I pull the chain of bones from around my neck. Each one is hollow, open on one end, and two to three inches long. I select one of the bones and hold it up, willing my shadows to blow into it since I'm unable. Rather than the sound of air coming from the other end, the bone plays a note, deep and doleful.

My shadows begin to swirl around what was once the half-orc and is now merely a pile of bones and bodily debris, shrinking everything into a mass that is perhaps a centimeter in length and width. Then, the mess is summarily whisked into the hollow recess of the bone. When there's nothing left on the floor, I stand and replace the chain around my neck where it belongs. Soon, I will deliver the remains of the half-orc to the paymaster. Once the remains are freed from the bone, they will return to their original size.

The target will be identified by his teeth.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

FLUMPH

The Infinite Forest

Fae Realm

I'm startin' ta wonder if I'm drugged outta my damn mind jist as bad as that angel is.

'Cause one minute, we're in the shadow forest an' I'm tryin' to convince big, pissed off Goliath that I ain't lyin' when I said the angel's got 'er wings. An' the next thing I knows, we be headin' through another time-travelin' hole full o' mist an' now I finds myself in the middle o' another forest. Only this one ain't so fuckin' scary. Thank my goddamn balls. It's still dark, though.

"Thoradin, you will travel with us," Dragan announce to his main squeeze. Then, he look back at the equivalent to a gargoyle stepson. "Tell Gurdis to travel back to the Gorge. Variant will be coming for me. If the battalion must scatter to survive, so be it."

Thoradin nods and then goes to talk to the gargoyle runner-up.

"Where we goin'?" I ask Dragan.

"To find Cambion."

"What the fuck's that mean?"

“Don’t ask questions if you won’t understand the answers,” he say real rude like an’ frown down at me.

Dick.

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FLUMPH

We walk for, like, three hours—well... Dragan an’ Thoradin do. Dragan’s carryin’ the angel an’ I’m ridin’ on her back real comfortable like.

“You know’s what I hate ‘bout the other realms?” I say to Dragan, but he don’t turn ‘round to look at me soze I just continue talkin’. “I hate that there ain’t none o’ the modern conveniences like we got in the Mortal Realm.”

“What are you on about?” Dragan grumbles.

“Look at us,” I answer. “We been walkin’ nonstop for ways too long when we coulda been drivin’ us a sweet ass ride if we was in the Mortal Realm.”

“Every realm has its benefits and hindrances,” Dragan say.

“This faerie realm make it feel like we back in the medieval times,” I complain. “An’ name me one good thing ‘bout yer realm.”

He finally glance back at me, an’ he wearin’ a smirk. “No sprites.”

“Ha ha, real damn funny, anus face,” I mutter. “Why it be that way, anyways?”

“Why is what what way?” Dragan ask me back.

“The realms? Why there be modern conveniences in the Mortal Realm but not here?”

“Because Variant wants it that way.”

“Why he want it that way?”

“You never stop asking questions, do you?”

“Not ‘til I get me some answers.”

Dragan sigh like he real frustrated, but he answer all the same. “Because Cambion was banished to the Fae Realm and I was banished to the Shadow Realm, Variant disallowed us both the benefits of technology that evolved in the Mortal Realm. It’s part and parcel of our punishment.”

“Then you ain’t never seen a vehicle before?” I ask.

He glares at me. “I’ve seen vehicles before because I haven’t stayed trapped in my realm, as you’re already aware.” He take a big breath. “No more questions.”

Then he an’ Thoradin stop walkin’ an’ jist start starin’ at this big-ass tree, like it’s nekked an’ got titties or somethin’. I guess all trees are nekked but this one definitely don’t got no titties. It do look old an’ dead, though.

“The Tree of Shadows,” Dragan announce, then he lean down an’ carefully puts the unconscious girl on the ground. She ain’t made a sound this whole time. Not a peep, fart... nothin’. I checked her a couple times ta make sure she ain’t dead, but she still alive. For now, anyways.

I watch Dragan as he stands in front o’ the tree an’ then close his eyes an’ starts movin’ his hands in front o’ him like he touchin’ a ball. Not like a hairy testicle ball,

but like a ball you bounce.

Anyhows, all o' a sudden, there's like dark shadows pourin' out his hands an' they're spreadin' down his arms, an' I'm startin' to get antsy 'cause I'm a creature o' the light an' I dunno 'bout this dark arts crap. An' Dragan's like the King o' the Darkness. I swear, if that tree come to life an' start talkin', I'm gonna shit my pants an' die. Right here.

Well, that ain't 'xactly what happens. Instead, Dragan start speakin' some crap I don't understand, an' then the center o' the tree get all blurry an' translucent-like. It's like, wavin' with ripples you can see through, but when I look real hard, I don't see what I figure would be on the other side o' the tree. 'stead, I see a totally different place that ain't got nothin' to do with this one. Yeah, I know. It don't make sense to me neithers.

Dragan stops his ball rubbin' an' stops talkin' his gibberish an' leans over to pick up the girl, with me still sittin' on her.

He frown at me but I smile back 'cause I'm a happy sprite like that.

I'm guessin' the tree's actually a portal into some other place 'cause Dragan start walkin' into the blurry part an' he don't get smacked in the face by tree bark or nothin'. Come to think o' it, I kinda wish he did get smacked in the face, 'cause he a right twat an' need to be brought down a peg or two an' that'd be some funny shit.

When we comes out the other side o' the tree, it's like we's in dreamland. It ain't pitch dark no more, but it ain't bright, neither. 'stead, the air's that dark blue like it be right before sunset.

"How long does the angel have before the withdrawals begin, liege?" Thoradin asks Dragan, who shrugs.



“Not much longer. The sooner we find Cambion, the better.”

Thoradin don’t say nothin’ else an’ I’m wonderin’ if maybe he’s as lost as I is ‘bout who this Cambion turd-for-brains is.

“We don’t have much longer, either,” Thoradin points out an’ Dragan nod real solemn-like.

“Fifty-seven minutes. I’m keeping track.”

“An’ then you gonna turn to stone?” I ask, lookin’ at both of ‘em.

“Yes,” Dragan answer without botherin’ to look at me.

In front o’ us be a dirt path leadin’ into a town o’ sorts. We be surrounded by big-ass flowers o’ every size an’ color you ever thought. The sound o’ soft music fill the air—like flutes or somethin’—an’ it smell like we jist walked into the middle o’ a rose. The darker it gets, the more I notice lil balls o’ light dancin’ in an’ ‘round the flowers.

I fly off the girl an’ start buzzin’ ‘round the flowers, an’ they smell even better up close. They so big, I can land on ‘em. Soze I do. Lotsa times. I jist float ‘round an’ land on flowers an’ then fly ta the next one like this was what I was meant ta do all my life.

An’ them balls of light? Pixies. Smaller than me, even. I’m finally a big ass sprite in a small ass faerie pond. An’ that be sayin’ somethin’.

“Sprite, stop fucking around,” Dragan grumble at me.

Dick.

We keep goin' down the dirt path into a town. Glowin' lanterns bob in the gentle breeze an' light our path. Meanwhiles, these big ol' fireflies buzz through the fields o' flowers either side o' us.

The town itself is full o' little circular hut-like things made outta wood an' topped with mossy roofs, an' every one of 'em has its own enclosed garden overflowin' with flowers an' bushes. I'm wonderin' if Snow White live here 'cause every woodland animal known to the forest is hangin' out like they ain't afraid o' becomin' dinner.

I spot some halflings an' they're bigger than me which sucks, but then I figures I'll jist hang out with them pixies when I move in. It ain't like the halflings are that much bigger, anyways—they's maybe three feet tall. A few more walk by an' that's when I notice the townfolk noticin' us, an' they looks a lil worried. Not that I blames 'em, 'cause Dragan could pass for Satan any day o' the week an' Thoradin ain't much better. If Dragan's a ten on the scary-as-fuck meter, Thoradin's like a seven. Maybe an eight.

“What business have you here? Your kind isn't welcome.” I hear a voice an' look down to see a real fat gnome blockin' Dragan's path. I didn't even see where the gnome came from! I ain't got no idea if one o' them flowers jist burped him up, or maybe I jist weren't payin' attention an' he been there the whole time?

“I ain't with them,” I start to explain, but then Dragan smack me with the back side o' his big-ass mitt o' a hand an' I go somersaultin' over all them flowers. It take me a second to recover an' then I got me a mean headache.

Dick.

Meanwhiles, a whole group o' gnomes have piled theyselves up in front o' Dragan an' Thoradin. An' they all look real pissed-off-like. The gnomes are a lil taller than the halflings, but not by much.

“We’re here to see Cambion. We wish you no harm,” Dragan say as the pixies start surroundin’ us. There’s, like, a hundred o’ ‘em all at once an’ they buzzin’ ‘round our heads an’ I see a few o’ ‘em in the girl’s hair an’ under her blanket, probly tryin’ ta figure out if she got a giant lizard tail under there or somethin’.

Then, they all buzz off in a wave an’ we’re jist standin’ in the middle o’ this weird town, surrounded by unfriendly munchkins an’ I’m wonderin’ what the hell’s for dinner.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

I hear a deep voice to the right, where the main road break off intos another one. I whirls ‘round to see a man—er, a faerie elf to be exact. He got a big owl sittin’ on one o’ his shoulders. An’ that owl’s makin’ me a might nervous, ‘cause owls gotta taste for fat, little sprites like me. ‘Course, the owl ain’t made no move ta eat any o’ them pixies so maybe it’s a vegetarianism.

I glance back at the guy with the owl on his shoulder an’ realize he got other fae standin’ jist behind him. Three of ‘em, an’ by the way’s they dressed an’ the weapons they’s holdin’, I think they’re fae militia. Two men fae with staffs an’ a lady fae with a crossbow. She look the meanest.

The head fae ain’t armed at all an’ he smilin’ at us—well, more at Dragan. But it’s a smile that be like for good manners. It ain’t a for-real smile ‘cause it’s too tight.

“Dragan. Welcome to Geldingstock, my barbarian friend,” he say an’ then gesture to the village behind him. “I must admit, I’m surprised to see you.” He pause for a few. “It’s been over a century?”

This guy be real tall but ain’t so tall as Dragan an’ although he definitively muscular, his muscles ain’t big an’ bulky like Dragan’s. His are more long an’ lean, like he been

swimmin' with the merfolk too much. His hair's dark gold an' his skin's bronze. His eyes are amber an' he might jist be as beautiful as the angel, but in like a more manly kinda way.

"Cambion," Dragan say but he don't sound too happy.

An' I notice neither o' 'em offer to shake the others' hand. Soze maybe they ain't friends? 'Course, Dragan came here ta see this guy so I dunno what ta make o' the whole thing.

"Dismissed," Cambion say to the elves behind him, an' they turn 'round an' disappear down the path behind him.

Dragan an' Cambion jist stand there, starin' at each other. The owl look at Dragan with them weird owl eyes that always seems like they know too much. Cambion's the first ta speak agin.

"I wasn't aware that you were allowed to travel freely from the Gorge."

"I'm not."

"Then is this an astral version of you with whom I'm speaking?"

Dragan's eyes narrow as Cambion's smug smile widens, an' I immediately decide I like him. Mainly 'cause I can tell he ain't gonna let Dragan pull no shit over on him. Even though Cambion ain't as big as the Gargoyle King, he act like he is.

"Let's cut the bullshit," Dragan growl.

"Consider it cut," Cambion answer in a bored voice an' then he narrow his eyes as he cross his hands 'gainst his chest. That's when I notice his clothin'—considerin' the

guy live in the middle o' the forest, he ain't dressed like it. He wearin' a real nice, tailored violet overcoat in shimmery fabric that look real expensive. An' he got velvet pants on in a matchin' color. He look kinda ridiculous.

"Why are you here?" Cambion ask.

"I need your help. Why else would I have come?"

Cambion shrug an' then pretend ta be way too interested in his clean nails. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe you were passing through the fae plane? And you decided to pop in to delight me with tales of the land of deep despair, of wherever it is you've been banished to. Or, were supposed to have been banished to." He look 'round hisself an' shrug before lookin' back at Dragan. "As you can see, I've done a far better job of sticking to my banishment."

"I need you to heal someone," Dragan say, like he in a big hurry an' ain't got time for all o' Cambion's talk. "She's high on Atacomite ."

"She?" Cambion repeat, his eyebrows furrowin' as he look at Thoradin an' frown deeper. "Last I had the pleasure of seeing you sans clothing, Thoradin, you possessed a cock and balls, like the rest of us? Has your dick fallen off? To be replaced with a..."

I can't help my laugh 'cause that be some funny shit.

"You've never seen me naked, faerie," Thoradin spit back an' Cambion jist smirk, makin' me wonder if maybe he be more into the sausage than the bun?

"We don't have time for your games, Cambion," Dragan interrupt in a voice that sound more like a bark. Then he turn 'round so Cambion can get a look at the girl.

“Ah, you’ve brought me a wife—how good of you, Dragan,” Cambion say, that jokin’ smile back on his face. “And she’s passed out, just how I like them.” He take a step forward an’ brush the girl’s hair away from her face, an’ then he don’t say nothin’ for a moment or two. He got the same expression Dragan had the first time he saw her.

“She’s quite the looker,” he say in a deeper voice. So maybe Cambion ain’t so much into the sausage as I thought?

“She’s an angel,” Dragan explains like Cambion be a big dumb-dumb.

“An angel?” Cambion repeat an’ then frowns real deep-like. “Aren’t you aware of the edict...”

“Yes! I’m fucking aware of the fucking edict!” Dragan thunder back, an’ all the pixies hide in the flowers which close up ‘round them an’ bow down like they tryin’ to hide, too. Not that I blame ‘em; Dragan’s one scary prick.

“Then you would know,” Cambion start but Dragan interrupt him.

“And I don’t give a fuck about Variant or his fucking edict!”

“Well, if we’re playing the game of who can say fuck the most, you’ve certainly won, old chap,” Cambion say, but he don’t sound too amused. Then he take a real deep breath. “Since I have a feeling you won’t leave until I help you with whatever trouble this girl’s gotten herself into, I will help—on one condition.”

“Which is what?” Dragan demand.

“That you leave and return to your dark cave as soon as I do. The last thing I need is Variant finding out I’m in any way aiding and abetting a criminal.”

“As soon as Variant realizes I’ve escaped the Gorge with an angel, he’ll be coming here, looking for you next. If you’re smart, which I’ve never accused you of in the past, you’ll listen to what I’ve got to say and you’ll help me.”

“Our time, liege,” Thoradin say in a quiet voice from behind Dragan.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Dragan respond.

“Your time?” Cambion ask an’ his smile look like a serpent’s.

“We have thirty minutes remaining before we must return to the land of shadow,” Dragan explain.

“Or what happens?”

“We run the risk of being forced into our gargoyle forms and remaining that way.”

Cambion start to laugh. “Variant certainly thought of every possible angle, didn’t he?”

Dragan don’t look entertained. “And what happens to you if you leave your realm?”

“I don’t know.” Cambion shrug.

“What do you mean?” Dragan insist, but then he like figure it out. “You’ve never attempted to leave the Fae Realm?”

Cambion shrug again. “Why leave? I have everything I need here.”

“You’re kidding.”

Cambion shake his head. “Why voyage off into another realm I have little interest in so I can simply be forced into the body of a rodent or something equally disagreeable?”

“Unbelievable,” Dragan answer. “You’ve completely accepted your servitude.”

“I certainly have not, for I don’t serve Variant. I serve no one but myself. And Geldingstock, which has taken me the last hundred years to build,” he continue an’ then motion to the fae village surroundin’ him. The owl jist blinks.

Dragan glance ‘round but don’t seem impressed. ‘Course he don’t seem impressed ‘bout anythin’, so that ain’t much o’ a surprise.

Cambion turn on his heel an’ start walkin’ for the center o’ his village. The three o’ us follow him, ‘cause it ain’t like we got many other options.

“Sprite,” Cambion say without botherin’ ta turn ‘round an’ look back at me. I’m surprised he’s picked me out an’ I glance over at Dragan who nods at me, probly ta let me know it’s okay for me to talk.

I flutter up to him ‘til we’re both side by side. “That’s me,” I say.

“Your name?”

“Flumph.”

“What are you doing, traveling with such bizarre cohorts?”

“Well, it be kinda a long story.”

“I enjoy long stories,” Cambion nearly interrupt an’ then look at me with a real stern



expression. “As long as they’re not corrupted with lies.”

“I ain’t no liar, mister,” I start an’ furrow my eyebrows into a real cross expression.

“Very good. Then we shall be the best of friends,” Cambion respond an’ then lead us down a dead-end road, an’ we takes a turn onto a smaller path that lead in between flowers almost as tall as him.

“Now, back to the question of how you came to be with this motley crew?” Cambion remind me.

“Well, I was workin’ for Anona in Precinct Five,” I say, an’ I notice Cambion frownin’ which means he either know Anona personally or he heard tell o’ jist how horrible she can be. “An’ this girl come screamin’ down the road an’ yellin’ at the guards to let her in ‘cause somethin’s chasin’ her.”

“Sounds quite frightening.”

“Righty-oh. Anyhows, the guards let her in only ‘cause she be an angel. An’ Anona get super excited ‘bout her bein’ an angel ‘cause she know she gonna make all sorts o’ money on the girl. ‘specially ‘cause the girl be real pretty. Soze Anona take her to the tavern an’ find out she goin’ through Atacomite withdrawals.”

“You were correct, this is quite a long story.”

“You asked for it,” I says an’ shrug.

“Quite right. Continue.”

“Soze, once Anona realize how the girl’s goin’ through withdrawals, she give her a megadose o’ Atacomite soze the girl can’t even talk, an’ she put me in charge of

givin' her a bath."

"Lucky fellow," Cambion interjects as we take another turn 'round a huge, gnarled tree an' face the biggest o' the wood huts. It's like a three-story one an' there ain't no moss on its roof. An' the garden in front o' this one puts all the others to shame.

"Maybe if you be into that sort o' thing, but as a sprite, I ain't," I tell 'im.

"Carry on."

"Righty-oh. Soze I be washin' the girl, an' all o' a sudden, wings pop out her back! Like real, true angel wings an' I thinks I'm gonna shit myself real hard!"

Cambion stops walkin'. I stop flyin' an' decide to try floatin' down to the shoulder that don't got a big bird on it 'cause I'm real tired. But once I do, Cambion do the same thing Dragan did an' dusts me off. But he's a lil nicer 'bout it.

"The angel has her wings?" Cambion demand as he face Dragan, an' his pomp ain't nowheres to be found.

"I told you I needed your help."

"Do you understand what this means?" Cambion ask.

"Yes, Cambion, I do," Dragan growl. "That's why I'm here." Then, he take a deep breath. "We're running out of time, so help the angel and we'll discuss the particulars after."

"You want the rest o' my story or what?" I ask the elf king.

"I've heard quite enough," he answer, but he still glarin' at Dragan an' Dragan glarin'

right back at 'im .

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

CAMBION

Geldingstock

Fae Realm

I'm fuming.

What the fuck is Dragan thinking, coming here and bringing this angel with him? Doesn't he remember what fucking Variant did to Baron? Right in front of us, no less? We're lucky to still be alive.

Taking a deep breath, I try to calm myself as I think back to the day the four of us signed the pact and took the oath. We were each given immortality. The only way we could die was if one of us bore the title of murderer—something Variant made plainly clear he was willing to do when he did it to Baron.

I hope he doesn't track Dragan here, but if he does, I'll have to turn the whole lot of them over to Variant, pretending I had nothing to do with any of this.

While I am living a life of banishment, it's really not so bad. I have everything I could want. As far as prisons go, mine could be much worse. It could be what Dragan's facing, and has been for the last one hundred years already.

I lead my unwanted guests through the garden in front of my stately home and open the door, granting them entry.

Trym, I address the owl riding on my shoulder through our telepathic connection. I speak to him in the old language of Elvish . Trym is my animal familiar. Keep sentry and scout the perimeter of Geldingstock for strangers. Should you see any, alert me immediately.

Trym alights and flies off overhead, eager, as always, to do my bidding.

Once I follow the rest of the party into my home, I watch them pause to take in their surroundings. The sprite immediately appears impressed with my ornately carved wooden furniture, expensive rugs, and priceless art. Dragan narrows his eyes as he takes in the splendor surrounding him, while Thoradin appears simply bored.

“Nice to know you’ve been living the life,” Dragan grumbles as I steal a few more glances at the angel slung over his shoulder. She’s certainly beautiful; no one can argue that. Perhaps once I return her to her health, she will choose to repay me by favoring me with her delectable body.

“Banishment isn’t to me what it is to you,” I respond. “Bring her upstairs.”

Dragan doesn’t say anything but follows me through the foyer, the living room, and into the hall. From there, we voyage up two flights of stairs. Then, the three of them trail after me down another hallway until we reach the last room and I throw the door open wide.

“Put her on my bed,” I command.

Again, Dragan says nothing but does as he’s instructed, placing the girl on top of the green silken linens. She sinks into the billowing, feather duvet and pillows surrounding her. The sheet Dragan must have stolen from Anona starts to fall off her shoulders, and I notice how careful the gargoyle is about pulling it back up to her chin. I find the whole display rather odd. Dragan is not, by rule, gentle.

He's quite the opposite. Or so he used to be.

"She has no clothing, so you'll have to provide for her," he says gruffly.

"Ah, a beautiful, naked, and unconscious wife. Quite the welcoming gift," I respond before deciding to delve into the more important area of our conversation. "Now, back to the subject of her angel wings..."

Dragan takes a deep breath, as though he's going to need it. "I can't say with any certainty whether she has them or not."

"Then the sprite could be flubbing?"

"I ain't flubbin'!" the sprite yells, darting up between the two of us. It's a courageous little thing, I'll give it that. Annoying as fuck, though.

Dragan rubs his chin. "Flubbing or not, I've seen nothing to prove she has wings." His frown grows. "My magic failed to force them out of her. And I attempted to do so on two different occasions, but each time I felt like my magic was blocked somehow."

"Blocked?" I repeat as I glance down at the sleeping girl and shake my head. I return my piercing gaze to Dragan as ire begins to build inside me. "Your Shadow Magic has never been blocked before?"

"Never," Dragan answers, as though this isn't a huge deal. "My magic has never failed me on any other occasion."

The anger builds.

"Look, I ain't sure why Shadow Dick's magic ain't workin' right," the sprite declares

and I have to stifle a smile at his term for Dragan. “But on my life, the angel got wings—I seen ‘em with my own two eyes.”

“But, alas, no one can prove it,” I say, whirling to face Dragan as I unleash my fury upon him. “You fucking asshole! You’ve come here, wasting my time, inconveniencing me and putting my safety as well as that of my people in jeopardy!”

“Don’t start, Cambion,” Dragan growls, but I’m not intimidated.

“I’m sure word of the missing angel has reached Variant by now, and he’ll come looking for her. Or his emissaries will. And if their trail leads them here, there’s no telling what they’ll do to Geldingstock if I’m unable to talk them out of it.”

“Are you or are you not a creature of magic?” Dragan demands, his jaw tight.

“I’m not sure what my being a ‘creature of magic,’ as you say, has anything to do with this!”

His eyes narrow further and the deep olive of his skin grows red. “Your magic has everything to do with it!” he rails. “If Variant and his forces arrive, you could magic your village away, hide it in plain sight, call in an Aura Of Warding , or summon all the animals of the forest to fight on your behalf. This is your realm, Cambion—your magic is strongest here!”

“And, maybe, I could stall Variant for a few days at the most.” I take a moment as I restrain the anger flowing through me. Anger is not a bedfellow of logic and rational dialogue. “The point is that I don’t want to call Variant’s attention to me. I’ve lived here in peaceful comfort since we were banished, and I find no argument with my banishment.”

The redness of Dragan’s skin grows until I’m quite certain he’s ready to bust a

gasket, as the saying goes. Or is it blow a gasket? Hmm... no matter.

“Since when have you become such a fucking dandy?”

“Since when did your stupidity overcome your instinct to survive?”

Dragan, never one to back down from an argument, takes a step closer until we both are standing face to face, glaring at one another. Then, he glances around himself and chuckles. “You’ve been so busy playing house and tending to your goddamned garden, you’ve forgotten what it means to be a warrior! And look at you!” he continues, staring down at me in distaste. “You’re dressed like a fucking girl!”

“Clearly, you have no eye for fashion,” I grumble at him wearily.

He sneers at me, shaking his head. “You were the fucking King of the fucking Seelie Court , for Chrissakes! Maybe I need to fucking well remind you, Cambion, that you’re a man and you still possess a fucking cock!”

I laugh coldly in response. He doesn’t know the half of it. “Oh, believe me, I remember I have a fucking cock, you prick.”

“Then act like it—” he starts, but I cut him off.

“Just ask any of the eligible women in this village, and they’ll be quick to tell you just how much they enjoy my fucking cock!”

Dragan’s expression falls and the frustration that appears in his eyes is telling. I laugh even more loudly as I realize I’ve got the upper hand in this argument. “Please tell me you’ve at least been able to fuck yourself senseless in that hell-hole you call the Gorge?”



Dragan doesn't answer.

I laugh louder. "Then all you've got for company are your gargoyles?"

He still doesn't respond, but it's answer enough. My eyes go wide and I can't hide my shock. There was a time when Dragan could outfuck me with his hands tied behind his back. And did. On a regular basis.

"Unbelievable! No wonder you've been searching for ways out of your dismal abyss." Then my laughter dies and the smile drops off my face as I remember the situation I'm in, the situation this asshole put me in. "I'll help your angel, but then you take her and your fucking henchman and that sprite and you get the fuck out of here and never come back."

"This isn't so simple, faerie ," Dragan starts, spitting the words at me.

The prick knows how much I hate that term. "Yes, it is. Variant won. You need to accept it the way I have."

"I will never accept it, because it isn't true."

God, I can't fucking stand him. Truth of it is, I never have. He's an arrogant, stupid barbarian and he always has been.

"Isn't true?" I laugh at him like he's a bigger moron than I had previously thought.

"Look at reality, you fool! Variant is the one in power, not us! He's in control."

"Maybe for the foreseeable future."

"Not just the foreseeable future, you fuckhead!" I yell, unable to keep my anger in check now. Dragan is just so fucking stupid. "We're the lucky ones!" He scoffs at

that. “Look at what Variant did to Baron!”

“What’d he do to Baron?” the sprite asks, even though he clearly has no idea who Baron is.

“Variant fucking murdered Baron and put him six feet under!” I continue as I shake my head, wondering if I’m talking any sense into Dragan’s stupid brain. “And he did it as a message to the two of us. I’ve listened, and you should do the same.”

“Heal the girl,” Dragan says, his hands fisting at his sides. Clearly, I’ve provoked the dumb fucker.

“Heal her yourself,” I spit back at him.

He glares at me. “You’re well aware that I can’t heal her, or I already would have.” He’s correct, of course. His dark magic won’t heal an angel. Only magic born of light will. Hence his reason for coming here.

“I want no part of this,” I respond, making no move to heal anyone.

But before Dragan can say anything, the girl’s eyes dart open and she stares right at me. Then, she opens her mouth as if to scream but passes out again, instead. I feel my breath catch and all of my anger bleeds away. Her eyes were wide, beautiful, the color of a clear, blue sky—and the expression in them was one of pure panic.

She needs me.

The way she looked at me was imploring, begging.

It’s at that moment that I begin to realize what she truly is, as if this knowledge had been stoppered until now. Whether she has her wings or not, she’s the ultimate

example of a creature of light. Such that I am. The fae have always regarded angels as the most revered of all creatures. And I haven't done my part to honor her. Not yet.

"Our time to leave is approaching rapidly," Dragan announces, sounding impatient.

"Open the window," I demand, removing my jacket and setting it carefully over the armchair at the foot of my bed. Dragan does as instructed and I face the sprite. "Fetch me the flowers there, sprite," I tell him and point to the vase in the far corner of the room.

"Don't no one 'round here know how ta say please ?" the sprite grumbles, but does my bidding all the same. He brings me the bunch of daffodils, roses, tulips, and daisies, and I place them around the girl's body, ensuring the petals touch her skin. Instantly, the hue of the blossoms begins to intensify, the yellow of the daffodils deepening into gold. The lavender of the rose becomes a rich violet; the red of the tulip, crimson. And the green of the stems is more verdant than it was seconds ago. What's even more strange is that the leaves of the rose and the daisies begin to grow, reaching out as if they're on fast forward.

"What the bloody hell?" I say, mostly to myself.

"She's an angel," Dragan scoffs above me, as if that response is explanation enough.

I reach into the fabric pouch I keep upon my person at all times and remove the crystals from within it. As the Atacomite is poisoning her entire body, I must cleanse her from head to toe. It's usually a lengthy process to remove Atacomite from someone's body, but time isn't a luxury we currently have. And though I know I can pull most of the poison from her body, it will not come without cost to her. She'll be extremely weak as her body heals. I, of course, have the ability to aid in her recovery, but we won't be in one another's company for much longer. A shame.

Above her head, I place a piece of Celestite in its natural, geode form. Celestite will help minimize her pain as it aids in removing the toxins plaguing her. The blue crystals sparkle, reminding me of the glittering blue of her eyes. Up close such as I am to her now, I can truly see how remarkably lovely she is. Easily the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I suddenly feel pangs of shame that I wasn't quicker to offer my assistance. Well, I'll make up for it now.

I place purple Fluorite , one of the most beautiful crystals, on her forehead. The Fluorite will strengthen her bones as the Atacomite leaches valuable minerals and vitamins from them. On her throat I place Azurite , a small, deep blue stone, which will protect her brain from any damage.

When I realize where the rest of the crystals must go, I glance up at Dragan who studies the girl intently, as if he's attempting to remember the curvature of her face.

"I must have access to the entirety of her body in order to proceed," I say.

Dragan frowns, but faces his henchman. "Thoradin, turn your back." Thoradin does as he requests and Dragan looks over at me.

"Aren't you going to turn your back?" I ask him with a teasing smile. I must admit I enjoy baiting him.

"No. I'm in charge of keeping tabs on you, to ensure you don't do anything to her you shouldn't."

I frown up at him. "As if I'd ever accost an unconscious woman." I shake my head as I reach up and pull the white sheet away from the sleeping angel, revealing her breasts.

Swallowing hard, I look upon the heavy mounds of white flesh that fall slightly to the

sides. Her nipples are the same pink as the Rose Quartz I place above her heart. The beautiful, blush-colored crystal will stabilize her heart and circulatory system.

I'm beginning to wonder if I should be concerned about my own circulatory system, because the sight of her perfect breasts is doing something to me. My heart is pounding, and all I can think about is taking one of those nipples into my mouth.

I hear Dragan clear his throat as though he's uncomfortable, and I suddenly feel sorry for the poor bastard. He hasn't had a woman in God only knows how long—as difficult as this is proving for me, it must be torture for him.

Reaching out, I pull the sheet further away from her to reveal her rib cage and the lines of her body that taper into a small waist before flaring out with her hips. I haven't uncovered her sex yet, but I'll need to soon.

On her stomach I place a geode of yellow crystals, Citrine , to help detoxify her blood.

"Time is of the essence," Dragan reminds me, breaking my concentration. He sounds perturbed.

"If you must leave, then do so," I bark back at him. "Fucking cock," I add under my breath.

He says nothing but makes no motion to exit, so I assume he's found his patience.

When I pull the sheet away from the angel, I hear Dragan inhale deeply. But my attention doesn't rest on him for long; the bulge between my thighs is suddenly swelling as I behold her flat stomach and the bareness of her mound. Anona, or someone, has shaven her clean, and her exposed lips are calling to me. I want nothing more than to bury my face in them, to taste her essence, to fill her with my tongue.

“Continue,” Dragan growls. He knows me and my libido well.

With a shaky hand, I place Chrysoculla , a turquoise stone, upon her mound, being careful not to touch her anywhere else. I spoke the truth when I said I derive no pleasure in fondling an unconscious woman. Yes, I admittedly derive great pleasure in viewing the sleeping woman’s nudity, but that’s where my enjoyment ends.

“What does that stone do for her... there?” Dragan demands, as though he believes I’d just been looking for an excuse to touch her in her most private of places.

“It will make her long for your impotent cock,” I respond as I smile up at him. The sprite tries to hide a laugh beneath the cover of a cough.

“What the fuck does it do, faerie ?” snarls Dragan.

“It will aid in her detoxification, reoxygenate her blood, and help relieve her pain,” I answer staunchly.

He says nothing more, so I figure he’s accepted my explanation. I pull the sheet away from her completely and, at her feet, I place Hematite , a deep gray crystal which will support her kidneys. And in each of her hands, I place a piece of Angelite , which, as the name denotes, is an angelic stone that will balance her physical body with the etheric realm.

“Sprite,” I say and face the creature who looks at me with interest. “Touch her,” I instruct.

“Why I gotta do that?”

“Because you’re a creature of light, and nature’s magic will recognize you as such. I can pull your energy to heal her, as well as my own.”

The creature shrugs and then floats down to the woman's head, taking a seat just beside it as he reaches down and places his tiny hand on her cheek.

I, meanwhile, close my eyes and hover my own hands above the lovely angel, reaching out to the power of the natural world that made me what I am.

Speaking Elvish , I call to the earth, the wind, the sun, and the water, asking for strength to heal this creature born from the flesh and blood of the earth and the angelic realm. I call in an Aura of Vitality , a healing energy that radiates an aura which surrounds the angel in a cocoon of light. I then tap into the immeasurable light of the Fae Realm and call on it to guide me, to use me as its vessel as it purifies her, leaching from her the toxins of the Atacomite .

Light blossoms from beneath my palms and, as I open my eyes, I witness energy passing through one crystal after another, in the form of a bright, radiant light. This life energy pulses within each crystal, causing it to glitter. I can feel the power of the light thrumming from beneath my fingers as it joins the crystals and activates each one, like a current of static electricity.

As the woman is an angel, a creature of light, so will the energy recognize her and heal her with its blinding beauty. But the Atacomite will not leave her system without a fight, and that fight will result in arduous pain and many days of healing .

EILISH

Geldingstock

Fae Realm

A brilliant white light blinds me, consuming my entire body. I can feel the power of its essence seeping into me, invading my skin. The power roars through me with a surge of energy that forces the sickness out of me, a sickness that's been living as a parasite inside me for too long.

And then there's nothing but the searing shriek of pain. Bright, blinding, and relentless agony that wages an uncompromising battle against my entire being.

My heart beats in outrage against the sting that invades each drop of my blood, spreading its throbbing anguish into every muscle and fiber of my body. The agony envelops me until it feels like my form is nothing more than pain itself, a beating manifestation of the misery contained within.

Before this, I'd been swimming in a body of warm water that soothed me with each gently rocking wave. But now, that buoyancy is nowhere to be found. Instead, I feel cold and wretched.

I feel.

And, in feeling, I want nothing more than to go back to that balmy water so I can sleep again within its peaceful and warm embrace. I want to be cocooned by those



numbing waters.

No, Eilish, a woman's voice commands within my head, behind the jarring ache between my ears, behind the trilling scream I can't seem to force through my lips.

It will get better. Brace yourself and be strong.

A tremor seizes me and ripples through my body, causing my lower teeth to slam against the upper ones as I begin to shake uncontrollably. I feel myself bite down hard on my tongue and the taste of blood is thick in my mouth and throat.

"She's having a seizure!" a deep voice says, fear and concern penetrating the words.

"I never said this would be pleasant," another voice responds, not quite as deep but just as masculine.

I open my mouth to scream as another tremor grips me, but find I'm unable to utter even the smallest of squeaks. Instead, my back arches as my fingers grip onto something satiny beneath me. I squeeze until the tips of my nails bite into my palms. Anguish travels through me, shaking my entire being, rattling inside my head like a stray bullet. When the shaking stops, all that's left moving is my heart, which is beating so hard it feels like it could burst.

You are almost through the worst of it, Eilish, the voice inside my head insists.

"Please," I beg, barely recognizing my own voice. The pain is clearly evident in the word that barely makes it across my tongue.

"She's bleeding," the deep voice announces. "Her mouth."

"She'll be fine," the second voice declares. It's hurried and irritated, but there's fear

beneath the words.

I feel the salty sting of tears as they bleed from the corners of my eyes. Eyes I still haven't found the strength to open. Not when the pain between them threatens to rip my brain apart.

Then, as though it never was, the pain is gone. Completely. The tremors stop. I can feel nothing. The only reminder of the horrible agony I've just endured is the taste of blood.

As the seconds tick by, the coldness alleviates. My body begins to warm, as if I'm sitting in front of a blazing fire.

The impurity has been cleansed, the voice tells me. You are free, Eilish.

In the wake of the tremors and the torment is an emptiness that is both reward and suffering. Exhaustion claims every cell of my being, but the good news is that I can breathe again. I feel my chest rise as I inhale a deep breath.

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DRAGAN

"Long, slow, deep breaths," Cambion instructs the angel, who lies on his bed just as still as she was moments before. If not for the gentle rise and fall of her chest, I might wonder if his enchantment just killed her.

"Continue to breathe in and breathe out," he says, watching her. I immediately reach over him and pull the sheet back up to her chin to protect her nudity. He glares at me over his shoulder before returning his attention to the angel.

Fuck him. I don't care if he's pissed or not. This dandy isn't the king he was one hundred years ago. He's a shadow of the man he once was and I have no respect for him.

"Everything is going to be fine now," he finishes, his tone soothing.

"Is it done?" I ask.

"Yes." He begins collecting his crystals but pauses when he reaches her breasts.

"Would you prefer to retrieve them for me?" he asks.

"Yes," I respond. "Turn your back."

"For fuck's sake, Dragan," he starts, shaking his head.

"Turn your fucking back!"

Cambion does as I insist, and I retrieve the additional crystals from the girl's unresponsive body. I hand them to him.

"Then, she is well now?" I ask him as I face the sleeping beauty. She doesn't exactly look well. She's just as pale as she was before, and a thin sheen of sweat has broken out across her forehead.

"I should have been able to clear most of the Atacomite ."

"Most?"

"To dissolve all of it would take days," Cambion responds with little interest. "Her body will be able to handle the remainder on its own. She'll be weak and will require rest for the next few days, at least."

“Then you weren’t able to heal her fully?”

“I did what I could, given the short amount of time, asshole.” Then he turns to face the sprite. “Sprite, you may feel more tired than usual, as well. The enchantment borrowed your life energy, as well as my own.”

“Do that mean I’m gonna die sooner than I would have?”

“No,” Cambion assures him. “It means you’ll require more food and rest.”

“Oh.”

Glancing down at the still girl, I realize this is another opportunity to attempt to investigate the angel’s wings. My magic failed, yes, but maybe Cambion’s won’t. “Try to produce her wings,” I order him.

“Fuck off.”

I inhale deeply and try to control the rage that simmering just beneath the surface. “Will you try to produce her wings... please?”

“I thought you had to leave?” Cambion responds and the way he asks the question implies that he wants us to go.

“We can’t remain much longer, liege,” Thoradin confirms, even as he still faces the wall.

“How much longer do we have?” I ask him.

“Eight minutes.”

“We have time,” I decide and face Cambion resolutely.

He sighs in frustration but then turns back to the angel. He holds his hands out above her again and closes his eyes. Then, he begins chanting in the old language of Elvish , delivering his words in a commanding tone. There is a brief interlude of silence before he repeats them in a louder voice. Then he falls silent again.

After another few seconds, he drops his hands and opens his eyes. He turns to face me and shakes his head.

“It looks as though you’ve been duped, old chap,” he informs me with a smug, self-satisfied smirk. I know Cambion well enough to know he’d enjoy nothing more than for the fucking sprite to have pulled one over on me.

“I ain’t duped no one!” the sprite yells. “Maybe her wings ain’t showin’ up ‘cause she so exhausted from all your magic!”

“He has a point,” I admit.

“If you choose to believe him, then I suppose he does have a point,” Cambion replies. Clearly, he doesn’t.

And I’m beginning to wonder if I’ve been a fool for trusting the sprite in the first place.

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EILISH

Open your eyes, Eilish.

As if the words are a command, my eyes blink open of their own accord and everything is blurry for a few seconds. A shape directly in front of me begins to delineate and, as my eyes beg my exhausted brain to make sense of the image, I realize it's a man.

He's staring back at me with the same curiosity in his expression that I imagine must also be in mine. I don't know him. At least, I don't think I do, but there's a void of blackness where my memories used to be.

As I study the man sitting beside me, I notice the brightness that surrounds him, almost as though his bronze skin glows. It's only then that I realize how stunningly beautiful he is.

He's a creature of the light, Eilish, the voice inside my head tells me. You can trust him. You must trust him.

The beautiful creature parts his full lips and smiles warmly as he continues to stare at me. He appears to be in his early thirties, maybe. His eyes are the color of honey and they seem infinite in their depths. His dark blond hair is short, yet it curls around his pointed ears.

Pointed ears...

He's fae. And the fae are friends to angels. Yes, I can trust him.

How I know any of this, I can't say.

"We must leave," the deep voice sounds from behind the man. I look over the fae's head to see another man lurking behind him. He stands almost as tall as the ceiling and the reach of his shoulders is so broad, I imagine two of me could fit between them. Where the fae healer was surrounded by light, this creature is encircled by

shadow. It weaves in and around him, coloring him with a darkness I find hauntingly alluring. He appears as though he's older than the fae man but not by much.

I've seen him before. How, I can't say, but his face brings me a sense of calm familiarity. He's powerful, battle-worn and strength personified, but there's a gentleness within him that speaks to me. I know he won't hurt me.

He studies me in the same way the fae man did before him. With open admiration and... curiosity.

"Yes, you must take her and leave, before Variant finds you here," the fae man instructs and scowls as he pulls his gaze away from me and, instead, focuses on something in the distance. He makes no move to stand.

You cannot allow him to leave you. You need both of them, the female voice booms in my head.

"Is she well enough that I can bring her with me?" the shadow man asks.

"The answer to that question is beside the point—you have no other alternative. She can't stay here," the fae man responds, refusing to look at me. I don't understand why I can't remain with him. He's a friend, a comrade. And clearly, he just brought me back from the precipice of wherever I was.

He cannot leave you, Eilish. You need him.

As I study the fae man who refuses to so much as glance at me, a determination sets into me that I can't deny. Whoever put those words into my head must also be in control of my body because before I know what I'm doing, I reach out and wrap my fingers around his wrist.

He looks at me immediately, his eyebrows arching in surprise. When our eyes connect, everything goes black for a split second. Then, I see images flashing through my mind. Images that make little sense to me:

This honey-eyed man looks down at me, watching me. I'm lying on a bed and he's above me, his hands on either side of my head. His hair is disheveled and he's out of breath. A thin sheen of sweat coats his entire body, causing that bronze skin to glitter. I can feel the heat of his body. I watch as his muscles tense and release as he moves above me.

Within me.

Yes, he's buried deep inside me. His eyes never leave mine as he thrusts himself into me repeatedly. Each drive deeper than the last. I hear the sound of my own moan, which causes a smile to seize his mouth and he pushes into me even harder.

"My King," I say to him and I can feel my smile.

His is beaming. "My beautiful Queen."

"Enough!"

His voice interrupts the vision and I blink a few times once I'm transported back to the room with the fae man and the shadow man behind him. It's then that I realize there's a sprite circling above my head, and another man of shadow in the corner of the room.

The fae man stares down at me with a furrowed brow and I feel coldness beneath my fingers, whereas moments before they were wrapped around his wrist. He must have pulled away from me.



Touch him again, Eilish, the voice demands. You must know who he is.

I don't give him a warning before I grab his hand, and even though I'm beyond weak, my grip is firm. Strangely, he doesn't try to release himself. Instead, he eyes me with a reticent curiosity as though he wants to understand who and what I am but, at the same time, he doesn't.

This time, the images hit me immediately.

The clashing of blades. The sounds of fists meeting flesh. The cries of the wounded. The smell of something burning.

A battle.

The fae man is dressed in battle armor, but his armor is distinguished from that of the others by the royal crest of the Seelie Court. He is the King of the Seelie, and he leads his legion of Seelie Fae soldiers as they clamor against another. A legion of their own kind—the fae. Only instead of the lightness of the Seelie Court, this enemy bears the darkness of the Unseelie Court. Eternal rivals, yes, but never have they fought on opposite sides. Not like this.

Standing beside the Seelie King is the man of shadow. He, too, is a king. The King of Shadows controls his own legion of winged creatures, all of whom are bathed in darkness. They are gargoyles, protectors of stone. Creatures of the night. Yet these shadow warriors fight alongside the Seelie? Against the Unseelie, against the fae king's own kind?

I don't understand.

The legion of the Unseelie Fae are led by their own king—he is dark where the King of the Seelie is fair, but just as devastatingly handsome. The Unseelie King's anger

penetrates out of him in unending ire. He's joined by still more creatures, and they're surrounded by a light brighter than even that of the Seelie.

I feel my stomach fall as I realize the race of the Unseelie King's accomplices. Angels.

Look closely at the angels, Eilish. The woman's voice inside my head says.

I do as I'm told and further suffer another shocking blow. The angels are male. But how can that be? There are no more male angels left...

Except for one.

The King of the Angels, Variant, the woman's voice corrects me.

I gasp and break the illusion as I drop the beautiful man's hand. He pulls away from me at the same time, even going to so far as to stand up to put more distance between us. I don't know if he's witnessed the same vision I have, but he looks stunned.

"You're the Seelie King," I whisper, and the man's eyes widen only momentarily.

"Thank the fuckin' stars she got her goddamned wits back!" the sprite nearly sings as it bobs up and down in the air. "I thought that Atacomite shit had eaten up her whole damn brain an' she was gonna be as smart as a fuckin' zombie."

I ignore the annoying creature.

"He was the Seelie King," the King of Shadows clarifies and I look at him, suddenly realizing he epitomizes the word "king"—from his impossibly large presence to the way he holds himself, the arrogance of his countenance.

“You’re the King of Shadow,” I finish.

His eyebrows are drawn and there’s surprise on his face, but he’s clearly pleased I know this. He’s pleased to be recognized as the king he is. A smirk appears on his lips and it’s all I can do to think of anything other than tasting them.

“What’s your name?” he asks. No—demands.

“Eilish,” I answer, suddenly overcome by an exhaustion that seems to claim my entire being. I close my eyes as I listen to the rasp of my breath, inhaling deeply.

“Don’t overstress her, she can’t take it,” the Seelie King warns.

I open my eyes to look at him but he looks beyond me, to the open window as a cool breeze enters the room, assaulting each of us and blowing his hair around his ears. I want to tell him how beautiful he is, but I hold back. The timing is wrong.

“My liege,” the shadow man from behind the Shadow King interrupts. “We must return to our own realm before we’re forced to become stone.”

“Yes,” the Shadow King agrees, and worry etches across his face.

“Take her and go,” the Seelie King says, motioning to me. Cold and indifferent, he still won’t return my gaze. I imagine he wasn’t always this way and I wonder what must have happened to change him.

“No,” I insist, and I feel everyone’s attention on me. I don’t know why, but there’s an absolute understanding within me that I can’t be separated from him or the King of Shadow. I need this Seelie King as much as I need the shadow warrior behind him. “You... saw the... vision,” I say, narrowing my eyes on him.

“What’s she talking about?” the King of Shadow demands. He sounds perturbed.

“I don’t know,” the Seelie King lies.

“Yes. You do,” I insist.

I know he saw it, I felt him pull away from me in shock and outrage at what the vision revealed. Like he didn’t want it to be real. I was equally shocked to see visions of a battle, but even more so when I saw the two of us in the midst of a sexual tryst. Shocked, yes, but I wasn’t about to deny any of it was true. Of course, I don’t have my memory, so I couldn’t say if what I saw had already happened and I just couldn’t remember it. Or maybe it was portending the future? A vision, sent by the woman’s voice that keeps sounding in my head? Whatever it was, I believe it.

“What vision? What the bloody hell is she talking about, Cambion?” the Shadow King asks, spearing his glance between the Seelie King and me.

I’m too tired to respond.

“She’s been out of her mind for who knows how long,” the Seelie King starts, taking another step as if he wants to be far away from me.

“No,” I interrupt, then need to take another deep breath. I’m pushing myself too hard.

“Shhh,” the Shadow King says to me, a kind expression on his stern face. Then he growls as he grips the Seelie King’s arm and holds him firmly. “What the bloody fuck is she talking about?”

“She’s just come out of a fucking Atacomite stupor and whatever she’s talking about might as well be the ravings of a lunatic...”

“I’m not a... lunatic,” I argue.

“Cambion, what did you see when she touched you?” the Shadow King demands again.

The Seelie King finally meets his gaze and both of them look like they’re within seconds of attacking each other. “If you’d really like to know, you fucking barbarian, I saw her beneath me while I fucked her and she begged me for more.”

While his description exaggerates the truth somewhat, it has the desired effect. The Shadow King’s expression drops and his eyes darken as his hands ball into fists. He swallows hard.

“Would you like to know more?” the Seelie King continues, baiting the larger man.

“Would you like to know how tight and wet she was?”

“Shut the fuck up,” the Shadow King snarls.

“Or how fucking good she felt each time I plunged into her?”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

“He must... come with... us,” I tell them, as I move my gaze from the Seelie King to the shadow warrior who holds him hostage. The King of Shadow will help me. I’m not sure how I know this, but I do all the same.

Eilish, your enemies have awareness, the woman’s voice says inside my head, and it sounds urgent. They are hunting you again. You cannot tarry any longer. You must move. Now.

“We have no... more time,” I explain, and I have to close my eyes to catch my

breath. The exhaustion is growing, claiming me. “They’re coming.”

The Shadow King nods as if he understands my convoluted words, as if he understands who “they” are. Then, he turns his steely gray gaze to the King of the Seelie and his eyes narrow.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” he says.

Before the Seelie King can defend himself, shadows begin to spin around him, enveloping him in a cocoon of darkness. Seconds later, the darkness disintegrates and the Seelie King collapses on the ground.

DRAGAN

Geldingstock

Fae Realm

“My liege,” Thoradin says, worry in his voice. I’ve noticed it, too—the tendrils of gray creeping up from my fingertips with a hardness that numbs my extremities. Early in my exile, we tested the limits of our imprisonment and, long story short, it’s not a limit I care to test again.

I reach down and haul Cambion over my shoulder. The asshole isn’t exactly light. “I’m fucking aware we need to leave!”

Turn into stone now and who knows how long it would take us to make it back to the Shadow Realm. Yes, all Cambion would have to do is return us once he awoke, but after knocking him out with my Arcane Magic, I imagine he’ll be a sore loser.

“I’m comin’ with you,” the sprite says, flapping obnoxiously in front of my face until I wish I had a fly swatter. “Wherever the hell’s you’re goin’ to.”

“I don’t care what you do,” I respond as I turn to face Thoradin. “The angel.”

He nods and strides up to her, leaning down as he gingerly places one arm beneath her legs and the other beneath her back, hauling her into his chest. I notice she’s too exhausted to hold on, but rests her head against him as her eyelids flutter closed and she breathes deeply. Yes, she’s still wearing only a sheet, but we don’t have time to

find her anything else right now. Time is no longer at our disposal.

I don't like seeing her in Thoradin's arms, and I suddenly regret going for Cambion when I could be holding her. But no matter. I have more important problems to worry about.

Thoradin leads the way out of Cambion's house, back into the natural world. I am quick behind him. Once outside, he stalls and glances back at me.

"Where are we going, liege?"

I clear my throat as I consider the options before us. Of course, the only place Thoradin and I can return to now is the Shadow Realm, otherwise we will very shortly become gargoyles. But if we return to the Gorge, I have no doubt Variant or his men will be awaiting us. Thus, it's out of the question.

But the Gorge isn't the only place within the Shadow Realm where one can hide. Shadowland is vast and one could very easily lose oneself there, which will provide the exact cover we require. My mind returns to our previous conversation with Cambion. Just as Thoradin and I will soon be turning to stone where we stand, Cambion won't be able to enter the Shadow Realm without consequence. Even if Variant didn't plan a punishment for Cambion like he did for me and my kind, everyone knows beings of light suffer in the shadow plane. Their power and life forces are leached from them—slowly at first, but, over time, remaining in darkness can be fatal. The same goes for the angel and sprite.

"Grimreap," I respond with more confidence than I feel.

Thoradin's harsh eyebrows arch in surprise, but he says nothing; instead, he recites the necessary enchantment to create a portal back to our world. Leaving our realm requires creative solutions, but returning necessitates only a simple incantation.



Thoradin vanishes from sight with a quick spin. Leaves kick up around him, the only trace marking where he once stood.

I feel my expression begin to harden involuntarily, my muscles seizing as my now gray arm stiffens against Cambion. On my last breath, I step into the portal, eager to have my body returned to me but worried about what enemies will meet us at our new destination.

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## DRAGAN

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

We arrive in a dimly lit grove, blessedly free from interlopers. For now.

I find it interesting and equally annoying that it appears Variant didn't bother to place any limitations on Cambion with respect to leaving his realm. Whereas I turn to stone when leaving mine, Cambion doesn't appear to have suffered any ill effects for leaving his. And it's been over an hour since we passed through the portal.

I always assumed Variant liked me least of the three of us but now I'm convinced.

We're on the outskirts of Grimreap, in the Raven Forest. The stench of the city wafts over us, riding the coattails of a sluggish breeze. I watch as the stony gray bleeds away from my skin and feeling returns to my arms and legs. That was close. Closer than I'd like.

I assess our weak crew. Thoradin has placed Eilish, still slumped, against a tree. He

clenches and unclenches his fists, likely feeling the same uncomfortable sensation I do as the blood returns to his previously lifeless limbs.

Eilish, Cambion, and the blasted sprite all look worse for wear. The natural luminosity of their skin has already waned in the dim that surrounds us in the shadow plane. Eilish, still arrestingly beautiful, emits a light of her own, but her skin has taken on a gray hue, here—devoid of color in the dismal gloom. Her face is still clammy from her recent ordeal, and her long eyelashes flutter against her cheeks as if she's dreaming. Her white hair stands in stark contrast against the dull black of the skeletal tree behind her. If it weren't for the slight movement of her eyelids and the gentle rise and fall of her chest, I'd think she was dead. I force my eyes away from the sheet still draped loosely around her delicate body.

Flumph has, for once, stopped his incessant chatter and seems to be in a daze of sorts. He sits, swaying slightly, beside the angel, his waxy skin looking greenish. I turn as I hear a small burp precede his retching.

I set Cambion against another nearby tree before turning my attention back to Eilish. I have more than one issue with her current outfit. Not only does it arouse something dark and slumbering within me, but my attention isn't the only one she'll attract. Men will want her as soon as they lay eyes on her. And if she's clothed in nothing but a sheet, that want could make them act against their own better judgement. An angel in the shadow plane will be hard to miss, regardless. But a half-naked angel? Variant would be on us before we even knew we'd been spotted.

Furthermore, I don't trust Cambion. I've seen the way he looks at her—like he's hungry. And I don't know what to make of the vision she had of the two of them... having sex. Apparently, Cambion witnessed it, too. I can't explain why, but the visual disturbs me. Deeply. I don't want him to possess her. I don't even want him to touch her.

Cambion doesn't deserve her. None of us do. She's the epitome of light and beauty and each one of us is flawed. Me, especially.

"Shall I create the Glyph of Warding, liege?" Thoradin asks, pulling me from my deep thoughts. I'm grateful for the distraction.

"Yes."

The Glyph of Warding is a way of protecting everyone within a designated area from anything or anyone outside that boundary. I watch as Thoradin inscribes the glyph on six of the closest trees surrounding us, creating a squarish pattern. He uses his fingers to draw his mark on each of them and his shadows sink into the glyph, making it glow red.

Even though the wards that now protect the perimeter of our camp are invisible, they radiate dark energy that warns beasts, sentient and otherwise, as well as the dead, to stay away. If something is brave enough to touch the wards, a blast of Shadow Magic will cause them to regret their decision. But the Glyph of Warding will allow the five of us to freely travel back and forth without consequence.

My senses are sharp and I don't detect anyone near the small clearing, but it's only a matter of time before something emerges from behind the swirling, dark fog around the city. What's more, the cold mist that hangs around us has saturated the ground and surrounding trees.

"That should protect us for the time being," I say.

Thoradin nods soberly. "Even so, we must keep sentry over the camp at all times."

"And we must build a fire," I add.

The fire is important not only for heat—the light will also encourage the less-than-friendly inhabitants of the Raven Forest to keep away. Light is the antidote to darkness, and the creatures that occupy this forest are of the shadows.

I glance at the three beings of the light and sigh. It's only a matter of time before they become as icy and damp as their surroundings. As if to confirm this thought, I see Flumph shiver.

While I have no concern over the little winged devil, I know Eilish and Cambion will be following suit shortly. I approach the angel cautiously, as if my footsteps will wake her. Placing my hand atop hers, I use the Gaze Of Two Minds charm to meld my senses to hers. At once, I feel a flood of pain and exhaustion. A shiver racks my body so violently, I nearly bite my tongue. Quickly, I remove my hand, and my senses become my own again.

Thoradin doesn't make any move toward starting the fire. It's customary for him to do my bidding without question, but I see the lines of his mouth harden in protest.

"You're worried a fire will attract attention?" I ask.

He hesitates. "We've come to a very dangerous place, liege."

The high-pitched hum of Flumph's wings informs me he's hovering directly over my shoulder. I fight the urge to swat him.

"Yeah, I wasn't gonna say nothin', but since he did, I'll second it. You got some shitty taste in 'commodations, Lord Night Prince."

As he speaks, it becomes harder to not hit him; I growl a low warning instead and the whirring of his wings grows quieter as he flies out of reach.

“We didn’t have a choice,” I say darkly. “Thoradin and I were in the process of taking our stone form. We had to return to the Shadow Realm.” I breathe in deeply.

“An’ what’s gonna happen to us?” the sprite asks, motioning to Cambion and the angel.

“Yes, this isn’t the best place for you, but it’s the only place where we have a chance to hide and not be found.”

“Then, what? You jist gonna let the Shadow Realm kill us lil by lil?” asks the annoying sprite.

“No, because we won’t be in the Shadow Realm for much longer.”

“Where we goin’?”

“Grimreap.”

The sprite appears confused. “Ain’t Grimreap in the Shadow Realm?”

“Grimreap isn’t fully shadow,” I respond.

“What?” the sprite frowns. “I thought we was in the Shadow Realm ‘cause you ain’t turnin’ to stone no more.”

“The Raven Forest is the Shadow Realm, yes.” I nod. “But Grimreap isn’t so easily explained. The divisions between the Fae, Mortal, and the Shadow Realm aren’t always clear. And in some locations, those lines are fully blurred.”

“What you talkin’ ‘bout?” Flumph demands, plopping his hands on his round hips.

In general, I don't enjoy explaining myself. Especially not to nosy and irksome sprites. But there's a time for explanations, and that time is now. "There are areas that exist in more than one plane at the same time—the Tree of Shadows is one such location. These are places where the edges separating the planes become blurred. Edges where each of us can exist simultaneously. Grimreap is one such edge."

"What's he goin' on about?" Flumph asks Thoradin.

"Long ago, before the humans were expunged from the world, hundreds of mortals, fae, and shadow-folk alike lived and died in Grimreap," Thoradin tells him. "Those spirits continue on, allowing each of us to coexist where, ordinarily, your kind would perish."

The sprite frowns as though he still doesn't understand. I curse the bloody imbecile but clarify anyway. "The land is shared by ghosts of all three realms. Essentially, this is the spirit world. There are aspects of Fae, Mortal, and Shadow, all coexisting together. The city is so haunted, it's taken on a life its own."

"Quaint," says Flumph, his small eyes rolling in his head. I hear a weak moan from behind me and turn to see Eilish's limp head droop forward, her pearly skin coated in a sheen of sweat and gooseflesh.

"Quaint, it's not. Thoradin's right; we've come to a dangerous place. Grimreap is foul, and, as such, it's home to some of the foulest. None of us are safe here."

"Ain't your Shadow Magic 'nough ta protect us?" the sprite asks.

"My shadows will cloak us, but the chill of this world will kill you and the others before any Shadar-kai or Banderhobb can," I say, turning to Thoradin. "Thus, we need to warm them with fire." He nods solemnly and sets off in search of dry wood.

“What’s a Shitter-cat an’ a Corn-cob?” Flumph asks, looking frightened.

“ Shadar-kai and Banderhobb ,” I correct. “And what did I say about asking questions when you won’t understand the answers?”

### DRAGAN

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

We busy ourselves gathering supplies needed to camp. Thoradin marches off in search of wood and the sprite attempts to help him. Moments later, Thoradin returns with a large bundle of sticks, logs, and kindling while Flumph, the useless thing, drags a single small twig across the forest floor, his squat body heaving under the supposed weight. He sets his twig beside Thoradin's bundle and wipes his brow.

Thoradin arranges the kindling and branches into a pyramid shape. Then, he holds his palms up. “ Conjure Flame ,” he says and immediately, a flickering blaze appears between them. The flame sheds a bright light in a ten-foot radius around us, and dim light for another ten feet beyond that. He leans down to the pyramid of wood and opens his hands above it. Instantly, the small pyre is consumed with the shadow flame and the fire roars to life.

“What's for dinner?” Flumph asks, looking around expectantly.

The Raven Forest is a wasteland, home only to foul and enormous insects, terrifying monsters, and the spirits of the dead. Any animals fit to consume would be skin and bones—their bodies likely ravaged by disease. My stomach tightens with hunger, but there will be no dinner tonight. I watch as the realization sobers the sprite's expression.



“See to it that the fire never goes out,” I order, eyeing Flumph specifically.

“Why you lookin’ at me like it’s my job?”

“Because I’m making it your job.” I take a deep breath. “The fire’s your only means of protection beyond the Glyph of Warding . Respect it.”

I hear movement and look to the tree under which Eilish is propped. She’s stirring, her limp body now showing signs of alertness. I move toward her as she raises her hand to her head, wincing in pain.

“Dragan...” she half mumbles.

At the sound of her voice, I hurry until I’m standing above her. She repeats my name but doesn’t open her eyes. She’ll most likely be confused by her whereabouts, tired, and hungry. Conditions I can’t do anything about. And yet, she asks for me anyway. In her fear and suffering, my name is the one that moves across her full, pink lips.

I place one arm beneath her back and the other under her legs, and lift her easily. It’s as if she weighs nothing; her body feels small and fragile. I can feel her skin, where it’s exposed beneath the poor wrapping of her sheet. The soft fleshiness of her thighs, the slenderness of her shoulders and arms. She folds her face into my chest as I walk to the fire.

She’s so vulnerable, it would be easy to take what you want from her, points out a voice inside my head. It’s the voice of darkness, a voice that’s been my constant companion for as long as I can remember.

Imagine how good she would feel, wrapped around your cock. That hot, tight wetness you’ve denied yourself for so long...

Stop! I yell inwardly and shake my head as I clench my eyes shut.

Carry her away from the others and spread her wide. Taste her. It's been so long, you've forgotten what a woman tastes like.

Enough! I inhale deeply, trying to get control of myself, trying to force these awful thoughts aside.

Imagine the feel as you slide into her, her folds stretching wide. That slickness welcoming your throbbing cock. Imagine the moans escaping her lips, the way her breath speeds up.

It's an endless battle to fight the darkness within me—a darkness that constantly threatens to take over. I'm angry with myself for needing to battle my baser instincts, instincts that tell me to take what I want. And I want Eilish. I want her more than I can remember wanting anything in a long time. The need to claim her grows stronger the more I'm in her company, and it's everything I can do to keep it at bay.

In general, I'm not the type of man who keeps anything at bay. I'm accustomed to taking what I want, but I know it's not right. Especially with Eilish. She trusts me. More so than she trusts the others, I can tell. And I want to encourage that trust. Giving into my needs and having my way with her won't achieve that.

Take her. Fuck her, Dragan, the voice insists. She's yours. Claim her. Mark her.

No.

If you don't, Cambion will. Remember the vision...

And suddenly, I remember the expression on Eilish's face right before she came out of the vision. I remember her smile, the way her breath hitched. The rise and fall of

her breasts as she envisioned Cambion inside her. And then I remember the tugging pain of jealousy that consumed me. The anger, the fire that rose up inside me until I wanted to punch my fist through the wall.

Is that what you want? The voice insists . Do you want Cambion to be the one who experiences her?

Fuck! No, that's not what I want!

Then take her now, so Cambion knows she's yours. Make him understand he'll never have her—that if he were to try, you'd kill him. Claim her before another man does.

I can't take it anymore. My head feels like a battlefield, warring thoughts rampaging through it until I want to scream.

Gently, I place Eilish on the ground in front of the fire, and I watch as the shadows dance across her beautiful face. I step away, running my hands through my hair as I breathe deeply. I need to calm myself and deny the voice its power over me. I need to focus, to find my inner strength, to center myself.

As I inhale, I feel my chest expanding as far as it'll go. The trees here don't carry the same aromatic delight of typical firewood. Instead, the air around us smells acrid and burnt—sulfur, and decaying leaves, and acidic, brackish dirt. The black wood sputters and hisses as it burns, the salt in its bark producing flames of greenish-blue.

Eilish is delirious and can barely sit up straight. She says my name again and I hold myself back from going to her. I'm not fully in control of myself yet, and if I catch her scent and lose control... I can't think about what could happen.

“Dragan,” she whispers, rolling her head right then left.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper back, hating my own fucking weakness. She needs me, but I can’t go to her. Not when I’m this dangerously close to losing control. If she knew the thoughts that were polluting my brain... she’d hate me. She’d realize how ridiculous it is to trust me. She’d understand what I truly am. That I’m Darkness. I’m as much shadow as the Shadow Realm, itself. I’m tainted and sick.

When she opens her eyes, they’re bloodshot. Large bags puff out beneath them, and her water line is an irritated pink. Regardless, she’s breathtaking. Compared to the red, her eyes appear even more vibrantly blue. She seems to be fully awake, but she doesn’t speak. She just looks at me.

I pace back and forth, doing my best to keep my gaze locked on the ground. But every now and then, I glance up at her. I can’t help it. It’s addicting to look at her: her hair, draped over her naked shoulders; her cheeks, pale in the waning light; her legs, slender and long, extended out in front of her to take full advantage of the fire. What fascinates me the most, though, are her eyes. Those deep, intelligent windows to a mysterious soul. It takes me a second to realize I’ve been unabashedly staring at her and, quickly, I look away. This obsession I’m forming with her isn’t safe. It’s throwing my thoughts and it’s making me at odds with myself.

It’s a wonder the others haven’t noticed yet. Or maybe they have and I’m just kidding myself. I’m almost certain Thoradin can tell I’m not acting like the king he’s known me to be all these years. He knows me better than anyone here does. And yet, he says nothing, because I’m his liege and he knows it’s not his place. But I’m sure he’s worried all the same.

I need a woman, I tell myself resolutely. Maybe fucking someone would deliver me from this constant need for Eilish. Maybe it would cure these thoughts that keep plaguing me.

The more I consider the idea, the better it sounds. I decide, right then and there, that

as soon as we enter Grimreap and as soon as the opportunity presents itself, I'll find a whore. And I'll use her as many times as it takes to rid this from my system.

"Dragan," Eilish repeats.

I look at her and suddenly feel ashamed for my thoughts.

Up until very recently, I hadn't even heard the angel speak. Even now, she's borderline catatonic. Yet, there's something about her, some brightness that I can't tear my gaze from. I want to hold her, protect her, and tell her she's safe.

"I'm starvin'!" hollers Flumph, forcing me to look away from the beautiful young woman. She raises her head to look at him, then steals another quick glance at me. And I think I see something in her eyes, something that smolders. The look, albeit brief, is a knowing one. I wonder, somewhat irrationally, if she's been reading my thoughts.

Then again, maybe my thoughts aren't all that difficult to read. My lingering gaze over the lines of her poorly concealed body is probably no mystery to her. Then why does it look like she shares the same need? Why are her eyes continually finding mine? And why is there a spark inside them that hints at her own lustful thoughts?

You're confusing her desire with yours, I tell myself, ashamed again. After the trials of her last day, sex has to be the last thing on her mind. But, as hard as I try to distract myself, it's still first on mine.

I walk away from the fire; I have to get away from her. Her presence is enough to drive me to distraction and I need to focus on our surroundings. I need to be in complete control of my mental faculties, so I can sense danger and plan accordingly.

"Where you goin'?" the sprite demands. "You gonna get us some eats?"

“No,” I bark at him.

“I’m starvin’, Demon Prince.”

“I’m not your parent,” I growl, lustful thoughts becoming liquid anger inside me. I’m dangerously close to losing my cool. “If you want food, get it yourself.”

“I thought you said there was nothin’ to eat ‘round here?”

“I’ve heard roasted sprite isn’t bad,” Thoradin jokes. “As long as you don’t mind some getting stuck in your teeth.”

I can’t smile. My thoughts are wholly encompassed with the need to suppress this burning fire within me. The sooner we get into Grimreap and I find myself a whore, the better. My sanity seems to depend on it.

Flumph crosses his arms against his chest. “Ha. Ha. Very funny. What am I supposed to do out here, starve?”

I look over his round, cushioned body and hear myself chuckle. Then I hear Flumph mumble something underneath his breath. I can’t make out what he says, but I’m pretty sure the words ‘dick’ and ‘shadow-fuck’ are used.

He seems to be in an even more contentious mood than usual. This isn’t surprising, considering we’re in the forest of shadow.

The attitudes of the group will continue to foul, the longer we remain here. I’ve watched it happen before—it’s a slow transition. Gradually, their voices will grow weary, their movements will become sluggish, and they’ll seem snappish and angry. It’s similar to how I feel when in the light realm. Even before Variant’s edicts and stone curses, life in other realms proved challenging.

At the thought of the darkness destroying the beautiful angel, I look at her and find her looking at me. She doesn't turn her gaze away but continues to study me boldly. She's still propped up beside the fire. The warmth seems to comfort her somewhat, and she's sitting up on her own.

The pull of shadow on beings of light is nothing compared to the pull she has on me. My heart beats faster the longer our eyes lock. My muscles tense. She continues to stare at me, as though she can see through me. I allow my eyes to roam the endless beauty of her body and I do so brazenly, curious as to how she'll respond when she sees me appraise her so blatantly.

She doesn't shift her gaze, doesn't appear angry or self-conscious. Just continues to watch me as I look at her breasts and then the junction of her thighs. The sheet that covers her is all that separates her nudity from my probing eyes, and I wish she'd shift it, show me what's beneath it. But she doesn't.

I glance up at her again and watch as her mouth turns in a slight smirk. She seems amused. I can't explain her reaction. She should be offended by my roving eyes, but she appears entertained, instead.

I don't.

I feel weakened.

Compromised.

### CAMBION

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

My body is devoid of warmth and a throbbing headache makes it difficult to open my eyes. I sit up slowly, my body reluctant to follow my commands. When I look around, all I see is an overwhelming darkness, so black I have a hard time believing my eyes aren't still closed. But then, light appears like a beacon from a lighthouse tower. Fire. At first, the light from the fire is the only thing I can see. Everything else is an inky black. Instinctively, my eyes blink against the darkness, willing my vision to adjust. Behind me, I can barely make out the dim outline of trees—twisting, contorted branches coated in deadly thorns—their shapes barely visible against the darker blackness of the sky.

Feeling pain in each of my limbs, I struggle to remember where I am. The last thing I recall is healing the beautiful angel. Beautiful, but powerful in a way I find myself wary of. Angels and fae are friends, yes, but Variant is also an angel and we all know how that story ended.

Angels are beings of light, but they aren't immune to corruption. And I know their proclivity toward decadence and greed better than most.

Then, I remember the visions the angel had...

First, the fucking. A not-altogether-unpleasant visual. It was more than a vision,



though. Like a dream, the sensation—phantom, but present—has arrested me and now I can't stop replaying the feeling of my cock sinking into her, the way her flesh yielded.

I don't trust her. And I don't trust the vision, either. In fact, the more I think about it, the more convinced I become that she's after something. Women, I've found, are manipulative, and the smart ones understand they possess what every man wants between their legs. This one is no different. I'm more than convinced she's using her extreme beauty to seduce us. And, so far, it appears to be working. Well, at least on Dragan.

Yet, I, too, find myself craving her, the way an Atacomite addict craves his poison. But I'm not satisfied that this desire originates from inside me. Instead, I wonder if I've been enchanted. Dragan definitely appears to have been completely bewitched, because he can't take his bloody eyes off her for more than a few seconds. The barbarian is too stupid for his own good.

I can't deny there was attraction between the angel and me from the onset. I know that much is true. But the ferocity of my need and my inability to curb it fills me with concern. I'm not a man who obsesses over a woman; I've never been that type. I'm too rational, too logical of mind. And yet I can't stop thinking about this woman—a woman I don't even know.

She's placed falsehoods in my mind, I'm sure of it. And these lies are confusing because they feel like the truth. For example, I now have a memory of an event (of us fucking) that never occurred.

Then it was a vision of the future, perhaps? I think to myself and can't help the swelling of my dick.

If it's a picture of the future, I worry about the implications of participating in a

destiny I didn't help dictate. In general, I'm a planner. I'm not like Dragan, who lives according to his impulses. Instead, I weigh all things and act accordingly. I don't like risks.

And the feeling I had when I witnessed our sexual tryst was that I had no control over myself. Yes, I was in control of penetrating her, but she was the one who maintained the power. It's difficult to explain, because I hardly understand it myself, but I felt as if I were her captive—as if I was incapable of denying her... anything. I felt helpless against her female charm. It's a feeling that's visited me in wisps since I've laid eyes on her.

Her beauty is undeniable, but it's her power that concerns me.

I've seen first-hand the hold she already has on Dragan and I won't allow myself to become her second casualty. Where he sees an injured doe in the woods, I see an intelligent predator in the midst of setting a very convincing trap...

The vision she had of the battle is more difficult to explain. It was the darkest day in my memory. And the sight of it forced me to revisit all the feelings and emotions I'd had so long ago. The anxiety, the agony of watching my comrades destroyed right in front of me, the crushing weight that came with the realization that we'd lost to Variant.

And it wasn't even losing to Variant that stings the most. It was the corruption and duplicity of the Unseelie King, Theren, that still burns me as sharply as it did one hundred years ago. Perhaps that's because the Seelie and the Unseelie, though different as night and day, have always been allies—until Variant made a mockery of that alliance. Or perhaps the Unseelie's treachery never stopped stinging because Theren, the Unseelie King, is also my brother.

I close my eyes against the memories. The battle was so long ago, yet it still burns as

if it were yesterday. Instead, I focus on remembering. On tracing the steps that led to me sitting here, in this shadow forest with these assholes.

Shortly after witnessing the battle vision, courtesy of the angel and her suspicious magic, the world went dark. But what had happened just prior to that? I close my eyes and rack my brain, trying to understand. Suddenly, I see Dragan's face and, along with it, I feel a flash of anger.

My eyes blaze open.

The fucker used his magic against me! It's his fault I'm here now, in the middle of this fucking forest in the shadow realm!

I return my focus to the fire and make out the white of the angel's hair. She seems to be glowing with a light entirely her own. Her sheet is wrapped tightly around her shoulders and even from my spot, separate from the group, I can see she's shivering. I shift my weight onto my aching legs and stand.

I don't care that the angel's shivering. She can be damned, for all the shits I give. As far as I'm concerned, she's more witch than angel.

"You'll be punished for what you've done," I say to Dragan when I meet him beside the fire. Just being near the light and warmth revives me somewhat. My gaze is hard, and my voice matches the cold of the chilled air.

Slowly, Dragan turns his attention away from the fire and locks eyes with mine. The flames reflect back at me from within his irises and the hatred between us is thick and tense. I'm beyond livid. I feel the rage build, the palms of my hands electric in anticipation of magic. If provoked, I will magic him out of this plane and into another. I need only be triggered. And there's a very large part of me that hopes Dragan rises to the occasion.

“We were out of time,” he explains casually.

The fury within me grows even stronger. “No. You were out of time.”

“My business is now your business,” he says matter-of-factly.

“No, it’s not.” I inhale deeply, subduing the need to pull my arm back and punch him right in the face. “I’m a king,” I start.

“You were a king,” he interrupts, his voice dripping with disdain. He crouches down in front of the fire, his large wings folded but tense behind him. It could be my imagination, but the flames appear to reach higher, their flickering tips licking the upper reaches of his shining eyes. Raw power emanates from him, but he doesn’t intimidate me. He never has.

I notice the girl; her face is weary, but her eyes are alert and intelligent. She watches us. The blue of her irises rattles me because there’s something more there than meets the eye. It’s almost as though she can see right through me and it’s not a feeling I appreciate. I force myself to turn again to Dragan.

“I’m still a king, in case you’ve forgotten. I command a legion of fae, all loyal to me. And all will be eager to have your head.”

“A legion of fae who can’t leave the fae realm,” Dragan chides.

“Regardless, I’m sure Variant will be very interested to know that two gargoyles abducted me.”

“Don’t threaten me with Variant,” Dragan says, his expression souring. “And as far as you’re concerned, faerie, we may need you now but as soon as you’re no longer necessary, you bet your ass I’ll have no problem returning you to your... quaint little

village.”

Anger pulses through me, pushing the emotion to the forefront of my brain. “You’ll return me now!”

“No,” Dragan asserts and his eyes are narrow, angry.

I don’t have time for a war of words. Even the most logical argument will mean nothing to the thick-headed gargoyle. He’s so fucking stupid, I half-believe his mind is made of stone.

“Where are we?” I demand.

“Does it matter?” He loosens his attack-ready crouch and rocks back into a more neutral position beside the fire.

“Yes, it fucking matters!” I yell. “And I demand to know!”

“You’re not in a position to be demanding anything.”

I hear a small laugh, like the ringing of a bell, and notice the sprite perched on the angel’s knee. “Look, his royal highness is awake!”

My hands clench. If I hadn’t wanted to kill the bloody thing before, I do now.

“Where the fuck are we?” I repeat as I face Dragan, my voice deadly.

Dragan sighs like he’s completely uninterested in me and this conversation. “We’re in The Raven Forest, outside Grimreap.”

My face must reveal my surprise. Why we’ve come here, of all places, baffles me.

Grimreap is a place so vile, it's said it was born from death itself. Its very existence hinges on the tortured souls that sustain it. The city goes against the natural order, against life itself, and revels in the void. It's not shadow nor mortal nor fae—it's only horror and death. To bring me here is greater than any insult Dragan could throw my way.

"Grimreap?" I repeat, shaking my head. "What the fuck are you thinking?"

"I saved our lives."

"Saved our lives?" I feel my mouth drop open. "Are you really that stupid?"

"Grimreap is the last place anyone would assume we'd go and it's the best place for that reason alone," he insists.

"But Variant—"

"If we're lucky, he knows nothing," Dragan interrupts.

"You think Anona won't tell him that you stole the angel and disappeared?"

He cocks his head to the side as though he's not sure what he believes. "Anona won't want to risk her already delicate favor with Variant by revealing she was housing an angel in the first place." He sighs, long and hard.

"And if we aren't lucky?"

He nods, as if he believes this option to be the case. "Then a hundred eyes have seen us. Which means Variant knows we have Eilish, but he doesn't know what she is. No one does, except for the four of us."

“What she is?” I repeat, shaking my head at his idiocy.

“An angel,” he finishes.

“An intact angel, a subject on which none of us knows the truth,” I correct him. He just nods, then breathes in deeply. He can’t argue with me on this, because he’s just as uninformed as I am with regard to the subject of whether or not the angel really is whole.

“Regardless,” I continue. “I want no part of this.”

“It’s a little late.”

“You came to me,” I remind him, glaring. “I could’ve denied you! Refused to see you! I could’ve—”

Dragan interrupts me again, holding up his hand, “But you didn’t. Which means you’re now as much a part of this as any of us. If Variant catches you, you’re as good as dead. So, I suggest you stop your incessant noise and help us devise a plan.”

I’m fuming. Beyond livid. I feel the air around me vibrate, touched with the energy of my anger. “You’re saying you brought me to Grimreap, to the city of the dead, and you don’t have a fucking plan?”

“No.”

“You are even fucking dumber than I thought! And you’ve sentenced us all to death,” I snarl through clenched teeth as I scowl at him. “You fucking cock!”

Dragan stares into the fire and I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing.

I continue, the reality of our situation settling in, “And you’ve damned us for what?” I look at the girl. “You don’t even know if she has her wings! You don’t even know if she’s actually a fucking angel!” I scowl at her, then at him. “You’ve damned us for a fucking whore!”

Dragan’s in front of me in a split second, his hand around my throat. He lifts me into the air and it becomes impossible to breathe. I sputter and try to kick at him but he’s immense and built like a wall, so what little I attempt does nothing to dissuade him from choking the life out of me. His eyes are angrier than I’ve ever seen them.

“Shadow Demon!” the sprite yells at him as it spirals around his head. “You can’t hurt him! We need him! Remember what Eilish said!”

After another few seconds, Dragan releases me. I reach for my throat and begin rubbing it as I inhale deeply and then erupt into a coughing fit.

“Don’t you ever call her a whore again,” he warns, his words dripping with ire. “Next time, I’ll kill you.”

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FLUMPH

I watch the elf king pantin’ an’ lookin’ real angry-like. Dragan turn his back on Cambion an’ walks away, like, five steps. But Cambion continue to stare at him like he real mad. I think maybe it’s just a trick o’ the fire, but he got gold sparks, like embers, bouncin’ ‘round between his fingers. I’m worried for what he’s gonna do.

“Don’t do this, Cambion,” Dragan say real quiet-like even though he don’t even turn ‘round. It like he got eyes on the back o’ his head ‘cause he know Cambion standin’ there, ready to attack him.



“Fuck you!”

Then Cambion release whatever was brewin’ between his fingers, but it misses Dragan. So Cambion lunges for Dragan an’ Dragan slam his fist into the ground, an’ there’s like a big-ass earthquake an’ Cambion lose his balance real quick. Dragan stand up straight an’ his big-ass black wings go spreadin’ out real wide.

I can’t tell ya who I’m rootin’ for, just that I’m enjoyin’ the show.

Just as I’m wishin’ there was popcorn, there’s a shift in the air. Like the energy jist got sucked outta the man-tiff that’s goin’ on in front o’ me. Before I can take another breath, the angel does this weird high-pitched squeak thing. Suddenly, all eyes are on her.

“Stop,” she says in a little voice.

“You keep your mouth shut, whoever the hell you are!” Cambion rail at her an’ he takes a couple steps closer, lookin’ at her like she the devil herself. “She’s just a stupid fucking...”

But before he can finish, Dragan’s right in front o’ him like he’s thinkin’ Cambion’s gonna hurt her or some shit. Anyways, Dragan slam his fist into Cambion’s face an’ the elf king goes flyin’, like, ten feet. He land on the ground but he up faster than I can blink. An’ then, in like another blink, his fist is slammin’ ‘cross Dragan’s face. The gargoyle king launches backwards, which surprise the hells outta me ‘cause Cambion don’t look like he got it in ‘em to knock Dragan off his feet!

Dragan get up to his knees an’ check his jaw to make sure it ain’t broke, an’ then he face Cambion an’ he’s, like, mega-pissed. But rather than punchin’ Cambion back into the Fae Realm, Dragan surprise us all when he hold up his big mitt o’ a hand.

“Enough!” he yell as he stand there, pantin’.

Cambion stride closer but he don’t make no move to attack. He just stand, too, glarin’. His lip is bleedin’ real bad where the gargoyle king got a good shot in.

“He’s right,” Dragan say as he look from Cambion to me. I’m just as surprised by Dragan’s words as Cambion is.

“There’s been no proof that she’s an intact angel,” Dragan say. Then he glare at me an’ Cambion glare at me, too, like it be my fault they’re goin’ nuclear on each other’s asses.

“I ain’t lyin,” I say, gettin’ real sick o’ this convo. “I saw what I said I saw.”

“If it’s true, tell her to show us,” Cambion demand as he faces Eilish. “If you’re really an angel, show us your wings.”

“If you been holdin’ back,” I says as I look at her. “You gotta stop holdin’ back now, girl. They’s at their wits end an’ I don’t wanna get kilt ‘cause they ain’t believin’ me.” I take a breath. “Make them wings come out your back, Eilish, please.”

Her eyes are wide an’ she frown, droppin’ her head real sad-like. “I don’t... know how,” she answer, her voice low an’ exhausted.

### CAMBION

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

“Leave her be,” Dragan says as he faces the “angel” and then glares at me. “She’s dealt with enough.”

Dragan has it worse than I imagined. I don’t know if the woman has charmed him or what, but he’s unreliable now. He’s fully in bed with her, and that makes him dangerous. When I chance a quick look back, I find her sitting against the tree. Her eyes are wide, but she makes no motion to say or do anything. I’m not convinced she’s even an angel. Maybe a hag magicking herself to appear as one. If a hag’s magic were strong enough, it would be possible.

“You’re putting all your faith into this supposed angel, but you still don’t know if she really has her wings,” I say, my voice coarse.

“I can’t argue that point,” Dragan admits reluctantly.

“Right. None of us can.” Then, I turn to face the sprite. “The only person here who insists the angel has wings is you,” I point out, inhaling deeply. I’m tired of this subject and I want answers once and for all. “For all we know, she’s either charmed you just like she’s attempting to charm us, or you’re fully aware of her duplicity.”

“What are you going on about?” Dragan insists.

I look at Dragan but I don't respond right away. Instead, I glance at Thoradin and find him studying me with interest. He's following the line of my argument. And, from his expression, it doesn't seem as though he finds my perspective unbelievable. Hmm, maybe someone will see reason after all.

"I don't believe our angel is all she appears to be," I finish.

"I ain't no liar," Flumph squeaks, flitting away from the fire so he can come right up into my face. "I ain't!" he repeats emphatically, his voice growing even more tinny in its emotion. "I saws what I saws, an' I'm tellin' you, she got her wings! Big 'uns, too!"

"There you have it," Dragan says with a shrug.

I can't hide my incredulity. "So that's it? We just believe him?" I ask, facing Dragan first and then Thoradin. Both are frowning.

"What else is there to do, Cambion?" Dragan's voice sounds tired, like I'm a petulant child harassing him.

"I don't know, Dragan," I spit back. "Maybe not risk our fucking lives on the word of a bug!"

He shakes his head but doesn't answer. My face flushes; my hands are shaking so violently I have no choice but to ball them into fists.

"We could subject her to the Enchantment of True Seeing," Thoradin proposes in a low voice. I'm surprised he's offered a suggestion as I've never heard him do so before. Usually, he's Dragan's yes-man and nothing more.

"If her magic is strong enough, she could deny the enchantment," I counter, but the

idea still sticks with me all the same.

“Not if all three of us blend our magic together,” Thoradin responds. He has a point. The three of us should have enough magic to overpower whatever magic is inherent in the so-called angel. If she were a witch or a hag, the three of us would be able to overcome her and reveal her for what she truly is.

“It’s too dangerous. She’s too weak,” Dragan says as he looks at the beautiful girl and shakes his head.

“I don’t care,” I respond with stern conviction.

The subject in question remains silent. Her tired eyes have once again found the fire. As to her wings’ status, she makes no comment. It strikes me then that we know very little about her. We have no idea where she came from, or even what she came from. In the spaces she’s left with her silence, Dragan’s filled in the gaps with his assumptions of her goodness. If it came down to it, would he be able to see she isn’t what he thought?

His hard gaze is trained on the fire and it’s as if I can see the gears of his mind working furiously. Dragan, for all the time I’ve known him, has been driven, stubborn, and moral to a fault. More than once his actions, rooted in honor, have caused more harm than good. How fitting that Dragan is literally a creature of stone. He’s hard, unyielding, immobile. Time seems to have hardened these qualities, making him doubly set in his ways. Admittedly, it isn’t always a bad thing.

When he’s on your side, he’s the greatest ally you could hope for. He’s the most loyal person I’ve ever met. And this situation is proof—Dragan’s going (quite literally) to the ends of the earth for a woman we know nothing about.

I turn my attention to the anger still welling inside me. I feel beyond irate, my

emotion boiling very near the surface. I want to slap Dragan out of this trance the woman has put him in, break him out of this blind obedience. His immobility on the subject of the angel is dangerous.

Watching her at the edge of the fire, however, my anger lessens somewhat. I feel it, too. That pull toward her. Maybe she really is an angel and not some hag or witch—it would explain the fact that none of us can keep our eyes off her.

And then, suddenly, I understand Dragan better. I start to see this situation from his perspective, because I feel the pull towards her just as readily as he does. If she truly is an angel, it's not just her beauty that induces Dragan's loyalty; she, by her very nature, is deserving of our reverence. An angel's power is unmatched and, so far, even with all my misgivings, she still could provide the outcome Dragan's so desperately wanted—an outcome he's waited a century for.

For Dragan, the angel isn't just a potential sexual conquest. She's his hope. He wants nothing more than a reason to rebel against Variant. And prior to this moment, he's never been given that reason. But if she truly is an angel and possesses her wings, she'd be reason enough. An intact, female angel is about as powerful as powerful gets. This is the reason Variant had the wings amputated from every female angel, and the reason he had all male angels put to death. He wants no one to threaten his rule.

As far as I'm concerned, until the angel proves she still possesses her wings, I consider her nothing more than a liability. And given the fact that she bears the markings, chances are she's been ripped of her wings just like every other angel has been.

"You're a fool, Dragan," I say as I look over at her. "You've bought into her story—hook, line and sinker—without ever seeing proof that she is what she says she is."

“I never said I was anything,” she suddenly pipes up and faces me accusingly. “You’re the ones who’ve made a big deal about me still having my wings.”

“Then you don’t possess them?” I ask her, surprised at the vitriol in her tone. Her expression reveals nothing; she merely stares into the fire, her body swaying slightly with the effort to hold herself upright. In the moment, she doesn’t appear dangerous. She appears tired, scared, and confused. She clutches at the edges of her sheet and I feel the tension leave my body. Briefly, I forget where I am and long just to touch her, to warm her. To share my light. To feel hers.

“I don’t know,” she says and shrugs.

“Of course, you don’t,” I reply with a smile I don’t feel and glance back at Dragan. He refuses to meet my gaze.

“I think you should do it,” the girl says as I face her and she stares me right in the eyes.

“Do what?”

“Force the truth out of me, like Thoradin suggested.”

“No,” Dragan says and approaches her, but she turns her heated gaze on him.

“The only way any of you are going to trust me is if you know I’m telling you the truth. And I need you to trust me.”

“The Enchantment of True Seeing won’t produce your wings,” I say staunchly.

“But if I’m aware that I have my wings, I’ll admit that I do, right?” she asks.

I cock my head to the side. "I suppose so, yes."

She takes a deep breath. "Then do it. I want to know as much about myself as you do. I'm tired of living without answers and only facing more and more questions."

"You're weak, Eilish," Dragan starts.

She shakes her head. "Cambion healed me before; he could heal me again."

"He isn't as powerful in this realm," Dragan tells her. "The Shadow Realm is already leeching the life force from all of you."

"I could heal her," I say with conviction.

"We could lend Cambion our magic as well, liege," Thoradin says. He's clearly a proponent of this plan, as well. Apparently, I'm not the only one who doubts the girl.

Dragan is quiet for a few seconds but then nods without saying anything more.

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## DRAGAN

I don't believe this is a good idea. Eilish is exhausted and her body is weak. After what she's been through, the idea of putting her through something as taxing as this enchantment seems wrong, malicious. But now that she's asked to be subjected to it, I'm not sure what more I can do to stop it from happening.

"If she shows signs of pain or increased weakness, we stop immediately," I warn them. Thoradin nods his agreement but Cambion just stares at me. I'm not sure what his problem is; it seems like he's trying to discredit her. I believe he wants nothing



more than to prove she's not what she appears to be, but I'm not sure why. He must recognize that if she's an intact angel, she's the answer to defeating Variant? Then it dawns on me: maybe that's the exact reason why he hopes she's a fraud. Maybe he's that afraid of rebelling against Variant?

Regardless, I believe in her. I can't explain why, because she's shown me nothing more than she's shown the others, but I believe in her all the same. Maybe I'm a fool. I suppose time will tell.

"Join hands," Cambion says as we circle Eilish. She lies in the center of our circle, facing the starless, black sky.

"Sprite, you must place both hands on her," Cambion continues.

"Why I gotta do that?"

"Learn how to follow directions without asking questions," I bark at him. He glares up at me but does as he's told. His light energy will help balance the loss of Eilish's.

"One of us must touch her," Cambion explains.

No one is going to touch her but me. I reach out, placing my hand on her shoulder, and she glances up at me with wide, nervous eyes. She's scared. I smile down at her as consolingly as I'm able. She takes a deep breath and breaks my gaze, staring up at the sky again.

Cambion begins reciting the words of the enchantment in the old language of Elvish . I watch as Eilish's breathing picks up, her chest rising and falling more obviously. She closes her eyes.

"Activate your Shadow Magic," Cambion instructs and I close my eyes, calling my

shadows forth. I feel them immediately. Opening my eyes, I witness a bluish glow building from beneath Cambion's hands. It spreads to Thoradin's, where it morphs to a red glow, then carries through to me. Fairly soon, our circle of arms is lit with fae and shadow magic, blue and red fluorescence that dances along our hands and arms, highlighting the circle surrounding Eilish.

She opens her mouth and inhales deeply, her breathing coming even faster now.

"I call forth the powers of the Enchantment of True Seeing," Cambion intones. Almost immediately, the glow linking us begins to arch inwards, toward Eilish. The glow empties from our skin and swallows her entire body, cocooning her in a white, radiant embrace. She jerks slightly and opens her mouth as a slight moan echoes from her lips. It's a doleful sound.

"Hurry," I growl at Cambion.

"Are you angel or are you otherwise?" Cambion demands, staring down at her with an expression devoid of empathy.

Eilish opens her mouth to speak, but another small moan escapes and her jaw tightens. Cambion repeats his question, this time with more urgency.

"I am... angel," she says this time, in a small, wilted tone. "But I am more."

"More?" Cambion studies her pensively. I'm surprised, as well. "What more are you?" he asks.

"I... I am not... sure."

"Do you still possess your wings?" he insists.

“I... I don’t know.” She takes another deep breath and clenches her eyes shut. A tremor suddenly seizes her, shaking her from her shoulders to her feet. Her eyes pop open and the whites are clearly visible. She’s afraid.

“Who placed the marks on your back?” Cambion asks.

“I...”

“Who placed the marks on your back?” he asks again, this time louder, more impatient.

“Cambion,” I growl at him in warning. I hate the way he’s treating her—as if she’s not an angelic being, as if she doesn’t deserve his respect. I’ve forgotten how much I fucking hate him.

“I... I don’t know.”

“Where did you come from?”

She closes her eyes again and pauses as tears begin to drip from her lashes. Her hands are now fists at her sides, and her skin tone is pure white.

“She cryin’,” Flumph says, and he glances up at me with an expression of concern.

“Cambion, no more,” I whisper as I face the man in question. But he doesn’t bother looking at me and, instead, continues staring at her, his jaw tight. He’s angry and by his expression, he isn’t about to give up anytime soon.

“Where did you come from?” he repeats.

“I... I don’t know,” she answers.

Cambion frowns and his eyes are hard, deliberate. “Is it true your memories aren’t available to you?”

Tears roll freely down her cheeks now and her breathing is coming in ragged gasps. “Yes, it’s true.”

“Are you trying to manipulate us into doing your bidding?”

“She don’t look too good,” Flumph points out, looking up at Cambion, but when Cambion doesn’t respond, the sprite looks at me. “You gotta stop him, Dragan.”

“Are you trying to manipulate us?” Cambion says louder, glaring at the sprite and then at me.

“No,” she whispers, then begins to openly sob.

“Cambion,” I snarl at him again. “Enough.”

“What do you want from us?” he nearly interrupts me.

She’s started crying uncontrollably, the pulse in her neck pounding. “Your... protection.”

“From what?”

“I... I don’t know.” Another tremor rocks through her and she arches her back, gritting her teeth as she cries out.

“Stop!” Flumph yells. He’s careful to keep his hands on her as he looks at Cambion imploringly. There’s wild fear in his eyes. “I can feel her pain! You gotta stop!”

“Cambion!” I yell at him, and he finally looks at me. “You’ve gotten your answers, now release her!”

He makes no motion to do anything. Just stands there, glaring at me.

“Fucking release her!” I yell at him.

“I haven’t accessed her subconscious. All her answers are coming from her conscious mind, which is why she can’t answer any of my questions,” he responds.

“I don’t fucking care. You’re hurting her!”

She begins to hyperventilate and I glare at Cambion. I want to bury my fucking fists into his face and tear away that look of determination. I want to kill him for what he’s just done to her. But I know I can’t break the circle—if I do, the magic won’t escape her body and it will destroy her as quickly as I release my hands.

“I want fucking answers,” Cambion snarls, clenching his teeth as he frowns at me, his eyes issuing their own warning.

Eilish’s breathing is coming so quickly, I’m afraid she’s about to lose consciousness. She throws her head from side to side as an agonizing moan escapes her.

“Release her now or I’ll fucking kill you,” I say very clearly, staring directly at Cambion.

He glances down at the angel, who’s sweating and pale, her tears bleeding into the black earth beneath her.

Cambion frowns and begins speaking Elvish again. As soon as the words leave his mouth, the glow enveloping her begins to fade and she breathes out a long sigh. After

another few seconds, it's gone completely, and Cambion finishes the enchantment and drops our hands.

That's when I pull my arm back and release it, punching him across the face .

### CAMBION

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

I feel the bones in my cheek break under Dragan's knuckles. There's instant pain and I see him wince as his knuckles shatter in turn. Before I can take another breath, he's on top of me, pounding me incessantly with his broken fists. I can't see anything, and the only thing I can feel is pain echoing through my body as my ribs snap beneath his fury.

I'm not sure how it happens, but Thoradin dives between us and pulls the fucking barbarian away from me. I'm on all fours, watching the blood dripping from my broken nose and sinking into the black earth beneath me.

"You fucker," Dragan seethes at me.

I ignore him and reach into myself, into the light that's fading the longer we spend in this fucking forest. But the light is still there all the same and when I call it, it answers. I can feel my bones mending as my magic spins a healing web throughout my body. Another few seconds and I'm returned to myself, sans any pain.

That's when I turn to face the man whom I once called friend. But those days were long ago, and now, he's my enemy.

Dragan, too, is bleeding. Luckily, I was able to produce a few choice blows myself

and, with Thoradin still restraining him, I watch as his Arcane Magic heals him just as my Light Magic did the same for me.

“You’ve gotten your answers,” Dragan says as he pushes Thoradin away and stands up straight. He walks over to the angel, then crouches beside her. The sprite is still standing there, with his hands still on her. The girl’s eyes are closed but she’s breathing.

“I got no answers,” I correct him. All I have now are more questions—namely, what did the girl mean when she admitted to being more than an angel?

“She’s an angel, you have to accept that now,” Dragan says, his gaze fixed on her. “And you’d better start treating her with the respect she deserves.”

I can’t argue with him. Even though I didn’t find out much, at least I know she wasn’t lying about what she is. When I walk over to them, he glares up at me, snarling as if to warn me not to come any closer to her.

“She needs healing,” I announce as I look down at her pale face.

Dragan nods and allows me to approach the beautiful girl. I place my hands on her naked shoulders and close my eyes, calling up the light that still remains inside me. I’m exhausted already. The energy it took just to heal myself is going to take a few days to replenish, at least. And that’s only if I get out of this fucking shadow forest.

I feel the crackle of electricity as it fans out through my fingers and enters the angel, lighting her from within. As she begins to glow, I watch her inhale deeply and continue to pump my life force into her until I grow so weak, I have to pull away.

“It will have to do,” I confess as I roll over and sit down, needing to catch my breath. I close my eyes and will the dizziness away. “I have nothing left to give.”



“We need to leave this forest,” Dragan says.

That’s when I realize there’s no escape, now. If I return to the Fae Realm, Variant will know I’ve been gone and I’ll be in a whole world of trouble for not immediately turning Dragan, Thoradin, Flumph, and the angel over when they first entered my realm.

I could stretch the truth, yes, perhaps play up the events leading to my capture. I could say Dragan threatened me, told me he’d kill me if I didn’t save her. Then, when it was over, he took me as his prisoner. But I know Variant would never believe it—even though parts of it are true. Variant knows Dragan as well as I do, and he knows the bounds of Dragan’s sense of honor. He would know I’m here because I agreed to help.

To be fair, I haven’t been entirely honest with Dragan. When I told him I had no desire to leave Geldingstock, it was a lie. Geldingstock is a comfortable prison, but a prison nonetheless. And I’m not accustomed to the role of prisoner. Dragan and I are immortal beings, protectors at one time of the realms of light and dark. We were kings of the highest order, elected by the Midnight Queen herself to serve the three realms and all within them. We were given magic of the highest order—power that no other creatures possessed. Over time, that power has faded and weakened, especially while we’re subject to realms that aren’t our own. But we’re still highly capable, all the same.

To go from Seelie King—Lord over the fae, eldest and most venerable among my people—to a lowly servant of a former equal, forced now to view him as my sovereign? It may be comfortable banishment, but to lie and say it suits me is a disservice to all beings of light. The truth is, that imprisonment is worse than any hell. It’s done nothing but make me despise the chains of my immortality.

Had I the choice, I would now jump at the opportunity to end my existence and

dissolve into the nothingness of death. Numerous times have I envied Baron his death, envied the fact that he doesn't have to face the agony of another day in a calendar chock-full of neverending days.

Variant destroyed everything when he took power; he destroyed the balance we'd been so careful about preserving. Dragan and I were forced to watch as stability and prosperity were stripped from our respective lands. And, forced into exile, we had no choice but to allow Variant to rule us, because we knew what would happen if we rebelled...

The same thing that happened to Baron more than a century ago.

I hate Variant as much as I hate the city of Grimreap: both are unnatural, vile, ill-omened. But defy Variant and what good are we? We'd find ourselves walking the same path as Baron, winding up six feet underground with worms feasting on our carcasses.

But now I wonder if I'd rather be alive and subservient than dead and free?

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FLUMPH

My head hurt like I been gettin' into Anona's wine too much agin, but I know that ain't why I feel like somethin' one o' her guards shit out.

It's this place. It's dark, like it could be night if a full moon were out but there ain't no moon. Just clouds, like thunder 'bout to start rippin' a new one 'cross the sky. The clouds circle each other, like a giant whirlpool o' gray darkness. Not 'xactly the cure for an angry gut.

This forest got scary-ass trees all over. The ground's gray or black, I can't tell. An' not a hundred yards from us is a huge wall. 'Course, most things are huge to a sprite, but I'm thinkin' this wall be considered big to them others in my group, also. It go up an' up, like it stretchin' to meet the clouds. An' it's made completely outta stone.

This place's cold, too. An' the trees look like somethin' out one o' my nightmares—like they about to develop mean-ass faces an' start screamin' at you, tryin' ta grab you with them prickly-ass branches. An' if there's an owl in one of them tree-holes, I'm gonna jist fuckin' die right here. Probly shit myself, first, an' then die.

I don't like it here. Not one bit. But seein' as how my wagon's hitched to theirs, there ain't a whole lot I can do 'bout it.

It's quiet for a long time. I stay next to the angel an' just watch her sleep. Whatever the fuck Cambion did to her, she almost unconscious-like. An' Dragan real worried 'bout her. He won't leave her side, neither.

That's when it starts. From over the walls o' the city, we start hearin' screams an' yells an' I ain't got no idea what the hell's goin' on. It's enough to make me start shiverin' again, even with the fire toastin' my tender bits. My brain start thinkin' 'bout those corn-cobs and shitter-cats agin, or whatever they was called. I don't suppose their names'd matter too much as they snackin' on your liver.

Dragan look worried, too, an' even though I hate all these tall assholes equally, somethin' 'bout his expression gets me to thinkin' maybe he ain't all dick.

He turn to the girl an' sigh as he look at her. As weird as it sound, it's like he care 'bout her. It's in the way he look at her—all that macho shit, like, melts away. Kinda crazy, considerin' the guy's, like, a wild beast.

He'll take first watch, he says. He tell the elf king the same, but when he look at Cambion, his eyes are real angry-like.

"Elves don't sleep," Cambion say coldly, his eyes stayin' fixed on the fire.

"Fine. Then you take first watch."

Cambion nod an' Dragan leave the camp in search o' more firewood, I'm guessin'. Or maybe's he gotta shit? I ain't even sure if gargoyles shit. I means, I'm guessin' they gotta 'cause they eats...

Guess I'll ask him when he get back.

The elf king just stare into the fire, not sayin' nothin'. For someone that don't sleep, he look bone tired. Probly owin' to all that healin' he had ta do recently. An' that fucked up spell he put on the angel that wore her out almost as bad as the Atacomite did.

"Maybe you should give sleepin' a shot," I venture at the elf. He cuts me off with an icy look, but I finish my sentence anyway. "You look like shit."

"Elves don't sleep," he repeat. "They meditate."

"What's that mean?"

He seem surprised I don't know. "It's when you focus on focusing on nothing."

"What?" Still, I don't get it, so's I hope the next explanation's a bit clearer.

"Usually four hours meditation is as good as a full eight hours sleep for most creatures," he continue, apparently not interested in enlightenin' me as to what the

fuck he be talkin' about. "But I may need more than the usual to recover, owing to that asshole." Then he wave in Dragan's direction. "I don't belong here," he say, and it sounds like he's talkin' to hisself again but then he adds, "none of us do."

The fire crackles.

Cambion walk a handful o' paces away from the fire an' sits cross-legged on the ground. His eyes don't close—instead, they just roll back in his head, leavin' only white an' scarin' the livin' bejeezus outta me. Combined with the howls, the night is startin' to look like one o' my nightmares.

I hear the girl besides me start to breathe funny an' when I look over at her, her eyes are open an' she be awake. But she lies there on her back, just starin' up at the sky like she wonderin' if gargoyles shit too.

"It's just us," I say to her.

She rolls her head in my direction an' smiles, real pretty-like. "Thank you, Flumph."

"Fers what?" I ask, all confused.

"For everything you've done for me," she answer an' sigh. "I owe you a debt I can never repay."

"Fers what?"

"For helping me get away from Anona."

"Oh, that," I say an' get to start thinkin' 'bout it. "Wells, you could set up a payment plan."

She laugh. "Once I have some money, it's yours."

Then she get real quiet while I start thinkin' 'bout bein' rich. Then I realize we basically all alone. "You got left with the wrong guy to stay awake an' protect you," I say 'cause I'm the only one left awake, seems like. Thoradin disappeared with Dragan when he went off ta take him a nice ripe stone shit.

"We'll be safe tonight," she tells me in her low voice. I eye her like I ain't buyin' what she sellin'.

"How's you so sure?"

She opens her mouth like she's gonna say somethin', then stops. A second later, she says, "I trust Dragan."

"Wish I did, too," I grumble. Then I remember something. "What'd ya mean, when you said you was more'n just an angel?"

"I said that?" she asks, surprised.

"You don't remember?" I ask, and she shake her head. "When Cambion was doin' the Enchantment of True Seeing on ya, he asked if you was angel an' you said yes, but you was more."

"I don't remember," she say an' look like she lost in her thoughts for a while. "I don't remember any of it, actually."

"Well, you looked like you was in a lot o' pain, so can't say I blame ya." Then I look at her closer. "I gotta wonder what else you is, though. I'm hopin' it ain't some demon that's gonna show up when them shadow dicks are out playin' in the forest an' that elf king got his eyes rolled back in his head."

She laughs and it sounds like the tinklin' o' a bell. Real nice-like. Then she look real tired again. "I don't know what I meant by that, Flumph," she says an' sound frustrated 'bout it. Then she take a real deep breath. "Tell me about Anona," she say, changing the subject. "And the precincts."

Hearin' the bitch's name makes me feel like some o' that fire is burnin' inside me. My wings start goin' an' I feel myself lift up off the forest floor.

"Well, we ain't got enough firewood for me to tell ya all the names I got for Anona. But the precincts are easy 'nough. Hundred years ago—way before I was born—when Variant took control, he divided the kingdom, light an' dark, into seven precincts an' picked seven lords to watch over 'em. People who were loyal an' what not. Most o' them are rough places. Filled with all the forgotten junk the mortals left behind. It's good for the lords, though, 'cause all they gotta do is follow all Variant's edicts. 'Course, they don't. Anona's been in trouble more'n once for disobeyin' King Variant."

"How did Variant win?" she asks as she look over at Cambion. "One king against two..."

"Three," I correct her. "Baron."

"Baron?" she repeat.

I nod. "Yessiree. Vampire king. Two kings o' dark. Two kings o' light. He's dead now, though."

"Dead?"

"Oh, that's right—you was passed out when we was talkin' 'bout it. Accordin' to Cambion, Variant killed Baron—don't go sayin' that out loud, mind ya. Round here,

you'd get demons sent after ya for talkin' heresy like that."

Eilish is quiet for a long time, as if her mind is workin' real hard on somethin'.

"Baron was his name?" she ask finally.

"You got dirt in your ears? That's what I said, ain't it?"

"And you're sure he's dead?"

She actin' real dumb an' I'm figurin' everythin' she just went through is fuckin' with her head. "Cambion seemed real sure."

"Hmm," she says an' drums her fingers on her thigh before she look up at me agin.

"What if he's not?" she ask, her voice all thoughtful-like.

"Not what?" Girl has finally lost it, she's once again makin' no sense. It happen sometimes with addicts, when they go past the point o' no return. Senseless babble. But I'm lookin' at her veins, an' I don't see no green. Maybe the cold worked its way up to her brain an' is, like, short circuitin' it or some shit.

"Not dead," she say. "My memory... I don't know... Flumph. But I have a feeling I came here for... a reason." She's strugglin' to speak. "And we need all of them. Dragan and Cambion... and Baron."

"I told you, Baron's dead. Dead as they get. Floppy dick, worms in his eyes, bone snacks for the dogs, D-E-D, dead."

She shake her head again. "Maybe he was, yes, but..." She look all confused. "I have this feeling that... that he's not dead."



“What?”

She swallow an’ look all kinds o’ confused. “I can’t explain it. I don’t know how I know Baron’s not dead; I just do.” Then, she look at me an’ her eyes go all wide an’ I’m thinkin’, like, she definitely crazy. “I just know... Baron’s alive.”

“Look, angel. Your head ain’t screwed on straight. Baron’s gone.”

She nod but she don’t seem convinced. “Angel,” she say like she ain’t never heard the word before.

“Why don’t you show ‘em your wings, anyway? It’d make things lots easier for me... well, for us.” I move closer to the fire, the air ‘round us feelin’ colder still. The warmth starts to make my eyes droop.

“I can’t,” she say. I notice her eyelids startin’ to droop, too. Her breath gets real slow.

I feel like I could fall asleep, but even though I can’t see it no more, I know that big tall wall o’ the city is right behind us. And maybe it’s jist on account o’ my overactive imagination, but I can’t help but feel like that howlin’ is gettin’ louder.

### SILVANUS

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

The forest floor stretches infinitely beneath my bare feet. I feel the trees shake the earth as their spiraling roots reach out to greet me. It is here—in this forest, outside the edges of an inhospitable city—that I have been called. I am father to these forgotten trees, deformed and rotting, that rise from the ground despite never knowing sun. But, as there is light, so too must there be darkness. And I welcome the darkness as gently as I welcome the light.

Shielded behind the thick base of a tree, I watch them: five beings. Three are creatures of the light, two of darkness. Those of the light grow weaker as the seconds turn to minutes and the minutes turn to hours. And one, the female, is closer to death than any of them realize. She is the reason I have come.

I grab hold of the bark and centipedes, thick and black, crawl out to greet me. And with them, giant Drehegs, many-legged insects with long antennae that twitch in response to me. The wind whistles my name as it blows through the skeletal trees. Creatures of this dark realm have already noticed my arrival and they shyly venture forth. I hold out my hands and welcome them, encouraging them, speaking the language of the wind.

A serpentine Hireb, blue and rubbery, crawls along the forest floor with its twelve legs before clambering up the bark of a tree just beside me. Its lightning breath

incinerates its prey before it constricts them with its coils and eats them alive. But it does not threaten me and neither do I threaten it, for I am as much a part of the Hireb as it is a part of me.

Fashes , awakened plants gifted with the power of intelligence and mobility, cautiously poke their heads out from around the stationary trees. Conifer-like needles grow across their bodies in clumps of dagger-like points—needles which can puncture armor. But the Fashes' main defense is the poisonous pollen they release when threatened. That pollen will dissolve the flesh of a creature within seconds.

The dwellers of the shadow forest assemble in and around me. As I walk forward, they part ways, allowing me passage. I stroke the head of an Uluucb as I glide by and the crustacean-like creature purrs up at me, brandishing its massive claws. Reaching down, I run my fingers along the jagged, golden shell of the creature's horned back. Though the night creatures welcome me back to their forest openly and joyously, I explain I cannot tarry. I do not mean to offend but I am needed, all the same.

I am here for the female.

When I reach the edge of the fortified clearing, I realize I cannot proceed forward. Wards protect the perimeter of the camp and while I could cross them easily, I do not want to draw attention to myself. Thus, the female will have to come to me.

She sleeps beneath a dark tree, her white and tangled hair fanned out beside her. Her skin glows weakly with the power of light, but that glow fades even as I watch. There is an innocence about her that does not characterize the others. She is not well, however, and her power wanes with each breath.

I watch as the two shadow figures take leave of their comrades and disappear into the forest. Meanwhile, the male of light retires to the far corner of the encampment and loses himself to his own mind.

Briefly, I stop the flow of time for all creatures of the forest, save myself and the female. The sprite beside her is halted mid-speech and stands with an open mouth. I smile, finding the image humorous.

According to my intentions, the sprite will appear invisible to the female, as will the male of light. She will imagine she has been left alone.

I inch toward the fire, still burning, and sniff the air. The forest is silent, but this silence is misleading—I could summon a forestry cacophony, if I so chose. I could make the ground blossom with insects, the sky above become thick with bats, the unending night darken with terror. Such is the sway I have over the natural world.

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## EILISH

I awake at the sound of a loud crack, as though something heavy has stepped on a dry twig. I have the uneasy sense I'm being watched. When I glance around, though, I find I'm alone by the fire, now reduced to simmering coals. The night is even colder than I remember and the thin sheet around me does little to quell the icy tongue that licks at its edges.

Fear takes hold of me as I strain to listen for more sounds, pulling myself to sit upright. With the waning light of the fire, it's impossible to see anything beyond the redness of the coals and my own body. A chill creeps over me that doesn't have anything to do with the cold night.

Where is everyone? And why am I alone? I suddenly worry for them, for Dragan, mostly.

Crack.

Another twig breaks; I strain my ears even harder. My eyes are useless in the dark, thus I attempt to rely on my other senses. Then it occurs to me that if there is something out there, hunting me, I'm basically useless to defend myself. My body is too weak to fight. My nakedness feels even more uncomfortable now. And my head is nearly splitting in two with the pain of my last seventy-two hours.

I want to call out to Dragan, to find out if he's nearby, but on the slim chance whatever's out there doesn't see me, I have no desire to alert it to my presence. 'Course, even if I wanted to call for help, fear is currently acting like a gag in my mouth.

I hear another sound... breathing?

My heart pounds and sweat has broken out across my forehead and the small of my back.

You need more light, Eilish, I tell myself. Light repels creatures of shadow.

Leaning over the fire as quietly as I can, I blow gently into the coals. The red-orange glow intensifies briefly, but as soon as I release my breath, the coals grow tired once again. I glance to my right, where I notice a pile of kindling left by Thoradin. It's maybe five feet away. Swallowing hard, I reach for the twigs and what looks like dried and black lichen. I grab a handful and throw it on the coals and a few seconds later, the fire ignites again, roaring back to life. My surroundings become marginally visible.

I look up and immediately frown at the sight before me. A small red fox stares at me from just beyond the perimeter of our camp.

You're seeing things, Eilish, I tell myself.

I close my eyes, then open them again.

The fox is still there.

I shake my head, disbelieving what my eyes report as the truth. How is it possible that a fox could survive in this shadow forest, a forest inhabited by abominations and monsters?

I don't have an answer for myself.

My mind races, imagining the hideous monsters that would make quick work of this beautiful creature. Even though it takes all of my energy, I push myself closer to the animal.

"Hello, little guy," I whisper as I approach. Cautiously, I hold out my hand. "Come on, I won't hurt you."

But then I remember the Glyph of Warding that protects our camp. The red fox won't be able to enter. If I want to protect him, I'm going to have to go after him. I don't even know if I possess the strength to stand, but I attempt it all the same. I fail.

Instead, I roll over onto my hands and knees, then close my eyes against the dizziness that plagues me. After a few deep breaths, I open my eyes again, noticing the fox hasn't changed position.

He continues to watch me with intelligent eyes. I begin to crawl toward him until I reach the perimeter of our camp. Once I travel beyond the perimeter of the Glyph of Warding, I'll no longer be protected. But the fox is standing so close, I imagine I might be able to reach over and simply lift him up and into our protective enclosure.

He's a wild animal, Eilish, I think. He's not going to just let you pick him up.

But I'm an angel, which means I have the ability to communicate with beasts, I remind myself. I'm not sure how I know this, but I know it all the same. I should be able to make him understand he needs me. I figure it's worth a shot.

The fox looks at me with suspicion.

"I won't hurt you," I explain, holding the creature's gaze as I smile and try to make him understand he's in danger and he needs my help. I reach for him, but he startles and takes a few steps back. A howl sounds in the darkness and my heart starts to thunder. This fox isn't going to last much longer; he's a walking target.

"Come on," I plead, but the fox makes no attempt to come closer. "Please."

He just looks at me. It's then that I realize if I want to protect the little guy, I'm going to have to go get him.

I realize it's madness but I take a deep breath and reach out, over the Glyph, so half of me is still within the perimeter and the other half is beyond it. The fox stands his ground—ground which happens to be just beyond my reach.

I crawl forward until I'm inches past the line of the Glyph, still on my hands and knees. I'm no longer protected, and fear is starting to surge inside me. I feel myself growing more and more weary as the seconds tick by.

"Please come to me," I call to the fox, holding out my hand. "I can't wait much longer." I need to get back to the safety of my camp.

The animal takes another step back and as soon as he does, a wind whips up around him. I close my eyes against the dead leaves and dust. When I open them, the fox is nowhere to be seen. Instead, I find myself at eye level with a pair of men's knees.

I swallow hard and time seems to stand still as I glance upward, following the lines of the man's naked body until I'm face-to-face with... a stranger.

Run, Eilish! The woman's voice suddenly awakens inside my head, screeching at me. Get behind the wards, now!

My heart starts pounding but just as I turn to try to scurry back, the man bends over and wraps his arms around my waist, preventing me from escaping. He lifts me and then pulls me into him and, as much as I want to, I can't fight him. I'm so exhausted. All I can do is lay there limply, my arms dangling at my sides as my back rubs up against the coarse hair on his chest. It's then that I realize the sheet covering my nudity has fallen down, and now lies strewn across the ground.

I close my eyes as stars dance behind my eyelids.

I can only hope my death will be a quick one.

I will not harm you, this man's voice sounds in my head. At the same time, he sets me down on my feet. As soon as he does, my knees buckle and he catches me, one arm beneath my back and the other beneath my legs. He lifts me again, and I glance up and find him staring down at me intently.

I color as I realize I'm completely naked; my breasts are basically in his face.

Do not feel shame in your natural state, he says, but his mouth never moves.

How can I hear your voice when you don't speak? I think back.

We share a telepathic connection.

Who are you? I realize with interest that we've never taken our eyes off one another.



His are hunter green but as I watch, they morph into a deep brown, only to become ocean blue before darkening until they're as black as the forest that surrounds us. I don't understand.

I am Silvanus, he responds. He's extremely tall and broad-shouldered, with a barrel chest covered in wiry hair that almost resembles fur. I can feel the muscles of his body shifting beneath me as he walks. His heavy blond beard obscures his chin and his golden hair is so long, it looks like a lion's mane flowing behind him. In fact, he reminds me of a lion with his large, round eyes, bronze skin, and his broad yet high cheekbones. He's handsome, but in an uncivilized way.

You are interfering where you are not invited! The woman's voice within my head suddenly screams through me. My eyes widen as I realize she can hear him and, at the cold expression of recognition I can see on his face, he can hear her, as well.

She is my charge! The woman's voice continues raging. I am protecting her! She is not your business!

Silence, Morrigan! He rails and her voice suddenly chokes, fading away until I can't feel her in my head any longer. My heart begins to pound as if it's trying to tear right through my chest and I'm even dizzy than I was before.

How do you know her name? I ask. And who is she?

It is a long and complicated story. One you are not ready to understand yet, he responds and breaks our gaze to face forward. I don't know where he's taking me, but his strides are long and purposeful.

Are you going to kill me?

He chuckles and the sound is warm. Quite the opposite. I am here to restore your

health, young female.

He stops walking and sets me down on a bank of wet earth. Then, he looks down at me, as if to appraise my condition. He's as naked as I am but where I try to cover my nudity, he brandishes his. Clearly, he's not in the least bit timid.

Do not hide yourself from me, he says, facing me with a stern expression. You deny your true self.

I don't understand what you mean, I think in response, attempting to keep my eyes fixed on his. It's difficult, given the fact that his penis is hanging directly in front of my face. My true self?

Are you not aware of what you are, female?

I'm an angel, I answer quickly.

He chuckles and I can hear the sound emptying from his mouth. It's warm and it fills me with balmy feelings. I can't explain why. There's no change to his physical expression, though; his face is just as hard as it was seconds ago.

There is angel within you, yes. But you possess another side.

Another side?

A side you have yet to know, he says. A side that has been repressed.

What am I? I ask, suddenly afraid for his response.

You are sick, he answers. And I am meant to heal you.

Then his eyes follow the lines of my cheeks, down to my neck. Freely, he gazes at my breasts before dropping his eyes lower still. Suddenly, I understand how he means to heal me, and excitement that makes little sense blossoms deep inside me.

I swallow. Hard. And my eyes seek out the appendage between his legs. I feel embarrassment course through me as I look at him, but I can't pull my eyes away. His erection is long and hard and it's wide enough that all I can think about is the feeling of my lips stretching to accommodate it.

I don't understand why I'm thinking this way. I don't know this man and he appears to be more enemy than friend—if I'm to trust the woman's voice in my head, anyway. And, thus far, she's done nothing but advise and protect me.

I am not your enemy, the man interjects, and when I look up at him, his eyes are piercing.

You can read my mind? I ask.

Yes.

I don't say anything more but I watch his eyes as they shift from mine and travel once again along the lines of my face, resting briefly on my breasts and then continuing lower, until he unabashedly stares at the junction of my thighs.

Beneath the intense exhaustion that's been my constant companion, I feel something. Exhilaration, maybe. Something that thrills over the fact that his eyes are centered on the soft flesh between my legs. I suddenly begin to feel strength returning, a power that births itself from within me that I don't remember ever experiencing before.

Yes, he says without speaking. Become one with that power for it is yours, female.

I close my eyes and allow the feelings of strength and exhilaration to spread. Tendrils of warmth branch out from deep inside me, carrying with them an excitement that reaches to every corner of my body.

Reveal yourself to me, female, he says and, as if his words are a command to my body, I spread my legs. He looks at my eyes then. Allow your true self to come forward.

I don't understand. But I'm not given an opportunity to ponder the question for long because he drops to his knees and is suddenly between my legs. His erection is perched at my opening.

He teases me with the head of his penis, pushing in slightly only to pull out again. I can feel myself growing wetter and I close my eyes as I tilt my head back, relishing the feel of his hard length as it traces my opening.

Finally, I say to myself. I've needed this for so long.

Yes, he chuckles. Allow yourself freedom. Be what you are.

I'm not sure what I'm meant to be, other than what I am, but I open my eyes and watch him as he pushes forward. His erection enters me and my breath catches. He feels even better than I imagined. I arch up and moan, gripping his back and digging my nails into his skin. He presses himself deeper into me, and my body envelops him with an urgency that shocks me.

He moans and begins to drive himself into me fully as I wrap my legs around him. I want him even deeper. I grind my hips down, needing all of him inside me.

He stares at me. And never do I stop to wonder what I'm doing. Why I'm allowing a stranger inside me. Because I realize why. I need this. I've needed it, because it's the

only thing that will heal me. It's why I've had such sexual reactions to Dragan and Cambion.

More, I beg him.

He drives into me even harder, lifting me up and plunging himself into me so forcefully, I can barely breathe.

"Your seed," I whisper in his ear. "Give me your seed."

My words surprise me. It's as though my body is speaking for me, demanding what it wants and needs. He pulls out and plunges back in again and I begin to shake and convulse. At the same time, he thrusts as hard as he can and I feel him explode within me, matching the intensity of my orgasm with one of his own.

And then I feel something burst from my back. I glance to the side to see huge wings billowing out of me. But they aren't white and feathery at all.

They're rubbery and as black as night.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

SILVANUS

The Raven Forest

Shadow Realm

Sleep, I say to the beautiful creature after she reaches climax and her body begins to heal. Already, her aura glows twice as brightly as it did when I first encountered her.

Her eyes drift closed, and her body goes limp. I pull myself from within her slick folds and inhale deeply. Then, I reach down and lift her into my arms.

The shadow creatures continue to watch us with cautious curiosity, and follow as I carry the female back to her companions. When I spot the white linen that was wrapped around her, I reach down and pick it up. I drape it over her as I place her limp body just beyond the line of the Glyph of Warding .

She will remember nothing when she wakes. It is possible she might receive fragmented images from her subconscious mind, but she will think of them as nothing more than a strange dream. She is not ready to fully understand what she is. And that realization cannot occur until I decide what to do about Morrigan—an obstacle that is proving quite frustrating.

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EILISH

I wake with a start.

Sitting up, I find myself on the opposite side of the wards of our camp and I can't explain what I'm doing out here. Suddenly afraid, I immediately stand and hurry into the safety of our protected enclosure.

It's then that I realize I'm no longer exhausted. Instead, I feel strangely invigorated. It's the first time I've felt... good. Well, the first time that I can remember, anyway. Yet I also feel strange. Yes, I'm stronger and that horrible exhaustion seems to have disappeared, but there's also a cloudiness in my head that I don't understand.

I notice Cambion sitting at the far end of the encampment. He's still deep in his trance, his palms face up on his crossed legs, his eyes white and unseeing.

In the distance, beyond the lines of the wards, I hear something. I glance out into the darkness and imagine I see numerous eyes staring back at me from the depths of the dark trees. But then the eyes are gone, and there's nothing there but the forest.

Kkkkk-krick

When I hear the sound again, I back up. A hand presses to my mouth as an arm pulls me against a hard, but warm chest, and my heart starts to pound.

"Shhh, Eilish," Dragan whispers into my ear.

Immediately, I feel relief. He releases my mouth and I turn around to look at him. He's crouched and attack-ready. We lock eyes and he slowly raises a finger to his mouth. Shhhh .

He must have heard the same noise I did. His wings are flexed behind him, black and foreboding. There's no sign of Thoradin.

I nod solemnly and look towards the woods, but I see nothing beyond the darkness. I know Dragan possesses Darkvision, and I wonder if he's able to see whatever's out there. I bring my gaze back to Dragan and notice how tense he is and powerful. His eyes are fixed on something in the distance.

In the dim light of the dying fire, I can see only the thick trunks of two trees.

Dragan stands and takes a quiet step forward, his jaw clenched in deep focus.

Another sound, from behind a nearby tree. It's followed by still another crack, and I feel my heart slide up my throat as I realize the sounds are coming closer. Whatever is out there is maybe two feet from us now. The seconds pass as if they're hours and a moment later, Flumph emerges from behind the tree, his arms full of acorns.

"Flumph," I say on a sigh, half relieved, half annoyed to see him.

"Angel," he replies, looking pleased with himself.

My shoulders deflate and I turn to see Dragan, who appears irate. "Fucking sprite!" he hollers in exasperation. In response, Cambion's eyes roll forward and his posture loosens, and Thoradin suddenly appears from beyond the darkness on the opposite side of the camp.

Flumph stops walking toward the fire. "What?" he asks innocently. "I got us some grub."

"What the fuck are you doing, wandering off?" demands Dragan. "Do you understand where you are?"

"Yeah, we're in the forest."



“The Raven Forest,” Dragan corrects him.

“Raven, Hawken, Eaglen, Sparrowen, what frickin’ difference do it make?” Flumph asks with a frown.

Dragan inhales deeply and his eyes narrow on the sprite. “The Raven Forest is haunted, you fool.”

“Haunted, like ghosts, haunted?” Flumph asks, his previous candid manner now evaporating.

“Ghosts, banshees, imps, ghouls, goblins, the list goes on,” Thoradin answers with a shrug.

“Why do you think I told you not to allow the fire to go out?” Dragan continues, pointing at the fire which is nearly nonexistent. “What if someone or something saw you? Or followed you?”

I’m suddenly reminded that I awoke on the opposite side of the Glyph of Warding . I wonder if Dragan saw me, but I assume not. I then realize how lucky I was not to have been taken away by some awful creature.

Flumph looks worried, glancing over his shoulder like he’s afraid something did follow him and is standing there now.

“I thought you said you put a shadow cloak or somethin’ like that on us?” the sprite argues. “I thought we was invisible.”

“We aren’t invisible,” Dragan grumbles as his gaze moves to Cambion and grows angry again. “What happened to keeping watch?”

The Seelie King shrugs from where he's reclining against a tree, appearing as comfortable as possible given our situation. He's incredibly handsome, but I don't trust him. And he doesn't trust me. So, I guess we're at an impasse.

"Do none of you understand the position we're in?" Dragan rails as he glares first at Cambion and then at Flumph. When his gaze rests on me, it softens.

"Do you ?" asks Cambion icily. "Last I checked, you were the one who brought us here."

"This was the safest place I could think of."

"The Raven Forest?!" Cambion yells at him.

Dragan's eyebrows arch in an expression of defensiveness. "Right now, our only concern should be guarding the angel."

"Alleged," clarifies Cambion, and then glances past me as if he's looking for a sign of my wings.

The topic of my wings has come up so frequently and yet there's still no sign of them; I begin to wonder if the sprite didn't just imagine seeing them. Maybe I wasn't the only one on Atacomite ? Then I start to consider what will become of me if the sprite is wrong. If I really don't possess my wings and I'm the same as all the other angels, what then? I figure Dragan will just turn me over to Variant, as his edict orders.

"If she didn't have her wings, then why would something have been chasing her in the first place?" asks Dragan, glaring at Cambion.

"Chasing her?" Cambion repeats and seems at a loss.

“When she arrived at Anona’s,” Dragan begins but the sprite interrupts.

“She was outta her damn mind on Atacomite an’ was goin’ on ‘bout somethin’ followin’ her. She was, like... convinced o’ it an’ scared outta her skin.”

“As you said, she was high,” Cambion responds with little interest.

“Something was following me,” I insist.

Cambion faces me, frowning, but then centers his attention on Dragan. “The angel possesses plenty of value without her wings.” He speaks the words slowly, as if spitting out each one. “Maybe it was Variant’s men trying to arrest her, according to his edict. Maybe it was a lonely group of gypsy men.” He shrugs. “Your fair angel seems like quite the tasty snack after a hard day laboring in Precinct Five. Or maybe... maybe she imagined the whole thing,” his voice is deep, tinted with his natural authority.

I wish I could show them my wings just to end the constant fighting. I can only hope that I truly possess them.

Not yet, Eilish. You’re not safe. The voice in my head, quiet through most of the night, has returned. Tell them they must have faith , it instructs.

Straining to speak, my voice lifts out of my chest; its edges are hoarse and cracking. “I need... you to trust me,” I manage.

Looking at me, Dragan and Thoradin appear to soften. Cambion, not so much. His expression remains hard.

“We don’t even know who you are,” he points out and glares at me.

“She don’t even know who she is,” Flumph adds.

Silence falls on us once again. Cambion seems revived, at least. The exhaustion’s left his face somewhat and now, he just looks angry. Although, on him, the emotion is somehow flattering. His sharp features are brought into focus all the more by his furrowed eyebrows and pursed lips. When his eyes meet mine, he holds my gaze in a way that makes me feel more naked than I already am beneath the thin fabric that poorly conceals me.

Cambion’s eyes trail down my body, to the place where the sheet wraps around my shoulders and plunges between my breasts. He stands up and approaches me, then takes an edge of the fabric in his hand. Unsure of what he’s going to do, I simply watch.

Dragan stands up and takes a few steps closer to us, watching Cambion intensely, his jaw fixed. He looks like he’s ready to spring to action any moment.

“What are you doing?” Dragan growls.

Cambion ignores him and stares at me unabashedly. His eyes are beautiful pools of amber, but they’re cold. No longer able to look him in the eyes, I glance down and watch as what appears to be yellow embers dance between his fingers and the thin sheet I’m wrapped in. But instead of the embers lighting the fabric on fire, the sheet begins to fold back on itself then forward, like invisible hands creating origami. I watch, amazed, as the sheet arranges itself until I’m no longer wearing a sheet at all. Instead, I’m wrapped in a white, sleeveless dress that ends at my knees. Above me is a cloak, also crafted from the sheet. Its hood is large and it covers most of my hair, reaching down past my ankles. For the first time since I can remember, I’m dressed.

“Fancy!” Flumph announces, then laughs goofily.

“How did you do that?” I ask the Fae King as I look up at him in wonder.

His eyes linger on mine for a few seconds before he answers. “Transmutation,” he says quietly.

“I don’t know what that is,” I respond.

His gaze has softened, as has his tone. “Transmutation is the ability to modify energy and matter,” he begins. “It’s the magical art of turning one substance into another.”

“You could turn tin to silver?” Flumph asks.

Cambion nods. “I could also turn you into a toad, if I felt so inclined.”

Flumph frowns at him. “Life’s hard enough as a sprite, prick.”

A sly smile parts Cambion’s lips, and I find him incredibly sexy. “Kindness suits you,” I say. His smile drops, replaced by the same stoic expression. “Thank you,” I finish.

“How are you feeling?” Dragan asks from behind us, his voice concerned. He eyes Cambion and then me as if he doesn’t approve of the easy conversation that just passed between us. I can see jealousy in his eyes and I’m not sure why, but it invigorates me.

“Better,” I reply honestly.

The Seelie King closes his eyes and places one hand into the remaining embers of the fire. He doesn’t, as I expect, cry out in pain.

“Come,” he says, motioning for me to move closer.

“Why?” Dragan begins but I silence him with a shake of my head. I need to get Cambion on my side, and I need to get him to trust me. If this is one small step in that process, I’m willing to take it.

I sidle up next to him and drop down to my haunches. He looks at me pointedly.

“If I touch you, am I going to be whisked into one of your visions?” he asks, frowning.

“I don’t know,” I answer with a shrug.

He inhales deeply but doesn’t say anything more as he places his other hand on my shoulder and bends his head. An image flashes in my mind when he touches me, but I don’t lean into it because I’m fully focused on the warmth flooding my body through his touch. It feels like taking a full breath of air after nearly drowning. My eyes shut of their own accord and I breathe in his energy.

When he removes his hand, I immediately feel cold again. I open my eyes and glance at him, noticing he appears surprised. When I look down at the fire, it begins to sputter as if Cambion stole its energy and, as I watch, the coals lose their glow and we’re thrust into darkness once more.

“Your strength has been returned to you,” he says as he eyes me with interest.

“How can you tell?” I ask.

“Because I attempted to bolster your life force with some of my own but, instead, you fed mine.”

I feel my eyebrows lift in surprise. “I can’t explain it, but I woke up feeling much better, stronger.”

I hear Dragan quickly instruct Thoradin to get more wood.

“Interesting.” Cambion studies me with narrowed eyes. He still doesn’t trust me, that much is obvious, but as he continues to hold my gaze, I see something flash across his eyes—something carnal, something that looks like desire. Maybe he’s remembering the vision from earlier? The one I had of us when our limbs were entwined, the powerful smiles we shared while he moved himself within me. It’s a vision I haven’t forgotten.

Soon, the fire returns to its full strength.

An odd, graying light slowly rises through the forest, though its source is invisible to me. “What is that?” I ask Dragan, unable to keep the fear from my voice.

“It’s the closest thing to daylight the shadow realm knows,” he answers.

For a moment, it strikes me as odd that they call this the shadow realm because, without light, not a single shadow exists here.

“Thoradin and I are going into the walls of the city to look for food and warmer clothing. You three will stay here and wait for our return,” Dragan instructs, and instantly, my heart starts pounding. I don’t want to be away from Dragan. Especially not here, in this wretched forest.

“When you leave, your enchantments leave with you,” Cambion responds guardedly. “I can’t protect us here.”

Dragan nods. “You’re not wrong, Cambion, but we don’t have a choice.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve been considering the options open to us, and I believe you’ll be safest here.”

“We’re safest with you,” I tell him.

He looks at me and appears torn. “Grimreap isn’t the place for you, Eilish,” he explains. “There are only three of us who could protect you and, in the city, that won’t be enough.”

“The shadows of this forest are already taking their toll on us,” Cambion argues. “At least in Grimreap, we can bolster our strength.”

“I’m aware,” Dragan says. “And I’ve weighed that fact, as well. I still believe it is safer for you to remain here.”

“You already made your decision when you brought us to the Raven Forest,” says Cambion. “We travel with you to Grimreap.”

“This isn’t open for argument,” Dragan grumbles.

Cambion’s eyes narrow. “And neither was it open for argument when you forcibly removed me from my home and anchored me to this hero’s quest. Our story doesn’t end in the woods outside Grimreap; we’re coming with you.”

“You know Grimreap’s reputation as well as I do,” Dragan counters. “You know you’re safer here.” He glances at me. “She’s safer here.”

“I know Grimreap’s reputation, yes,” Cambion continues to argue. “But I don’t believe we’d be any safer in the forest. I have some sway with the beasts of the fae, but here, the animals answer to different masters. Protection isn’t something I can offer. I can feel my magic growing weaker by the moment. At least inside Grimreap, we can feed off the energy of our forbearers.”

“You wouldn’t last a minute inside the walls of the city. The three of you are



practically glowing,” returns Dragan, his voice pulsing with anger. He’s by far the most intimidating creature I’ve ever seen. But he’s also beautiful, in his own way.

“Are your brains made of stone, too, gargoyle?” Cambion asks with mock cordiality.

“The three of you remain here,” Dragan declares with finality.

“You’re not going to leave me behind like a cow for slaughter in this fucking forest,” Cambion spits out. “Besides, if you’re going into Grimreap, you’ll need me.”

“How’s that?” Dragan gives him a cold glare as Cambion continues.

“I’d assume you weren’t about to enter the deadliest city in the world as the most recognizable man in all of the Shadow Realm?”

“Of course not,” Dragon replies. “As you know, I can employ the Mask Of Many Faces.”

Cambion seems unimpressed. “An elementary charm at best. Need I remind you I’m a master transmuter? All energy and matter bend to my will. I could conceal us far better than either of you could,” he finishes and looks between Dragan and Thoradin.

“You lack the strength,” Dragan replies with little interest.

“Because I’m stuck in this fucking forest!” Cambion rails. “Grimreap will bolster my strength again and I will be a valuable asset.” He takes a deep breath. “Three able-bodied men are better than two.”

“He has a point, liege,” Thoradin puts in.

Dragan’s jaw is tight. “Fine. We all go.” He turns to the sprite, which is hovering

nearby. “And Flumph?”

The small creature seems surprised at being addressed. “I ain’t got no masks or transmuters, Demon Prince,” he returns. I have to admit, I find his appellations for Dragan funny even if Dragan doesn’t.

“Just,” Dragan looks him over, worry creasing its way into the mature lines of his face. “Just stay hidden.”

Flumph makes his way over to me and successfully wraps himself within two folds of my cloak.

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*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am*

EILISH

Grimreap

Shadow Realm

We stop walking when we reach the city gates of Grimreap. There's a heavy wind that pummels us, howling a doleful melody that seems somehow foreshadowing. I'm afraid.

"Eilish," Dragan whispers from where he walks beside me. I glance over at him. "I will protect you," he reassures me.

I smile at him and give him a quick and grateful nod, but fear continues to weigh my feet down until I feel like I'm trudging through tar.

Cambion marches ahead of us, up to the towering stone wall where he extends his arm out in front of him and touches one of the smooth rocks. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply.

"What the hell's he doin'?" Flumph asks from within my cloak.

"He's absorbing the essence of those of his kin who came before him," Dragan responds.

"Why?" Flumph continues.

“To bolster his strength.”

“What, he like absorbin’ their spirits or somethin’?”

Dragan nods but doesn’t take his eyes off Cambion. “Yes.”

Cambion touches the wall for another three minutes or so before he returns to us. When he does, he appears different. The constant exhaustion which claimed him in the forest is now completely vacant, and in its place is a much more alert and strengthened Seelie King.

“I will illusion myself and Thoradin,” Dragan explains to Cambion as the two face each other. “You focus on yourself and Eilish.”

Cambion nods and then approaches me, holding his hands together until dancing embers ignite between them once again. The warmth of his hands radiates against my skin, bathing me in a balmy cocoon that feels like heaven in this dank, cold place.

“It’s done,” he says as he faces Dragan.

“Then we continue into Grimreap,” Dragan answers.

Dragan’s Mask of Many Faces isn’t quite what I expected. He still looks exactly the same. “Are you going to disguise yourself?” I ask.

He faces me and smiles, and it changes his entire countenance. In fact, I don’t remember seeing him smile before. It’s an expression that suits him; he’s beyond handsome.

“Look away, and when you do, try to remember what I look like,” he says.

I do as he instructs but when I look back at him, I'm confused. It's as if my mind is suddenly muddled. He's unrecognizable, simply because I can't seem to understand the lines of his face. I can see that he's standing there, but my mind makes no connection to him. It's like repeating a word so many times that it begins to lose meaning, until all that exists is the sound of the word itself, separate from its denotation. When I look at Thoradin, I find the same is true.

I have no mirror to see what Cambion's done to me, but judging by the others' reactions, the job is adequate. My robe is now dark gray and my hair is purple. My skin is the color of soot. Cambion is different, too, in a heavily hooded cloak with shoulder-length red hair spilling out from beneath it. His skin is now the color of an olive, and his face is completely unrecognizable.

Dragan gazes warily at the city walls. "Let's go," he says, his voice dark. "Stay close to me and say nothing."

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BARON

Grimreap

Shadow Realm

Poisons, such as the ones I use to complete most of my jobs, can be difficult to come by. Blue Dragon Juice, for example, is one of the most difficult essences in the world to acquire—if you don't know where to go. But there exists a black market, where one can find the most rare and precious commodities if one only knows where to look.

The vast majority of venoms I use for my charges are expensive and challenging to

locate, not to mention highly illegal. According to Variant's edicts, possession of the venom is punishable by death.

But fuck Variant and fuck his edicts.

Death as punishment is laughable to me. Life as punishment is a far more intimidating sentence. Perhaps that's why I chose to make a name for myself as the harbinger of death ; I no longer fear it. Waking up in the grave does something to you—it changes your philosophy on life and death. As does being immortal.

With my poison stores running low, I need to restock before my next job. Even though I know where to go, it doesn't make the mission any more appealing. Most black-market vendors work in the town of Grimreap—a vile place, home to the worst sorts of criminals and low-lives. It's taken years to build a name for myself there, but even now, run into a feuding gang that doesn't respect your connections, and you'll be in for a rough time.

Necessary, though, all the same.

An assassin is nothing without his tools.

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BARON

The journey to Grimreap is never an easy one. The road is peppered with thieves and dangerous beasts roam the forests on either side, looking to surprise unsuspecting passersby. The conditions become even worse as you approach the town's entrance. From there, the town has a heartbeat of its own, kept alive by the collective souls that sustain it. Not fae nor mortal nor shadow, Grimreap is a melting pot of any and everything unsavory. It exists without law or master. It is, itself, an undead, a creature

roused from the pits of despair just as I was.

It is mid-afternoon by the time I arrive at the city gates, but the clouds stay dark and ominous overhead, skewing all sense of time. They promise a storm that will never come. Grimreap exists in shadow, everything cast in a constant state of darkness.

The old city is the same dark gray as the sky above it. The stones of the city walls bear scorch marks from long ago, hinting at the battle that was waged here. A battle between light and dark... A day so violent, it has lived on forever... or so I am told.

The remaining stone-wall structure is impressive, with spires that rise one hundred feet into the air and an arch so high, you must tilt your head to see the top. The deathly spikes of the wrought iron gates settle like a guillotine over the city's entrance. Aptly nicknamed The City of Death, Grimreap sets off an alarm in the senses of all those who enter.

Within its limits, my instincts are suddenly on high alert. I feel the extreme need to flee, every fiber of my being warning me to the dangers that surround me.

The streets are damp and filthy, just as the people themselves, all bustling and unfriendly. Grimreap attracts all manner of creatures: deformed demons buying love from establishments that cater to their most carnal desires, escaped criminals, the banished insane, and black-market peddlers, to name a few. If you need someone killed, if you have a frowned-upon sexual fetish, or if you're after a loan repayable with your soul, Grimreap is the place to come.

The main street, a dirt road, is alive with stalls and the hollers of those selling their wares. The town smells like shit, refuse building up along each side of the narrow road and streams of piss snaking through the rutted lane, fogging up the freezing air with urine ghosts. Feral creatures, both magical and not, wander the alleys, searching for food wherever they can find it. What buildings still remain are now just facades of

crumbling stone, decimated so many years ago by the war that pitted light against dark—something that has come to be known as the Singularity .

Shrunken heads dangle from strings on a nearby cart. I watch the man selling them, an orc, as he places what look like dog teeth into the mouth of one of the heads, making it more grotesque than it already is.

Beside his cart are a few cages. Inside them are tigers, crocodiles, and apes. Behind these nonmagical beasts, in even larger cages, are all manner of monsters: a manticore, a sickly albino dragon, and two broken hippogriffs. All look extremely worse for wear. The manticore, usually a stunning beast with the body of a big cat and the imposing tail of a scorpion, appears blind in one eye. It suffers from mange and bears deep gashes from being whipped.

The hippogriffs are in even worse shape. With the body of an eagle atop the legs of a magnificent horse, these creatures are typically strong and proud. These specimens, though, reveal wings that are clipped. One of the hippogriffs has unnaturally bent legs, leading me to believe both hind legs are broken. Each is covered in scars; their eyes have the clouded look of something that has long ago given up. Their emaciated bodies are pressed tightly against the bars of their cells, where they lay in a bed of their own feces. The smell is vile, worse than a corpse left to rot, contributing to the overall smell of death that haunts the air in Grimreap.

“They have a taste for flesh,” says the greasy animal handler, an ogre who’s as tall as he is wide. He smiles at me with toothless, brown, infected gums. His hair is thin but thick with grease, slicked back to expose a high forehead and flesh filled with large pits from Atacomite overuse. Atacomite addicts all look the same, with missing teeth, bulging veins, pits in their flesh.

With my highly-tuned vampire sense of smell, I catch a whiff of him. His blood is rancid, like meat or cheese left in the sun. He smells worse than his animals.



“Not in the market for what you’re selling today,” I tell him, my voice low as I don’t wish to attract attention.

“They won’t eat you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I’m not. But I don’t respond. Instead, I’m irritated with myself that I haven’t wrapped myself in shadows to avoid interacting with these lowlifes. It has become my custom to hide myself in darkness before I venture into Grimreap and yet, this trip, I’ve forgotten to take this precaution. I’m surprised—I’m usually anything but scatter-brained. Well, as far as my memory will allow me to remember, that is.

I can’t recall anything before the day I awoke in the graveyard and became what I am today. What I’ve been for the past one hundred years.

Yes, this is an odd blunder. But perhaps it’s not that surprising, considering there’s been something in the air for the past few days. I can’t quite put my finger on just what that something is, but I can feel it all the same: A certain portentous energy that wasn’t there before.

One of the first lessons I’ve learned as a master assassin is to trust my instincts, because they have never failed me. And my instincts have been on high alert recently, warning me that something is coming. Something significant.

The ogre fishes an item out of his pocket: a long, thin whistle. There are curious engravings on it.

“What’s that?” I ask, somewhat disappointed in myself. I know better than to engage while I’m here, but curiosity gets the better of me.

“Fear,” he answers with a cryptic laugh, then raises the whistle to his mouth and blows. The cages nearby rattle as the creatures within them shift uncomfortably. One

moans, the sound reminding me of the banshees' wail, the lingering melody that haunts the Raven Forest.

"They're trained never to attack whoever possesses the whistle," the ogre tells me. "Your enemies, however, they won't be so lucky."

When he moves closer to me, his stench is so strong I have to take a step back. I shake my head to let him know I'm still not interested. Then I wrap myself in shadows before continuing along the main entrance of Grimreap, passing a plethora of stalls selling everything from the illegal to the dangerous. I stock up on some secondary poisons: Draught of Living Death, and chloride which I can use to make a number of toxic concoctions. Explosives, too.

Before concluding my business for the night, I make my way into a crowded tavern called "The Sunken Sword". Although I don't thirst, or require use of the tavern's facilities, I'm after information. And lurking in the corner of a tavern is one of the best ways to eavesdrop and learn news from around the realms.

I make it my business to know Variant's business.

I walk up to the bar, manned by a particularly ugly troll. Half of his face is caved in, obliterating one of his eyes and dragging part of his mouth down. He has to ask me what I want three times, because it's difficult for him to speak and even more difficult for me to understand. I order a tankard of ale and when he hands it to me, I notice his hands are huge and his fingers are covered in hair. I pay for the drink and eye it warily; it looks like piss.

Then I find a small, inconspicuous table in the corner of the main room. I take a seat, being careful to wrap myself in shadows yet again. Leaning back, I listen.

There is endless conversation echoing around me. A blood elf informs his companion

about a woman he found along the road and the sadistic sexual things he did to her. Listening to his story makes me want to subject him to the tortuous death of Rotting Worm Venom . The inky, black liquid rots away flesh and bone, melting sinew and boiling the blood.

But if I went after every rapist in Grimreap, I'd have a full-time job. Besides, it's important to preserve my arsenal of poisons, which are rare and expensive. Perhaps it's more fitting to say I'm no hero, nor do I claim to be. I keep to myself and that's the way I like it.

Finally, I hear something that piques my interest.

"... Crongus fucked an angel over at Anona's," says a loud, boasting voice from a nearby table. I turn at the sound to see an arrogant, if especially ugly, were-rat relaxed over his stein. He's in his animal form, the form most shapeshifters choose to take while in Grimreap. It's easier to remain unidentifiable and under the radar that way—a rat is more difficult to detail than a person.

"Bullshit, Crongus fucked an angel," replies his companion—another were-rat, this one just as hideous with his long snout, beady yellow eyes, matted brown fur, and long, stained teeth.

"I guess, technically, he just started to but then he got interrupted."

The second were-rat shakes his head staunchly. "I still say Crongus lied and you're a gullible dumbass to believe 'em, Dranmore. There ain't been an angel in one o' them lower precincts in years. An' everyone knows if you see an angel, you gotta turn her over ta Variant."

"Will you let me finish my fuckin' story, Olegad?" asks Dranmore.

“Go ahead, but it ain’t nothin’ but bullshit.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it ain’t,” Dranmore responds.

“Then fuckin’ get to the point!” demands Olegad.

Dranmore nods and doesn’t appear offended by his companion’s surly tone. “When Crongus was about ta get to the poundin’ part, he said this huge fuckin’ gargoyle burst into the room and almost made Crongus shit his pants!”

“A gargoyle?” Olegad repeats, clearly doubting the story. “They ain’t been seen in years, neither. Not since Variant forced ‘em into the Gorge for good.”

“Just listen, fuckface!” Dranmore takes a sip of what’s probably ale.

“I’m listenin’,” Olegad grumbles.

“So the gargoyle bursts in an’ just takes the girl, bed linens an’ all, an’ walks out wiff her!” Dranmore doesn’t appear any less excited to tell the story, even as Olegad rolls his eyes. He continues. “My man Crongus ain’t one to let coin go to waste, so he grab the gargoyle an’ fuckin’ socks him right in the face!”

“Crongus socked a gargoyle?” Olegad shakes his head and laughs.

“Crongus said he was a big fella, too, but he passed right the fuck out after just one hit!” Olegad continues to laugh, but Dranmore isn’t finished yet. “Crongus sees the gargoyle’s unconscious but knows it ain’t gonna be for long. Still, Crongus fucks the girl real good then gets the hell outta there. ‘No angel’s good enough to fight an angry gargoyle twice,’ he says.”

“Shit,” Olegad laughs.

“Then Variant’s guards get there, o’ course, owin’ to his latest edict. So Crongus gets caught an’ spends the night in the dungeon. But he say it was worth it for the most legendary finish he ever had.”

“Bull fuckin’ shit, your friend hit a gargoyle,” says another man at an adjacent table when Dranmore finishes his story. “And no one who sees the inside of Variant’s dungeon ever lives ta tell ‘bout it!”

“Are you callin’ me a liar?” accuses Dranmore as he eyes the stranger narrowly.

“No, I’m callin’ yer friend a liar. You’re just the dumbass who believed him!”

There’s the sound of wood scraping against the stone floor as Dranmore and Olegad slide their chairs away from the table and stand up. The eavesdropper does the same and it looks like a standoff. A few seconds later, though, a full-out brawl erupts. Dranmore hits the eavesdropper so hard that the crack of his shattering nose rises above the high-volume level of the tavern. I see a few heads turn, but owing to the other two fights going on simultaneously, no one seems very interested.

As to Dranmore’s story, I, too, have a difficult time believing it. For starters, Olegad was right—gargoyles aren’t exactly commonplace. Furthermore, it wouldn’t be a wise decision to go up against one. I’ve come across a few and hitting one is a probable death sentence. If you’ve ever hit solid stone, you can imagine the feeling.

Still, the story alarms me. While I’m certain it’s been exaggerated, I’ve come to find that even the most ridiculous accounts still contain a kernel of truth. It’s just a matter of sorting the wheat from the chaff.

It’s not only the mention of a gargoyle that strikes me. Angels, too, are very rare. No one’s seen a male in over one hundred years, not since the Great War when Variant had them all destroyed, save himself. And the females appear to be headed for a

similar fate, sightings of them continuing to be few and far between. With Variant's newest edict, any and all females are to be returned to him. Even though the edict doesn't explain why, I think it's fairly obvious.

Crongus knocking out a gargoyle is clearly a lie, but why mention the gargoyle's presence in the first place? Especially when it's not as though gargoyles are seen with any regularity. They've been banished to the Gorge for as long as anyone can remember. Additionally, Anona's precinct exists in the mortal plane—a realm a gargoyle wouldn't dare enter. Not when Variant cursed them into turning to stone when they venture outside the shadow realm. No, a gargoyle would never take his chances in the mortal plane unless... unless there really was an angel.

The whole story appears too farfetched, too unbelievable, too ridiculous. Then why am I still considering it?

You're not, I tell myself and continue scanning the tables for other bits of news from the realms.

That's when I see them, a group of four travelers sitting at a table across from me. They lean over bowls of soup and eat as though they haven't seen food for days. There's nothing necessarily interesting about them and yet, I can't seem to shake the feeling that there is something interesting about them, indeed.

The End

### CHAPTER ONE

Baron

Grimreap

Shadow Realm

Three are men and one is a woman. She's done an admirable job of hiding her body by draping herself in a gray cloak, but her female form is unmistakable. From beneath her hood, I see flashes of dark purple hair, and her hand reveals skin that is dark as night.

All are in disguise.

I can see the shadow magic weaving in and around them, shrouding them. Whoever wove the magical net is skilled; the only reason I can see through it is because I'm composed of shadow. Shadow magic animates me, it woke me from the grave.

Reveal True Form , I whisper, focused on the four of them. Instantly, the shadows scatter and only the truth remains, at least to my eyes. Their disguises remain intact to any within the tavern who care to look.

The woman is stunning. Her white hair frames a face of which I've yet to see an equal. I can see the lightness radiating from her and I conclude she must be fae. Or an angel, but the chances of her being an angel are slim. Yet, there's something beyond the blazing light that surrounds her. I can see the tip of something dark, something

sinister and shadowy. It makes little sense to me, and I have a hell of a time pulling my attention away from her.

Gargoyles, I say to myself as I study the two men on either side of her. Their rubbery, black wings and their immense size give them away. The third man is an elf and, as such, of less interest to me. Gargoyles, though... perhaps Crongus wasn't as full of shit as I previously believed. And, since he mentioned a gargoyle, then isn't it within the realm of possibility... I look back at the woman. She could easily be an angel. I can't recall the last creature I beheld with white hair.

For some reason, though, it's not the woman who keeps my attention now. It's one of the gargoyles—and as I glance back at the elf across from him, I realize there's something arresting about him, too. I've never laid eyes on either of them, but I feel as though I recognize them all the same. Yet when I try to place where from, I don't have an answer.

I watch the table with curiosity, until I notice I'm not the only one. Three booths down, I recognize Ferchad, a weapons smuggler who is well known here. In typical blood-elf fashion, he's pompous, righteous, and considers himself the biggest fish in the vile pond that is Grimreap. With him is my least favorite of his accomplices, Hendor. He's a man so disfigured and grotesque, I can only guess at his race. But he's large and mean, lacking the wits of his leader but able to deal twice the physical damage.

Ferchad is the type to constantly assert his dominance in a city that has little use for hierarchies. Still, there are always those weaker to exploit in whatever way possible, and Ferchad has a knack for finding them. Granted, he sometimes chooses incorrectly. He once made the mistake of coming after me, but quickly learned his lesson; now, he knows enough to leave me alone. I can't say things are amiable between us, though we have an unspoken understanding to avoid one another. I haven't and don't wish to test the bonds of that tenuous arrangement.



I watch Ferchad gesture toward the two men whose faces I recognize but can't place. Moments later, he notices the woman. Although she's still in disguise as far as Ferchad's concerned, she still appears as a woman—and most women in Grimreap have a price.

Ferchad walks over to the table. I can't make out what he says, but I can tell by the tension between the strangers that he's insulted them. The largest one, the one whose face I can't place, leans forward, his fists clenched tightly in front of him. Even from where I sit, I can see the vein on his forehead protruding. One of Ferchad's cohorts returns from the bar to join the excitement, seemingly vibrating with aggressive energy.

Propping himself on his palms with his arms out straight, Ferchad leans over the table. I can sense there's about to be a fight and I have every intention of being well on my way before Ferchad is even able to deliver the first blow.

After nearly a century as an assassin, I've become something of a master where unceremonious exits are concerned. Remaining unnoticed is a necessity. Thus, I slither my way around my table and covertly stick to shadow, invisible to prying eyes. I turn at the sound of a large thud to see Ferchad laid out flat on the ground. The large creature whose face I can't place is standing over him, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his arms rippling with power.

In that moment, the girl turns in my direction and looks up, directly into my eyes. I don't know how it's possible that she's able to see me, but our eyes lock all the same. The seconds tick by and I find I'm incapable of pulling my gaze away from hers. I'm both dumbfounded and profoundly bothered that she can see through my shadows.

Finally, I break her gaze and glance at the door of the tavern. I need to depart now if I'm going to avoid the trouble that's already started brewing. Yet, I find myself hesitating. I glance back at the girl and find her eyes still fixed on me.

I cannot explain why, but I approach the table where Ferchad's just finished dusting himself off from his fall to the floor. He's fuming, angrier than I've seen him in a very long time. And for good reason, he's been made a fool of.

I have no interest in dealing with the vile man, especially since we have a fragile agreement between us, but the angel...

My interest lies where all of my interests lie: in selfishness. Everything I work toward will benefit me at a future date. And if ever there's an opportunity that goes counter to Variant's edicts, I'm more inclined to get involved. I hate Variant and his fucking rules.

Thus, if Variant wants to possess each and every angel, I will do my best to make sure that doesn't happen. As a general rule, I will go to extreme lengths to ensure Variant never gets what he wants.

I feel an inexplicable pull to the girl's pale blue eyes, which haven't stopped studying me. There's knowledge in them, a wise understanding of the world and all within it. I have a strong desire to know those eyes, to see what they've seen, to understand what they understand. To see if they know anything about me.

Who I am... What I am... Why I am.

Ferchad approaches the table once more. The large gargoyle made a mistake in pushing him; Grimreap is no place for power plays. Survival, for most, demands a bent head and the ability to allow things to roll off one's shoulders. But gargoyles and elves aren't typically the types to back down. Here, it could mean their death.

I step closer to the group and pick up Ferchad's cold, slithering blood-elf voice from the crowd.

“You’ve made a mistake, friend,” he hisses to the gargoyle. “And it’s just cost you your lives.”

“No one will die today, friend,” the gargoyle spits back.

Immediately, something stirs within my chest and my mind. A flash of memory, like a blot of color against a canvas of gray. For the last century, there’s only been gray. My memories from before my revival have been only blank but now, something rouses me—an image from a half-remembered dream. The stranger’s growling baritone pulls me forward, urging me to learn more.

I think again to the angel’s eyes. To the answers I know lie beneath their surface. I take one last look at the door, but turn away again. I can’t leave the angel. Not yet. I’m not certain why, but something within me insists she can give me the answers I so desperately seek.

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## DRAGAN

It’s a mistake to come here. The moment we enter the city, I feel fear for the first time since the Great War—not for myself, but for Eilish. Maybe it’s because I’ve spent so long away from the presence of women, but despite angels being among the most powerful creatures in existence, she emits a fragility I feel personally responsible to safeguard.

Why? Because if Eilish’s wings really are intact, she is the answer to overcoming Variant. And it’s for that reason that I must ensure her continued safety and survival. Eilish is the second chance I never thought I’d get. And it’s a chance I’ll do everything in my power to protect.

Baron's murder and Variant's subsequent rise to power is a personal failure I'll never be able to accept or escape. We four were charged with one task: maintaining balance and protecting the realms. We failed. And because of that failure, one of us is dead, Cambion and I are prisoners, and the fourth is a tyrant. This town, in all of its immorality and constant state of destruction, is a direct representation of that failure and I feel it all the way down to my toes.

Now, here I am, marching through the embodiment of my shamed demise with my last hope for redemption. And I'm worried that something is going to happen and I won't be able to defend her. I have half a mind to take her in my arms and run far away from this place. But where would we go? I could hide her in shadow, bring her to the Gorge and tuck her away forever. But that would be a prison all its own, and imprisonment is no life for an angel. She was never meant to be a kept pet. Besides, she'd never survive in the shadow realm, anyway.

As soon as her strength returns, Eilish will be the only living creature powerful enough to take on the false king. And as she walks beside me, I feel the weight of a century pressing down on my shoulders.

I don't intend to fail twice.

"Keep your eyes on the ground," I whisper to her. The last thing I need is for her to make eye contact with the wrong creature and end up possessed by a ghost or something worse. She nods and does as I instruct.

We wind our way through alleys, side-stepping merchants and beggars along our way. Grimreap is home to a plethora of unscrupulous creatures, all of them fallen on hard times. The sounds of the city hint at the chaos within it: howls of caged animals, transitioning werewolves chained to crumbling walls, screams of people being beaten by thugs, violent explosions, and lepers begging on every corner while rats freely run rampant. I feel Eilish shift closer to me as if she's afraid. As well she should be;

there's no place scarier than Grimreap.

The line of her lithe body presses up against my arm and my cock instantly responds. I have to dampen the desire down, force away the images of her naked and spread out beneath me. This constant desire for her is getting exhausting. Any accidental touch now seems to set me off and it's all I can do to turn my mind to other things. I fight hard, knowing I'll need all of my mental and bodily faculties intact in order to face the horror that is Grimreap.

We keep our heads bowed as we hurry along the narrow corridors of crumbling buildings, our bodies pressed against the ruined stone.

When we come across a tavern, I point Thoradin in its direction and he nods. First bit of business is attending to our growling stomachs. We haven't eaten in far too long.

I crouch to enter the low doorway and then we're faced with stairs that lead down, into the belly of the beast. Inside, it's even darker than the gloom of the city. Eilish grabs my forearm as she stumbles down the stone steps and I wrap my arm around her shoulders, keeping her upright as I pull her into me. She looks up and our eyes meet. She appears surprised. I merely nod at her and she seems to understand that she can trust me. I will protect her.

A few burning torches decorate the stone walls. Their light casts dim circles against the low ceiling but does little to illuminate the creatures within its bowels. In the cramped space, the stench of unwashed bodies festers alongside the moldy dampness.

The tavern is at capacity with monsters, all bold and rowdy. Tables are scattered around the room and all are full, but half the chairs are tipped over or broken. The crowd is raucous, the cacophony of conversation and belligerent yells echoes across the sticky surfaces. We form a line, with me leading the way, and weave a path to a table in the far corner of the room, currently occupied by three hooded figures. I can't

see their faces but I'm fairly sure they're wraiths. Even though wraiths are spirits, many don cloaks to appear as though they're living, then they drain the life-force of those around them. And what better place than a tavern to feed on the energy of the unsuspecting?

Along our way to the table, we barely miss two drunken brawls. Eilish's eyes widen as she notices an oily demon openly fucking one of the tavern women, a well-used harpy, against the wall. The harpy shrieks in either delight or anger as she shreds the demon's back with her claws, and he continues to thrust into her.

Stench and disease linger in the air and I doubt my decision to bring Eilish to this place for the nth time since coming here. Thoradin wordlessly breaks the line to find the barkeep and we approach the table. The wraiths don't acknowledge us.

I hold Eilish at arm's length behind me. I would shield her from view with my wings, but I don't want to draw attention to the fact that I'm a gargoyle. Even with the charm that's currently protecting our true identities, I must be careful.

"It's time for you to leave," I say with tight lips as I face the three occupying the table. They look up at me and, just as I thought, there's nothing but blackness beneath their hoods.

They make no move to disappear and just continue floating above the chairs, as if trying to give the impression they're sitting.

"I don't enjoy repeating myself," I warn them, my tone harsh.

"For fuck's sake," Cambion interrupts and pushes past me. He eyes the wraiths narrowly then holds his hands together until a tiny ball of light forms within them. "Unless you want to be blasted back into the darkness you came from, get the fuck out of here."

The ball of light does the trick as the wraiths immediately disappear, leaving only their black robes. Cambion extinguishes the ball of light between his hands and throws the robes onto the floor before he takes a seat.

“That was risky,” I point out.

“No one noticed and it worked,” he responds.

I can’t argue with him, so I stand to the side and motion to Eilish to take her seat. “You sit on the inside, next to the wall,” I tell her. She simply nods and sits. I follow suit beside her, being extra vigilant when it comes to taking in my surroundings. When the barkeep and Thoradin return, we’re presented with four full bowls of “stew” and tankards of foul-smelling liquor. The bowls contain a gray, brackish liquid with chunks of questionable, possibly rancid meat.

I doubt any of us even taste the meal as we go about shoveling it into our mouths. Even Eilish has forgone her spoon and is taking long, deep gulps from her bowl. Once the fatal edge of her hunger is satisfied, she lowers the bowl and wipes her face with the back of her hand. She places the remainder of her stew on her lap and I see Flumph’s small head extend from his hiding place beneath her cloak so he can slurp the contents unseen.

When our meals are finished, we lean over the table so we can hear one another over the dissonance of the other customers.

“Fine place,” says Cambion. “You always frequent the nicest establishments.”

“For Grimreap, it’s bordering on pleasant,” I reply honestly. There’s far worse than this tavern within the city’s limits.

Cambion appears annoyed, but just as he leans in to speak, a man bumps into the

corner of our table.

He's big. Not so big as Thoradin and me, but still big enough to pose a risk. And I'm sorely attempting to avoid risks at all costs.

The man appears human but, of course, he isn't—humans have been extinct for longer than I can remember. The fire red of his hair and his point-tipped ears signify he's an elf. A blood elf. His blazing irises lock with mine and I realize trouble has finally found us.

"You all look a little too pretty to be from around here," he says, his voice thin but threatening. A second man appears behind him, his face pockmarked and scarred. The side of his body is ravaged with burns, deforming his neck and arms in a look so grotesque, he could be one of the walking dead.

"We're not looking for trouble," I mutter in a voice just loud enough to be heard over the discordant noise surrounding us.

"Then, it appears you've come to the wrong place." The blood elf laughs, a sinister and smug smile lingering even after his chortle has evaporated from the damp air. "This city got a mind all its own. Dangerous place for strangers. Bein' a charitable man, I thought I'd introduce myself. Maybe inform you 'bout the way things work here."

"We can figure out the way things work for ourselves," replies Cambion, coldly. With his red hair, he looks like he could be kin to the man before us, but even disguised, Cambion's lightness outshines any transfigurations and enchantments he can cast on himself.

A few tables nearby have sensed the tension and the patrons sit poised, eager for violence, hungrier for it than they are for the women on their laps or the tankards



balanced precariously against the sides of their tables.

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong,” the blood elf continues “You’ve already made mistakes.”

“Such as?” Cambion demands before I can stop him. The last thing we want is to play into this asshole’s game. I would have paid him off and sent him on his way, but Cambion always makes things more difficult.

“For starters,” the bastard continues. “You came here, somewhere’s you clearly don’t belong. Second, you failed to pay me the courtesy you should have.” Then, he turns to look at Eilish and his smile returns. “And you brought a sweet, little nymph wiffout offerin’ me first dibs.”

“The woman isn’t for you,” I tell him, turning my chair and body until I’m blocking his view of her. My voice is deadly. Fire is already brewing in my gut at the thought of this fiend laying just one finger on Eilish. If he touches her, I’ll kill him.

“All women are for my enjoyment.” He turns to his comrade, “Hendor, when do I not get what I want?”

“Never,” confirms the man, a dumb grin spreading across his marred face.

I’ve had enough. I stand up, towering over the stranger by at least a head. But he doesn’t back down. He’s large in his own right and he’s broad.

“You need ta understand just how things work,” the man continues. “There ain’t no law here. No one to protect you. You chose a bad place to die.” His tongue pokes out from behind his brown, decayed teeth, yellowed juice leaking out of the space between them.

He takes a step closer, which puts him closer to Eilish. He'll regret it. This man doesn't realize who I am. His tactic of intimidation has likely worked numerous times before, but he's in for a surprise if he expects me to cower before him. The only reason he isn't already dead is because I need to avoid attention.

But I also need to get him off my back. He tries another step and I push him backward, choosing to show him only a fraction of my power. As he falls to the floor, I realize I've failed in that mission; everyone within a ten-foot radius is now turning in their chairs to watch as the loudmouth is leveled. All eyes are fixed on us, greedy for the fight.

He slowly stands, the venom behind his crimson eyes visibly swirling. "You've made a mistake, friend," he hisses. "And it's just cost you your lives."

"No one will die today, friend, " I spit back at him. My arms are tense with fury. "Except you."

He squares his body toward me, snarling, his eyes nearly pulsing in their anger.

I'm aware of all the other eyes on us, and I wonder how I can settle this without causing more of a fuss. I clench and unclench my fist. We may have to fight more than just these two to get out of here alive.

### CURSED SHADOWS

Baron

Grimreap

Shadow Realm

Three are men and one is a woman. She's done an admirable job of hiding her body by draping herself in a gray cloak, but her female form is unmistakable. From beneath her hood, I see flashes of dark purple hair, and her hand reveals skin that is dark as night.

All are in disguise.

I can see the shadow magic weaving in and around them, shrouding them. Whoever wove the magical net is skilled; the only reason I can see through it is because I'm composed of shadow. Shadow magic animates me, it woke me from the grave.

Reveal True Form , I whisper, focused on the four of them. Instantly, the shadows scatter and only the truth remains, at least to my eyes. Their disguises remain intact to any within the tavern who care to look.

The woman is stunning. Her white hair frames a face of which I've yet to see an equal. I can see the lightness radiating from her and I conclude she must be fae. Or an angel, but the chances of her being an angel are slim. Yet, there's something beyond the blazing light that surrounds her. I can see the tip of something dark, something

sinister and shadowy. It makes little sense to me, and I have a hell of a time pulling my attention away from her.

Gargoyles, I say to myself as I study the two men on either side of her. Their rubbery, black wings and their immense size give them away. The third man is an elf and, as such, of less interest to me. Gargoyles, though... perhaps Crongus wasn't as full of shit as I previously believed. And, since he mentioned a gargoyle, then isn't it within the realm of possibility... I look back at the woman. She could easily be an angel. I can't recall the last creature I beheld with white hair.

For some reason, though, it's not the woman who keeps my attention now. It's one of the gargoyles—and as I glance back at the elf across from him, I realize there's something arresting about him, too. I've never laid eyes on either of them, but I feel as though I recognize them all the same. Yet when I try to place where from, I don't have an answer.

I watch the table with curiosity, until I notice I'm not the only one. Three booths down, I recognize Ferchad, a weapons smuggler who is well known here. In typical blood-elf fashion, he's pompous, righteous, and considers himself the biggest fish in the vile pond that is Grimreap. With him is my least favorite of his accomplices, Hendor. He's a man so disfigured and grotesque, I can only guess at his race. But he's large and mean, lacking the wits of his leader but able to deal twice the physical damage.

Ferchad is the type to constantly assert his dominance in a city that has little use for hierarchies. Still, there are always those weaker to exploit in whatever way possible, and Ferchad has a knack for finding them. Granted, he sometimes chooses incorrectly. He once made the mistake of coming after me, but quickly learned his lesson; now, he knows enough to leave me alone. I can't say things are amiable between us, though we have an unspoken understanding to avoid one another. I haven't and don't wish to test the bonds of that tenuous arrangement.

I watch Ferchad gesture toward the two men whose faces I recognize but can't place. Moments later, he notices the woman. Although she's still in disguise as far as Ferchad's concerned, she still appears as a woman—and most women in Grimreap have a price.

Ferchad walks over to the table. I can't make out what he says, but I can tell by the tension between the strangers that he's insulted them. The largest one, the one whose face I can't place, leans forward, his fists clenched tightly in front of him. Even from where I sit, I can see the vein on his forehead protruding. One of Ferchad's cohorts returns from the bar to join the excitement, seemingly vibrating with aggressive energy.

Propping himself on his palms with his arms out straight, Ferchad leans over the table. I can sense there's about to be a fight and I have every intention of being well on my way before Ferchad is even able to deliver the first blow.

After nearly a century as an assassin, I've become something of a master where unceremonious exits are concerned. Remaining unnoticed is a necessity. Thus, I slither my way around my table and covertly stick to shadow, invisible to prying eyes. I turn at the sound of a large thud to see Ferchad laid out flat on the ground. The large creature whose face I can't place is standing over him, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his arms rippling with power.

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Finally, I break her gaze and glance at the door of the tavern. I need to depart now if I'm going to avoid the trouble that's already started brewing. Yet, I find myself hesitating. I glance back at the girl and find her eyes still fixed on me.

I cannot explain why, but I approach the table where Ferchad's just finished dusting himself off from his fall to the floor. He's fuming, angrier than I've seen him in a very long time. And for good reason, he's been made a fool of.

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"You've made a mistake, friend," he hisses to the gargoyle. "And it's just cost you

your lives.”

“No one will die today, friend,” the gargoyle spits back.

Immediately, something stirs within my chest and my mind. A flash of memory, like a blot of color against a canvas of gray. For the last century, there’s only been gray. My memories from before my revival have been only blank but now, something rouses me—an image from a half-remembered dream. The stranger’s growling baritone pulls me forward, urging me to learn more.

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## DRAGAN

It’s a mistake to come here. The moment we enter the city, I feel fear for the first time since the Great War—not for myself, but for Eilish. Maybe it’s because I’ve spent so long away from the presence of women, but despite angels being among the most powerful creatures in existence, she emits a fragility I feel personally responsible to safeguard.

Why? Because if Eilish’s wings really are intact, she is the answer to overcoming Variant. And it’s for that reason that I must ensure her continued safety and survival. Eilish is the second chance I never thought I’d get. And it’s a chance I’ll do everything in my power to protect.

Baron’s murder and Variant’s subsequent rise to power is a personal failure I’ll never be able to accept or escape. We four were charged with one task: maintaining balance

and protecting the realms. We failed. And because of that failure, one of us is dead, Cambion and I are prisoners, and the fourth is a tyrant. This town, in all of its immorality and constant state of destruction, is a direct representation of that failure and I feel it all the way down to my toes.

Now, here I am, marching through the embodiment of my shamed demise with my last hope for redemption. And I'm worried that something is going to happen and I won't be able to defend her. I have half a mind to take her in my arms and run far away from this place. But where would we go? I could hide her in shadow, bring her to the Gorge and tuck her away forever. But that would be a prison all its own, and imprisonment is no life for an angel. She was never meant to be a kept pet. Besides, she'd never survive in the shadow realm, anyway.

As soon as her strength returns, Eilish will be the only living creature powerful enough to take on the false king. And as she walks beside me, I feel the weight of a century pressing down on my shoulders.

I don't intend to fail twice.

"Keep your eyes on the ground," I whisper to her. The last thing I need is for her to make eye contact with the wrong creature and end up possessed by a ghost or something worse. She nods and does as I instruct.

We wind our way through alleys, side-stepping merchants and beggars along our way. Grimreap is home to a plethora of unscrupulous creatures, all of them fallen on hard times. The sounds of the city hint at the chaos within it: howls of caged animals, transitioning werewolves chained to crumbling walls, screams of people being beaten by thugs, violent explosions, and lepers begging on every corner while rats freely run rampant. I feel Eilish shift closer to me as if she's afraid. As well she should be; there's no place scarier than Grimreap.

The line of her lithe body presses up against my arm and my cock instantly responds.



I have to dampen the desire down, force away the images of her naked and spread out beneath me. This constant desire for her is getting exhausting. Any accidental touch now seems to set me off and it's all I can do to turn my mind to other things. I fight hard, knowing I'll need all of my mental and bodily faculties intact in order to face the horror that is Grimreap.

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When we come across a tavern, I point Thoradin in its direction and he nods. First bit of business is attending to our growling stomachs. We haven't eaten in far too long.

I crouch to enter the low doorway and then we're faced with stairs that lead down, into the belly of the beast. Inside, it's even darker than the gloom of the city. Eilish grabs my forearm as she stumbles down the stone steps and I wrap my arm around her shoulders, keeping her upright as I pull her into me. She looks up and our eyes meet. She appears surprised. I merely nod at her and she seems to understand that she can trust me. I will protect her.

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Along our way to the table, we barely miss two drunken brawls. Eilish's eyes widen as she notices an oily demon openly fucking one of the tavern women, a well-used harpy, against the wall. The harpy shrieks in either delight or anger as she shreds the demon's back with her claws, and he continues to thrust into her.

Stench and disease linger in the air and I doubt my decision to bring Eilish to this place for the nth time since coming here. Thoradin wordlessly breaks the line to find the barkeep and we approach the table. The wraiths don't acknowledge us.

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"I don't enjoy repeating myself," I warn them, my tone harsh.

"For fuck's sake," Cambion interrupts and pushes past me. He eyes the wraiths narrowly then holds his hands together until a tiny ball of light forms within them. "Unless you want to be blasted back into the darkness you came from, get the fuck out of here."

The ball of light does the trick as the wraiths immediately disappear, leaving only their black robes. Cambion extinguishes the ball of light between his hands and throws the robes onto the floor before he takes a seat.

"That was risky," I point out.

“No one noticed and it worked,” he responds.

I can't argue with him, so I stand to the side and motion to Eilish to take her seat. “You sit on the inside, next to the wall,” I tell her. She simply nods and sits. I follow suit beside her, being extra vigilant when it comes to taking in my surroundings. When the barkeep and Thoradin return, we're presented with four full bowls of “stew” and tankards of foul-smelling liquor. The bowls contain a gray, brackish liquid with chunks of questionable, possibly rancid meat.

I doubt any of us even taste the meal as we go about shoveling it into our mouths. Even Eilish has forgone her spoon and is taking long, deep gulps from her bowl. Once the fatal edge of her hunger is satisfied, she lowers the bowl and wipes her face with the back of her hand. She places the remainder of her stew on her lap and I see Flumph's small head extend from his hiding place beneath her cloak so he can slurp the contents unseen.