



Demonic Descension (The Sundering Duet #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: In the wake of her mate's heart-shattering betrayal, Dagny Olavera finds herself trapped in Slaine's dungeons. She's been left for dead...and her only hope is the demon she's sworn to loathe for all eternity.

Anything is worth it to save her five other mates: even relying on Malice, the demon whose sins shattered her. The same one determined to win back her heart and trust even if it kills him.

When dark truths unravel and wrong turns into right, Dagny must put aside her hatred and fear. The fate of The Far Place hangs in the balance, and if she does not learn to harness her newly-awakened powers in time, it will all be for nothing.

The fates that drew them together now want them apart. But they don't realize just how far the vicious demons will go to keep their mate and protect her heart.

Demonic Descension is a why-choose, demon shifter paranormal romance

Total Pages (Source): 39

1

Malice

My beautiful mate is driving me mad.

I tap my claws one by one along the stone wall, the rhythmic clicking burrowing deep beneath my skull and rattling my core as I watch Dagny's slumped form from the shadows of her cell. It's been three days since I've put her there—three horrible days when she's refused to eat, drink, or acknowledge my presence—three days I've been driven mad with the desire to touch her. Talk to her. To look into her beautiful, bronze-rimmed eyes and revel in the pleasure of our new bond.

She must know I'm here. She must. Why does she pretend otherwise?

“You can't ignore me forever, my wildfire.”

At the utterance of her nickname, Dagny's eyes crack open to reveal hateful, narrowed slits. “I am not your anything,” she snarls, her voice cracking heavily from disuse. “Don't you fucking call me that anymore. You don't have the right.”

My chest constricts at the venom in her tone, and I have to hold back a whine rising in my throat as a shock of pain travels down the bond. “Wildfire, I?—”

“DON'T CALL ME THAT!” A heavily distorted voice explodes from her along with a rush of power, and a blast of heated air smacks against me, forcing long strands of red hair off my face and the ends to billow out in all directions. The ring

around her pupil expands as her magic penetrates the air, consuming the warm brown of her iris and casting her skin in a cool, silver light. A demonic light.

I eye the beautiful creature warily, the thing beneath my skin rising to meet her power head-on. It likes it. It wants it.

While each demon's power increases with the bond, Dagny's has grown exponentially, propelled to new heights every time she bonds with another piece of Abaddon's soul. The fourth bond—our bond—allowed her powers to fully awaken, that much is clear. But seeing it with my own eyes and having it used against me... I have no doubt that one day she will be the most powerful creature in The Far Place.

If only she lives long enough to see it.

As Dagny continues glaring with those shimmering silver eyes, I take a moment to inspect her. The beautiful dermal armor Kaehl gifted her is in tatters, showcasing her protruding ribs and deep, festering sores across her arms and legs.

I've seen the wounds only a handful of times in Abaddon's memories, but it's enough to realize exactly what they are—magic pollution. When halflings still walked the land, magic pollution was a real and terrible consequence of those able to harness the wells of power hidden deep in the earth of The Far Place. Unlike demons, halflings are born of both this world and the mortal realm, and have unlimited access to that source. But it comes with a price.

Dagny has no knowledge of how to halt the wave of power coursing into her bloodstream, and if she doesn't learn, it will consume her soul and cause her to deteriorate, both mentally and physically—of which I am already seeing signs.

“Wild—Dagny,” I correct. “Please... I need to talk to you.” I don't recognize my desperate tone, but it's there nonetheless. However, it doesn't have the effect on

Dagny that I want.

“I don’t want to talk. I want to kill you.” For a moment, a flash of pain enters her gaze, but in the next, it’s gone, leaving me to wonder if it was there in the first place.

“Dagny, please ?—”

“I said NO !”

Dagny’s piercing scream cuts me off as blinding silver light explodes from her pores, from her eyes and open mouth, bathing the room in luminescence. The beast under my skin rises to meet her show of power, and my skin shudders with the strength to hold it back.

Not here. Not now. Not yet.

But it seems Dagny has other ideas.

Instead of trying to control the power flooding out of her, she lets it flow freely, filling the air with pure magical energy. It flows into the walls of the small room, imbuing the stone and causing the ground to vibrate. A howling wind whips around me, sucking the air from my lungs and plastering long red strands of hair to my face and neck. And within that wind is a scream—a sound only for my ears—filled with so much rage and pain and despair, it causes that hollow space in my chest to twinge.

As the power consumes her, Dagny mindlessly rails against her restraints, pulling and yanking and clawing at the collar around her neck, ripping deep gouges into the thin flesh.

Part of me is horrified as I watch a river of red pour down to her chest, coating her hands in her precious life force as she continues fighting. But then there’s that other

part. The one that's utterly fascinated with her desire to survive—to be free. The part that wants to watch her struggle and see how far she's willing to go. To bring her back from the edge just before she slips. To show her what she's capable of. To show her that she's mine, just as much as I am hers.

A smirk tugs at my mouth as I stare at her, the thunderous roar in my ears drowning out the sound of my lungs screaming for air.

You've never looked more magnificent, wildfire. If you kill me now, I'd be happy knowing this is the last thing I saw.

My voice enters her mind as a gentle caress, and though she doesn't want it, her gaze softens as the bond between us thrums in ecstasy. Her concentration slips for the briefest moment, but it's enough. Dagny's power falters, and the wind whipping around me dies, as does the massive rush of magic pouring from her body. The adrenaline pumping through her veins ceases, and Dagny slumps back against the blood-coated stone as her quivering muscles give out.

I suck in a deep breath and propel myself across the room, landing directly in a pool of Dagny's blood. I crouch so we're at eye level and, giving zero thought to my safety, reach for her wounds with the healing magic thrumming in my palms.

Right before I make contact, Dagny's eyes spring open, the warm brown of her iris brimming with hatred. I'm so shocked by the emotion, I don't react in time to move my hand out of the way—something I sorely regret when Dagny's teeth rip into the flesh of my palm.

A wild glint enters her gaze as she tears through muscle and tendon, and while pain flares along the length of my forearm, I'm too mesmerized to pull away. A moment later, she does it for me, reeling back with a chin covered in blue-black blood and a piece of my flesh clenched between her teeth.

She turns her head to the side, spitting the chunk onto the stone ground before an eerie smile overtakes her expression. When she faces me again, I'm shocked to find her canines lengthened, tapering to razor-sharp points—just like a typical demon of The Far Place.

How spectacular.

I pull my hand to my chest, a matching smile tugging at my own mouth as I take in the bloodthirsty look in my beloved's eyes. Instead of healing the wound, I allow it to ooze, reveling in the sensation of my own blood dripping down my arm, drowning in the ecstasy each throb of pain offers me—all because it reminds me of the creature who put it there.

Thank you, I whisper into her mind. I'll treasure it for as long as I'm able.

At this, Dagny releases a vicious snarl, the silver ring around her pupil expanding as her power rises once more. But before it gets a chance to explode in a stunning display like earlier, a voice breaks out over my shoulder, causing Dagny to lose focus.

"It's good to know I'm not the only one going mad." The words are muffled, distorted, and barely comprehensible, but the laughter that follows is unmistakable. Fenryr.

I narrow my eyes as I turn my head, sending the green-eyed demon the full weight of my glare. "Something funny, dog? "

He shakes his head, but his chuckle still echoes off the metal muzzle strapped to his face. At the sound, an irritated growl rumbles in my chest, and I make a mental note to adjust it so he's unable to speak for the foreseeable future.

Speaking of the future...

I look between Fenryr and Dagny, the strength of the bond trying to draw them together palpable in the air. If his familiar was so inclined, it already would have happened. However, I had Nya lead him to the human realm—something he hasn't done since Fenryr was locked up—and he'll be preoccupied with getting his fill of mortal souls. But not forever.

It's not like separating them would help—and even if I wanted that, there are no other cells with strong enough wards to hold Dagny and Fenryr. Slaine refuses to offer Dagny a normal room—for good reason—until he assesses her threat level, and with the way she's reacting to my presence, I have to assume it's just as bad around Slaine's soldiers.

No, this is the only way. I just have to hope his familiar, Echo, stays away long enough.

I'm about to attempt to speak to Dagny again when the door bursts open, calling my attention to the huffing soldier in the doorway. My lip curls as I take in his gray skin and clouded white eyes—a hideous trait only descendants of the Naif species seem to possess. Though smaller than Abbadon's species—the Gyldens—the Naifs make up for it with their speed and unquenchable bloodlust, making them near undefeatable. The only species to rival their capability in battle is the Sable, distinguishable by its onyx-colored, feathered wings, but that lineage has been wiped out for decades. Erik was the last of his kind, and he fell along with Abaddon during the sundering twenty-one years ago.

I cut a glance toward Dagny as the last thought crosses my mind. At least, he was the last one ...

“Malice! Did you hear anything I just said?”

I hold back a growl as the soldier's voice makes its way to my ears, rudely interrupting my train of thought. I clench my fist as I turn to face him, giving him the attention he so desperately craves. "I can't say I did. You're more than welcome to repeat yourself."

The soldier frowns but doesn't comment on my mocking tone. "I said Slaine needs to see you. He says it's urgent, and to come right away."

Irritation roils beneath my skin as I debate whether it would be worth the punishment to slit this useless demon's throat. Hearing him choking on his own blood would be pleasant, but...

I sigh, turning on my heel and stalking to the door without another word. It would be nice, but no amount of temporary pleasure is worth the lifetime I'll possess if everything works out the way I plan.

The soldier follows me out of the cell, locking the door securely behind him before hastening after me down the hall. I take the stairs at the end of the passageway, my rage growing at the demons' irritating huffing just over my shoulder. By the time we make it to Slaine's throne room, I'm barely able to contain the urge to whip around and bash his face in.

Stick to the plan. Stick to the plan. Stick to the ? —

"Malice. I was worried I would have to wait all day."

My lip curls as I step into the massive throne room, the sensation of plush carpet beneath the pads of my feet causing my skin to crawl. "Your lap dog was very persistent."

"Hmm. Indeed." Slaine looks down on me from his throne, disgust swirling in his

misted white eyes as he taps a clawed finger on the shimmering blue armrest. I recognize the material immediately—carved from the stonelike ice deep beneath the crust of The Far Place, pulsing with the magic the roots of the welwig have imbued into it.

Disgraceful. It would be better to see him resting on a throne of antethorpe shit. More fitting for the new lord.

“What did you need to speak to me about? I have important matters to attend to, so make it quick,” I say, a thrill rushing through me at the disgruntled look on Slaine’s face.

“How dare you speak to Lord Slaine in that manner? I should have you clipped?—”

“It’s fine, Rai.” Slaine brings the tips of his fingers together as a smirk replaces his earlier expression. “In fact, it’s Malice’s ‘important matters’ I wish to discuss.”

I narrow my eyes, trepidation trickling down my spine at the flip in temperament. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what. The little human you have stashed in one of my cells.”

“And what of her?” I try to keep my tone nonchalant, but I can’t help the ounce of worry that finds its way into my words—something Slaine seems to notice.

His smirk spreads to a full-on grin, and for the first time since we arrived in this palace, worry hardens in my gut. “Some of my men... they’ve seen some disturbing things when attempting to feed her,” he says.

I don’t dare blink. “Have they?”

“Indeed. They say it looks like she has powers. You never told me about that.”

I shake my head, fearful my words won't come out on account of the vise squeezing my windpipe. “That's fucking nonsense,” I say. “She's just a human. Nothing more.”

“Yet the stories...” Slaine looks off to the side, excitement brimming in his ugly misted gaze. “Some of them think she might be... a halfling.”

“There are no more halflings,” I deadpan. “You saw to that twenty years ago. Anything your men have seen must be some byproduct of her bond with me and the other demons.”

“Hmm. I guess I'll have to take your word for it.” He looks back, that eerie grin never wavering. “After all, you wouldn't let one of those things into my palace, would you? You wouldn't dream of having me feed it. Keep it alive. Would you, Malice?”

My fist clenches as I say, “Of course not.”

“Because you realize how detrimental that would be, correct?” His eyes flash black. “Not just for your little pet but for you as well.”

I bristle at the insinuation—that he thinks he could best me in any capacity. That he thinks he could harm my mate—this will not do.

But it will have to. For now.

“I understand,” I murmur, the words turning to ash on my tongue. “If that's all, I'll be leaving now.”

Without another thought, I turn and walk out of the throne room, my skin trembling with the effort to hold my transformation at bay. I know attacking him now will do no

good. I'm still not strong enough yet, still not healed.

And before I can think about dealing with Slaine, I must find a way to make Dagny trust me again.

And I have a sickening suspicion that it will be a lot harder than I ever thought.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:02 am

2

Dagny

I think I'm going mad.

In fact, I know it. Ever since the battle—since I changed—I've felt the cracks in my soul, pulling me apart at the seams and allowing the magic of The Far Place to flood in. It's a never-ending well of power that courses through my veins like liquid fire, heating my skin past the point of comfort.

Whenever I close my eyes, it feels like someone is cleaving my skull in half, then bashing my brain to pulp with a rusty ice pick. But keeping them open means I have to witness the shadows swirling and dancing on the wall, mocking me. They're clearer than ever before—once formless whispers of smoke are now living, breathing figures of people and animals alike.

I'm positive they're souls—that somehow, my awakening has allowed me to see the remnants of the beings lost to The Far Place—though I really wish I couldn't.

If you can fear, you can also be brave.

The words of my late mother bring less comfort each hour that goes by, each minute I'm left to rot in Slaine's dungeon. Chained to the wall like an animal, I'm slowly going mad from my own power. Unable to stop it due to my lack of knowledge. My naivety.

A molten blade pierces my heart as the memories come flooding in, and I'm reminded of the actions that led me to this predicament. If only I hadn't trusted him. If only I hadn't listened to my stupid heart and left Malice in the dungeons to rot.

My lip curls as I think of the red-eyed demon responsible for the demise of my mates and me. Those casual lies, all the hope he fed me—worthless and only served to better his life.

If any of Abaddon's soul pieces were to go by the name they represent, it should be him.

A rush of power floods my veins as my rage crests, casting my skin in a haunting silver light and flooding my sight with luminescence. Malice should be locked in a cage, not the other pieces. Not Cyprien, Lir, or Roark. Not Kaehl.

The blaze of anger is extinguished as my thoughts turn to my four other mates, and that familiar buzz of anxiety floods in. I want to know where my bonded are, to run to them. That invisible cord in my chest is aching horribly, bringing tears to my eyes and filling my bones with lead. The only thing comforting me is the knowledge that they are all alive .

Every now and then, a bolt of pain will travel through the bond to me, and though it hurts me to know my mates are suffering, it's overshadowed by the relief that they're still here with me.

But it won't be for long.

At the last thought, a burst of power explodes behind my eyes, coloring my sight in blinding silver light. I can't see, but that doesn't matter—all I know is I need to get free of these chains.

My wounds burst open as I rail against the restraints, coating my arms and neck in thick dark red. I know I'm losing vast amounts of blood, and if I keep going, I'll die, but I can't find it in me to care. All I want is to be free, to go to my mates and heal them of their wounds—the ones I'm directly responsible for.

The blame I hold is twice as painful as the metal cutting into my skin, so I keep fighting, and fighting, and fighting until the cuffs cut to the bone and I can't feel anything other than the bond humming in my chest.

“ You shouldn't do that. I hate to see beautiful things ruined.”

The muffled voice slinks through the air, the words brushing my skin with wicked undertones and causing my spine to tingle. A piece of my sanity returns as warning bells blare in the back of my mind, snapping me back to reality and allowing me to focus on the green-eyed demon chained to the opposite wall.

Fenryr. Jealousy.

“You can talk?” I ask, irritation coursing through me as I recall our first interaction when he led me to believe he couldn't . Just like Malice, he lies—meaning I can't trust him. My lips purse as I shoot a glare in Fenryr's direction. “Well?”

“I only speak when I feel like it .” He gestures to the metal piece covering the lower half of his face. “It's more difficult to project than some might think . Painful.”

“Oh...” I lower my arms to my sides as a bolt of sympathy travels down the bond, replacing the spikes of agony I've become accustomed to. “I'm sorry.”

“ No need. I've gotten used to it by now.”

“How long have you had it? The muzzle, I mean.”

He looks around the room, eyes glazing over in thought. “I’ve lost track. Several months, perhaps.”

“Did Malice put you in it?” I ask, his name exiting my mouth with disdain despite the painful tug of the bond. Fucking soulmates.

Fenryr nods, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a smile. “Yes. But I don’t blame him. Neither should you.”

I scoff. “Why the hell not?”

“Because it is his nature.”

I tilt my head, a wave of indignation coursing through my veins. “I don’t see how that’s a good reason.”

“Then you’re not looking close enough, little one.”

I take a moment to survey the demon—his cunning, wolflike eyes. The bright green of his hair and the shaved part of his head that has grown out an inch at least. Just like the other soul pieces, he’s inhumanly gorgeous, with a bone structure carved from the gods themselves and a body to match. Though he’s malnourished and his muscles have withered, I have no doubt that at his peak, he’s just as foreboding and powerful as the others.

“Why are you telling me this?”

His eyes crinkle with a smirk. “Because you deserve to know. Because you’re important . Because... you’re the key to it all. ”

I blink, recalling Malice saying those exact words not long ago. “You’re the second

demon who's said that to me."

" Twice as right, then, " he says, his eyes practically closed with the weight of his grin. "You'll see, little one. You'll see. But not before it's time. "

With that, his beautiful emerald eyes close, bathing the room in total darkness once more. Leaving me alone to wonder just what he meant by that.

I'm sure it's nothing good.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:02 am

3

Kaabl

Long, hooked claws slice into the membranous flesh of my wing, ripping large gaping holes in the skin and shredding the delicate blood vessels that run throughout. Streams of dark blue blood fall to the floor, pooling at my feet and seeping into the stone lining the floor of Slaine's torture chamber.

My head falls back in a silent scream as agony laces my veins, filling my entire being with a deep, throbbing ache. But it's not from the sensation of having my wings torn to shreds—it's from the absence of my mate.

Dagny.

She's the single thought filling my head—the only source of light keeping me going, keeping me alive in this frozen hell. Without the thought of her smiling face, her pretty pink cheeks, and the way her pupils grow when my hands roam her body... if I didn't have the memory of her, I would have succumbed to my injuries long ago.

But I can't. Not when I have something to get back to. Not when I've finally found the reason for living. Not when that reason is her.

Black spots line my vision as I gaze into the milky white eyes of Slaine's torture master, Zairn. Animalistic rage stares back, the sheer lack of humanity in those soulless, clouded eyes enough to take my breath away. That, or it's the sheer pain of his soul-crazed pet gnawing on the bone of my wing.

Soul-crazed demons are exactly what they sound like—creatures of The Far Place that have ingested too many souls in quick succession. They're not born, they're created, and usually by force. The practice was outlawed while Abaddon was in power, seen as a cruel and inhumane waste of life and consciousness.

It appears Slaine doesn't share Abaddon's sentiments.

My lip curls in disgust as the creature sucks and laps at the fresh blood oozing from my wing, the thin gray skin of its belly extending the more it drinks of me. Unlike typical demons, soul-crazed creatures are basically mindless and will take their fill of any substance—edible or not. Still, anything other than souls is toxic to the sad being, and the fact that Zairn is allowing it to feed from me in this way is a disgusting display of his lack of empathy.

The soul-crazed demon moves to my elbow joint, sinking his powerful teeth through muscle and tendon before whipping its head side to side in a vicious attempt to yank it from my back.

“That's enough, Zairn.”

The gravelly voice that flows into the torture chamber is filled with a sickly sweet lilt, causing my stomach to churn uncomfortably. I crack my swollen lids open just in time to witness Slaine step into the room, the air around him bristling with authority. His clawed toes scrape the bloodied stone as he stalks toward me, a smile pulling at his gray skin that doesn't quite match the look in his eye.

He's worried about something. What? And why?

“Call it off. NOW, Zairn. I need to speak to him.”

Zairn lets out a disgruntled huff, but obeys. He tugs the leash attached to the spiked

collar around the creature's neck, causing the metal protrusions to dig into its flesh. The creature yelps, releasing the pressure in its jaw enough for Zairn to pull it away—but not without its mouthful of flesh.

I watch as the creature is dragged backward, eyes rolling back into its skull as it chews on my shoulder muscle. A horrible squelching noise accompanies the sight of blue-black blood dribbling down its chin as the soul-crazed demon enjoys its meal, causing my stomach to churn.

And this is just a small part of why they were outlawed.

With one last withering glare, Zairn hauls his “pet” out of the room, slamming the door to show his displeasure. Slaine walks the rest of the distance to me with a chuckle, stopping just short of the halo of blood frozen to the floor, his nose turned up and lip curled in disgust. The shine of his gray horns starkly contrasts with the lichen-encrusted walls of the torture chamber, as is the sleek comb of his snowy hair. The dermal armor strapped to his body like a second skin gleams beneath the faint glow of the sconces lining the wall, showcasing the powerful muscles covering his form.

“What a sad sight. Surely, this pathetic thing could not be the core of the great and powerful Abaddon.”

I eye the shimmering blue crown adorning his head, a silent chuckle rising in my chest. What a sad sight, indeed. A lowly soldier wearing the crown of the king. We’re much too old to play pretend, Slaine.

Though he can’t hear my thoughts, the sight of my smirk sends Slaine into a rage. The blow that lands against my cheekbone has stars sparking behind my eyes, and I blink rapidly, holding desperately to consciousness as blood pours from the fresh split on my face.

A cold laugh makes its way through the violent ringing in my ears, and a moment later, Slaine's claws are embedded in my chest, lacing every one of my senses with agony. My mouth fills with the taste of copper as Slaine rakes his claws downward, tearing through skin and muscle and bone as if my organs were made of tissue paper.

"Not smiling now, are you?"

I just stare at him, not reacting to the pain or the taunt. Instead, I empty my mind, focusing on the ever-present tug of the mate bond. It calms me and fills me with a sense of need—a sense of purpose—and I hold on to it like the lifeline it is, knowing it's the only thing that will get me through this.

Failing to get a rise out of me, Slaine frowns, clearly upset that I won't play his twisted game. With a scoff, he rips his claws from my chest, lowering his hand dejectedly to his side as my blood drips from his fingertips.

Never taking his eyes off me, Slaine calls out, and the door creaks open to reveal the pale gray face of Rai, one of his soldiers tasked with leading me to this room and my cell.

"Yes, Lord? What can I do for you?"

"Take this animal back to his cage," Slaine orders. "I'm done with him for now."

With one last rage-filled glare, Slaine turns on his heel and stalks from the torture chamber, brushing past Rai without so much as a glance. Once Slaine is gone, Rai lets out a sigh, his shoulders slumping in relief.

"Gods. That guy gives me the creeps ..." Rai cuts a gaze toward me, a sheepish smile replacing his frown. "It's a good thing you can't talk. If Slaine heard me..." He shakes his head. "Never mind. I don't want to think about it."

Rai steps over to me, clawed hands working quickly to unhook the chains bolting me to the wall. He wraps his fist around the one hanging limply from my collar, using it to lead me from the chamber. It's a short walk to my cell, but it feels like it lasts for miles. Each step sends a bolt of agony straight to the marrow of my bones, replacing the core with molten lead that weighs me down and fills my mind with a thick fog of pain.

When we finally make it to my cell, it's all I can do to take that last step inside before I slump to the floor, utterly spent and lifeless. Rai checks that I'm still breathing before slamming the door shut, the lock bolting into place like an ice pick to my skull. The power in my veins has long been used up, and without a source of food, I'm unable to replenish it. All my energy is being used to keep my organs working, so there's none left to heal the wounds that need it.

In the silence, my mind travels to my familiar, Syn. A pang of worry echoes in my chest at the reminder I haven't seen her since I attempted to reverse Abaddon's sundering. Is someone keeping her away? Has Malice found a way to trap her? I shake my head, letting out a shallow breath as I push those thoughts away. I'm sure there's a logical explanation for it. I'm here, and that means Syn is alive, which is what's important.

Without anything else to focus on, I lie on the blood-and-vomit-covered stone, counting the cracks on the ceiling. My vision fades in and out to the rapid throbbing of my wing, but I fight against the dark spots that line my sight. I need to stay conscious. I still have to check that Slaine's soldiers didn't find it while I was in the torture chamber. Every time I go to that room, they scour my cell, checking for weapons or other signs I'm trying to escape. They have yet to discover the treasure I was given the first day I arrived in Slaine's palace, and I just have to hope today is the same.

My muscles tremble as I push to a sitting position, and I have to use the wall as a

support so I don't fall back over. Slowly, I shuffle to the back corner of my cell, the scent of rot growing heavier the closer I get to the corpse.

My fingertips brush the edge of the decaying body, a disgusting squelch accompanying the flood of cool liquid onto the back of my hand. I flip my hand palm up, my stomach churning as I force it beneath the rib cage, coating the fresh wounds in whatever horrid substance is leaking from the carcass.

That's going to be a nasty infection.

I push those thoughts to the side as I curve my finger under the ribs, pushing them past the spongy remains of the heart in search of—aha!

With a smirk, I run the pad of my finger along the hard surface of the arachnix tooth, careful not to touch the pointed tip in my inspection. Though it's not lethal, arachnix venom is incredibly painful. The smallest amount can paralyze a creature for hours—even demons. Especially demons.

Only an inch in length, the structure of the tooth is curved in such a way to make it practically indestructible, and by its weight, it's filled with the potent paralytic—making it the perfect weapon for a prisoner, if used in the right way. At the right time.

I found the tooth on the first day. Or rather, it was given. And by the most unlikely of sources, too.

When Malice first showed up in my cell, it wasn't to taunt me or to show me what he did to Dagny, like he said. No—when he pushed his clawed finger into the wound on my shoulder, it wasn't to harm me—it wasn't even to get me back for a fraction of what I did to him.

It was to give me the tooth.

I'm still not sure why Malice gave it to me or what twisted plan he has in store—but I know it can't be anything good for me, at least. Still, I'm not going to waste this gift, this opportunity. I'm going to use it to escape. To save Dagny.

And then I'm going to rip Malice's head off.

Dagny

I lay my head back against the stone wall, my wounds throbbing in agony with each beat of my heart. It's so quiet, I can hear my lashes rustling and the soft whoosh of air entering my nose as I take small, labored breaths.

It's been at least a day since Fenryr fell asleep—or, rather, the deep hibernation-like state demons enter when malnourished. When I was locked away in Kaehl's dungeons, I witnessed Malice afflicted with the same condition. For hours, and sometimes days, I would be unable to read him, and I would be unable to break past the powerful barrier of sleep.

I have no idea what causes them to wake, or why, but I have a hunch it has something to do with the body's drive to obtain food. Perhaps it believes that things will be different after a small rest. Wishful thinking.

Scoffing, I attempt to shift into a more comfortable position, and a small gasp of pain escapes my cracked lips as the wounds along my wrists tear open with the motion. Thick pink and white fluid oozes from the lacerated flesh, and my nose crinkles as the putrid odor of infection fills my senses.

I'm sorely regretting my decision to struggle as much as I did when Malice came to visit me. Though it's not like I had much of a choice. When he's around me, it's like I can't think. All I know, all I am is fire and rage. And it burns, but it also feels good. It feels right.

And now, I'm suffering the consequences of that brief high. Every inch of my body throbs, and whenever I make a small adjustment, black spots line my vision and threaten to take my consciousness from me.

The other concerning aspect is my hunger—and though I haven't eaten since I've been in Slaine's dungeon, it's not from lack of available food. I've been able to take a few small ice cubes from the bucket Malice left me, but whenever he offers me human food, my stomach flips, and I can't even swallow the tiniest mouthful. It's like my body rejects it—needing me to consume something else.

A shiver runs the length of my body as I consider just what that else might be. Souls. The thing that demons eat. At that moment, my stomach rumbles, seeming to confirm my worst fear. I'm no longer human.

But I'm not a full demon. According to Kaebl, I'm something in between. A halfling—supposedly one with great powers, though I've yet to see any evidence of them. There was just that one time when Slaine attacked—that burst of power that exploded from me, carving a massive cavern into the ice as far as the eye could see.

And then, of course, there are the wings. The first time they appeared, I wanted to deny them, but now, I know they're real. I have true wings—feathered wings—which I've yet to see any of the demons in The Far Place possess.

I slide my palm over my skin, still sensitive despite the lack of silver luminescence it held earlier. Strange...

The creak of the cell door draws my attention to the opposite end of the room, and my eyes narrow in hatred as bright light spills across the stone floor, followed by a pair of all-too-familiar clawed feet. The fourth and fifth toes are missing on the left foot, the healed flesh jagged and heavily scarred, leading me to believe it was done crudely and with force.

That foot belongs to one demon, and one alone—Slaine’s torture master, Zairn. A sickly sweet smell follows him into the room, laced with something disgustingly metallic. Blood. One more sniff, and that awful tug in my chest lets me know whose it is. Kaabl.

I don’t have time to despair, though. A moment later, Zairn’s “pet” follows him into the cell, held back by a crude iron chain strapped to the torturous collar around its thin neck. Its claws carve deep grooves into the stone floor as it attempts to get closer, that horrible blood-coated mouth snarling and snapping at the air like a rabid animal.

I’d rather face a horde of antethorpes again...

Zairn steps toward me, and I flinch back against the wall as he reaches a clawed hand to my face.

“Be still, girl. I’m not going to harm you.” His lips part, revealing the rows of blunted yellow teeth lining his mouth. “Not yet, anyhow.”

His hand snaps out, grabbing my collar and hauling me forward so our faces are within inches. Zairn inhales deeply, the slits where his nose should be expanding as he scents me. A shiver of repulsion runs the length of my spine as his tongue darts out, dragging along his lower lip.

“ I know what you really are, ” he whispers, milky-white eyes narrowing to hateful slits. “ Halfling filth. ”

He presses his forehead to mine, and a wave of power enters my body. But it’s not at all like when my mates do it—Zairn’s power feels dirty. Tainted. But that doesn’t stop those unholy tendrils from reaching into my brain matter, extracting all of my memories, thoughts, and fears. It’s only for a moment, but it’s more than enough, and when he’s through, Zairn reels back with a gasp, his eyes wide and mouth twisted in

horror.

At his intrusion, a wave of my own power rises to meet him, and I rear back with a snarl, silver drowning out all my sight as I draw magic from the very earth itself. Before Zairn can react, I jerk forward, smashing the crest of my skull into his forehead with all my might.

A nasty crack fills the air, and Zairn falls back with a high-pitched yell, a river of blue-black blood flowing from the fresh gash in his forehead. Instead of the retaliating blow I expect, the torture master steps back, his hand shaking as he points an accusatory finger at my face.

“You’re... you’re Erik’s... I can’t believe it...” His eyes glaze over as his voice lowers, and it’s clear his words are not meant for my ears. “I’m not sure how I could have missed it... the thing has his eyes, his nose... but she was supposed to be dead...dead! How could this have slipped past us? Must do something... must tell someone...”

The name Erik hits me like a ton of bricks. I haven't heard it in so long, I had almost forgotten the name that would roll off my mother's tongue in the night as she cried herself to sleep. Erik Olavera.

I know I shouldn't, but my curiosity takes hold, forcing me to ask, “You knew my father?”

Zairn looks at me as if for the first time, his expression twisting with disgust. “I knew him well.”

“How?”

A cruel laugh echoes off the stone walls, filling my stomach with anxiety. But I still

have to know. “What’s so funny?”

“Funny? Oh, just your question... It really brings me back...” His lips pull back in a demented smile, showcasing cracked, rotting teeth and bleeding black gums. “I was the one to kill him.”

A bolt of lightning travels through my body, freezing time and gluing me to the spot. My dad... killed... Zairn killed him... I had always known my father had died before I was born, but the story was that he lost his life in a tragic car accident—never that he was murdered.

Either ignorant or indifferent to the war raging in my mind, Zairn continues his twisted tale, his grin growing more severe by the second. “I often have dreams about it, you know. The way he screamed as I sliced the flesh from his body. The way he pleaded as I plucked the feathers from his wings, and the sound when I tore them from his spine.” He takes a deep inhale, his eyes glossing over as if reliving the moment all over again. “It was a pity when he died. Too soon. Much too soon.” Zairn’s pupils dilate as he makes eye contact with me. “I should have done more. For his crimes against Lord Slaine, for siding with Abaddon—that Gylden filth— I should have made his death last months—no, years. I shall always have regrets about that.” He scoffs, lazily dragging his gaze down my frame. “To think you came from a Sable as powerful as Erik? Pathetic, truly. This is why mating with humans should have been outlawed long before. They are a food source and nothing else. Pretending otherwise only breeds weakness.”

With the barrage of new information, my mind is reeling, making it impossible to come up with a coherent response. Gylden? Sable? Feathered wings? My father... not just a demon, but one of great power? It seems too fantastical to believe.

Zairn leans in closer, his hot, putrid breath brushing my face with each of his labored breaths. Those milky white eyes seem to see through me in a way no one ever has

before, and my blood roils with discomfort. “What?”

“Your eyes...” he whispers. “They’re just like your mother’s. The color of fresh shit—just like the flavor of her soul. ”

As he speaks, that thing inside me rises, drawing from the endless well of power living and the earth. A silver film closes over my vision as a blazing heat builds beneath my skin, but I can hardly feel it. All I want—all I need—is to end this abomination, here and now and forever. And through the fog, only one sound breaks through. Laughter.

“ I knew it, ” Zairn whispers, his tone full of awe. “ You are one of them. ”

I blink, and all the energy is sapped from my veins, snuffed out like a light switch and causing me to slump back against the wall, utterly exhausted. My eyes find Zairn’s once more, and I’m not sure, but it looks like a hint of fear enters his gaze.

It's gone in the next blink.

Before I can react, Zairn’s hand snaps to my neck, his fingers curling around the circumference as jagged claws scrape against my pulse point. “I should just kill you now—have it over and done with. Slaine would be angry for a time, but it would be worth it.” His vision mists over with a faraway look as his voice lowers, taking on a trancelike state. “ I can see it... all the misery you’ll bring... all the blood... the rivers and rivers of red ? — ”

“I think that’s quite enough, Zairn.”

Malice’s sinful tone slinks into the room, and my blood turns to liquid fire as it licks my skin, drawing out the wicked desires always lurking in the dark corners of my soul. “Rivers of blood? What nonsense—there’s no need to terrify the poor little

thing.”

“There’s nothing poor about it,” Zairn snaps, turning his hateful gaze onto Malice. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you. Does Slaine know you’re down here?”

Zairn scoffs, waving Malice away, though fear slices across his gaze once more. “It matters not. I have free rein of the palace.”

“Not here, you don’t.” The voice that flows across the room is nothing like earlier, filled to the brim with authority and laced with something much darker. Deadlier.

Zairn cringes before schooling his expression and stepping back, and though he turns to give Malice his attention, he never looks him directly in the eye. “Perhaps I should go.”

“Perhaps you should.”

Zairn shuffles toward the door, casting one last withering glare in my direction before slipping out of the cell. Only when the door slams shut and he’s sure no creepy torture masters are eavesdropping does Malice turn his attention back to me.

Instead of speaking, his voice enters my mind, hollow but undeniably Malice. His tone is different this time—soft and cautious—so unlike him, it startles me into silence.

Don’t worry, he whispers, his one good eye glowing molten as he reaches for my face. Zairn won’t tell Slaine what you are. Not unless he wants to be punished for entering this room without orders—of which the penalty is death .

My hair raises at the sensation of his shadowy fingers probing my mind, searching for something. I try my best to push him away mentally, which fails miserably, so I go for the next best option.

Using the last of my strength, I place my palms on Malice's chest, fighting against the pleasurable wave of electricity that flows between us, begging me to do anything other than what I'm going to do. But it doesn't matter. None of it matters. Not any more.

I shove Malice away with a snarl, fixing my face into a disgusted expression despite the painful tug of the bond. Following that invisible thread typing us together, I project my own voice into his mind, making sure it's laced with as much venom as I feel.

It seems you're mistaken on how much I care—I don't. Not what happens to you, or that creep, or to me.

It hurts, but my words have the desired effect. An unmistakable sheen of pain enters Malice's gaze, and he drops his hand back to his side as his eyes widen dejectedly.

Don't say that...

Why not? I demand. If I have power, I don't know how to use it. And if I don't know how to use it, I have no way to get out of here and away from all of you. I don't have a choice anymore. You did a splendid job of taking that away from me and sealing my fate.

I shake my head, rage filling the endless pit in my stomach, and suddenly, my thoughts aren't enough to get my point across. "I hate you, Malice," I say, my voice cracking heavily. "I hate everything you fucking stand for."

His mouth sets into a hard line, all traces of arrogance gone. You don't mean that. The bond won't let you ? —

“I don't give a damn what the bond, the gods, or the fates themselves have to say about it,” I snap. “I fucking hate you for what you did to me. How you lied to me. And I always— always —will.” I turn away from him, facing the wall as the bond screams and yanks in opposition. I can't bear to look at him—to feel my heart break all over again as I'm reminded of his betrayal. Because not only did he doom me, but he betrayed Cyprien, Roark, and Lir as well.

And Kaebl...

The bond aches at the thought of him, so I stop. I'm already so conflicted about my feelings toward Malice, I don't need to worry over my growing attachment to Abaddon's core piece. Forcing my gaze from the red-eyed demon, I look at Fenryr, taking in protruding bones and oozing wounds peppering his torso and limbs. Even if he didn't betray us all, there are still all the horrible things he's done to Fenryr to take into account .

He truly is malice in every way, shape, and form.

Malice sighs, and his voice is laced with something akin to sorrow as it enters my mind. I cannot be anything more than I am, little one.

I roll my eyes. “Fenryr said as much.”

Shaking his head, he reaches toward my face once more, only to freeze midway when he sees me flinch away from his touch.

His eyes squint as he projects his voice into my head again, and this time, I'm positive it's sadness in his tone. I need to talk to you, Dagny.

“We are talking.”

Not about this. He looks over his shoulder, apprehension rolling off his shoulders in waves. Something important—what I needed to talk to you about yesterday.

“Oh.” I tilt my head, a sneer curling my lip. “In that case, I still have no desire to hear you out.” My power crests, fixing to deliver a blow to Malice just like the first time he showed up.

But before that happens, Malice lets out a deep sigh, sending a wave of his own magic toward me before mine has the chance to explode. Instantly, the power is frozen in my veins, pulsing violently and threatening to burst my vessels and break my mind.

My body is lifted from the ground, and I kick at the frozen air as an invisible hand wraps around my throat, pinning me to the wall as it slowly cuts off my oxygen.

Malice steps toward me, pressing his nose deep into my pulse point and inhaling deeply. The feline slit of his pupil expands, swallowing the shimmering red of his iris in the next blink, consuming the last of his humanity.

“ I love seeing those claws of yours, kitten. That darling little fire in your eyes when you lose control and allow your hatred to consume you... ” The intangible force squeezing my throat tightens further, cutting off my airflow as Malice grabs my chin, his clawed fingers scraping my jaw lightly. “But make no mistake—they only harm me because I let them. ”

That thing holding me to the wall evaporates in the next moment, and my body slumps to the floor in a broken heap, muscles quivering and chest quaking with every jagged breath.

Malice's voice enters my mind once more, filled with the cool composure I've become used to. As I said, there is something we must discuss. Your freedom.

At the moment I catch my breath, it's ripped from me with those two little words. Your freedom.

I turn narrowed eyes onto Malice, unease roiling in my gut at the sight of his red eye gleaming shrewdly. He knows he's got me. I have to know.

Though I won't trust a single word he says, it doesn't mean I can't hear him out—listen to whatever psycho scheme he has planned. Maybe, just maybe, I could use it against him in the future.

“Go on. Talk,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “And use your real voice—I don't want you in my head.”

His eyes flit around the room, and he takes a steadying breath before his voice projects into my mind despite my earlier wishes. What I have to say... Slaine has ears all over this castle—in the walls and under the floors. I cannot risk him hearing it.

“Okay. Do it your way.” I raise my brows, waiting for him to continue, for the chance to mock whatever nonsense comes out of his mouth. But what he says next has the words turning to ash on my tongue, and my stomach twisting into a thousand agonizing knots.

I need you to bond with Fenryr.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:02 am

5

Malice

“I beg your finest pardon?”

At Dagny’s stunned whisper, I bring a clawed finger to my lips, telling her to hush. They’re listening. Speak to me through the bond.

Dagny shakes her head, her eyes glossing over as her voice enters my mind. It’s quiet and soft and soothing, and it eases some of the tension between my shoulder blades. Out of all the things I thought you were going to say...

I shuffle closer, taking her hand in mine despite the obvious risks. Instead of rage, a pleasant rush of satisfaction vibrates down the bond, intensifying as I rub my thumb along the back of her hand.

Wildfire... I know you don’t trust me now—that you probably never will again after what I did—but you need to listen carefully, and you need to pay attention to what I’m about to say, because I only have time to once, and all of our lives are over if you refuse.

Again, her head moves side to side, causing greasy dark strands of hair to fall over her eyes. What the fuck is going on?

Though the words aren't for me, they ring out clear as day, filled with a desperation that makes my chest ache. I slide my palm up her arm, over the crest of her delicate

neck, stopping to cup her cheek in the gentlest embrace I can manage. You'll understand soon, little one. I promise.

That anger from earlier enters her gaze in full force. And what good are your promises to me? Just fucking tell me why you want me to bond with Fenryr and how that's supposed to help us escape and then go away .

I sigh, retracting my hand and allowing it to fall limply at my side. It will take time to explain.

I'm not going anywhere. Dagny raises her arm with a wince, rustling the chains on her wrists to showcase her words. Start talking.

I run a clawed hand over my face, fighting off the desire to pin her to the wall and do the things I really want to instead of talking.

What I said about Zairn earlier is true—he will not tell Slaine about what he saw in you, or what he knows of your heritage—but that does not matter. Slaine is already beginning to suspect you might be a halfling, and before long, he'll try to kill you, and then me, I say, my voice coming out a lot stronger than I feel.

Why you ? Dagny demands, her tone skeptical. You're his loyal little minion. Surely, he wouldn't harm you .

I bristle at the insinuation, but I can't show my hand too early. She has to be kept in the dark somewhat for any of this to work. So instead of telling her the whole truth, I opt for a part of it.

Why? Because if he so much as laid a finger on you, I would be forced to burn his kingdom to ash. Those types of actions tend to get people killed.

She frowns as the bond flares to life, attempting to pull us together. But I have to resist—Dagny doesn't want me to go near her right now, let alone touch her—despite what the thrum of emotions down the bond would have me believe.

If you can burn this whole place to the ground, why not do it? Or at least, use some of your spooky magic to get us out of these chains and away from here.

I frown. It's not that simple .

She rolls her eyes. Of course not—I shouldn't have asked. For one blissful moment, I forgot how impossible you are.

Heat roils in his veins as a bright red filter falls over my vision. Suddenly, I'm in front of her, my hand wrapped around her neck and body pressing flush against her.

I lean down to her ear, allowing my true voice to rumble out in a dark whisper. “You don't know the first thing about me, little one. Though I gave you the chance once...” I nip her lobe, a silent chuckle shaking my chest as her lips part with a gasp. “Do you remember what you said to me that day?”

Her breath catches as she leans into my touch, the ring around her iris sparking with a blinding silver light. Unable to form words, she shakes her head as the silver consumes the warm chocolate of her eyes. I brush my lips against hers, the intense thrumming of the bond making it nearly impossible to concentrate.

“I remember,” I whisper, my tone a sinful caress. “ I remember every little thing about you, Dagny. The things you want others to notice, and the things you don't.” His smile widens. “ Those are my favorite. The dark and wicked nature you hide from the light—from anyone who dares to get too close.”

She shivers as I reach up, fisting a hand in her long black hair. I pull her head to the

side, exposing her neck and allowing me to drag my tongue up the base of her throat.

“ You taste divine, ” I growl, jerking my hips and pressing the outline of my hard cock against her center.

Dagny gasps, her eyes fluttering closed as her lips part, full and pink and begging for a kiss. I’m about to steal one when a high-pitched meow breaks out over my shoulder, startling me out of the trance Dagny dragged me under.

Blinking to clear away the fog, I force my hands back to my side and take a step back, the lack of contact causing bolts of agony to strike my heartless chest. I tear my eyes away from the stunning creature before me, my entire body thrumming with agony as I turn them to the far corner of the room.

“Ah. Just in time.” A small smirk tugs at my mouth at the sight of my familiar Nya materializing from the shadows.

Nya’s fluffy black tail is the last to form out of the swirling darkness, swishing side to side as she lazily slinks across the floor, her glowing red eyes trained on Dagny. Just behind, a wolf pup follows, bounding after the small black cat with a dark green tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. Bright emerald eyes latch onto Dagny before widening, the pupils narrowing to pinpoints as the pup freezes mid-step. His rear end plops onto the stone floor, tail swishing in the blood and vomit carelessly as he gazes at the beautiful little halfling with unabashed love and adoration.

This is Echo. I speak into her mind as I gesture to the dark-haired wolf pup. If you couldn’t tell, he’s as enamored with you as I am.

“I see that,” she murmurs, her eyes widening in embarrassment when she realizes she wasn’t speaking through the bond. What’s he doing here?

My smirk widens to a full-fledged grin at her question. I already told you, sweet little thing. It's time to bond with Fenryr.

Dagny's gaze is drawn to the space over my shoulder, tethered by that invisible thread—and I know when I look, I'll find a pair of familiar green eyes gleaming through the dark.

Sure enough, when I turn, Fenryr is awake, his emerald irises trained on Dagny's swollen pink lips, gleaming with a hunger I know all too well.

Though I've experienced the intense sensations of the bond firsthand, it's another thing entirely to witness Fenryr enraptured with the possibility of bonding with Dagny. Seeing a creature so possessed and consumed with a mere possibility... defies all logic.

Yet it's what's happening.

“Mine,” he growls, his tone full of desperation. “My mate. No one else's.”

I sigh, shaking my head in a show of indifference despite my own bond thrumming rapidly, threatening to send me over the edge. “Yes, yes, I know. Just stay quiet for a moment, would you?”

I watch Echo stand, then bound over to Dagny with twice the intensity as he did with Nya—pulled by that invisible force tying all of our souls together—like it's the most natural thing in the world. His head knocks against Dagny's calf, and the pup stumbles back, blinking rapidly as he tries to right himself. Unprompted, Dagny crouches and pulls the wolf into her chest, running her hands over his back and up by his ears, giving him the tender scratches he's been craving.

While she's petting him, her eyes find mine, the silver ring around her iris growing

with each rapid beat of her pulse. Malice... What's going to happen to me? You know... if I...

Only what you want, I whisper into her mind, crouching in front of her, careful not to touch. Echo will leave if he senses any hesitancy—as the other familiars would have. This is all up to you, Dagny. I can't force this kind of bond. No one can.

She looks at the wolf pup, a frown creasing her forehead. You can only facilitate it...

Clever thing. As always...

Dagny takes a deep breath as she closes her eyes before offering her hand to Echo. The pup sniffs the back of her hand as Fenryr looks on from the shadows, straining against his chains in a desperate attempt to get to her.

It happens so quickly, I nearly miss it by blinking. One moment, Echo's coal-colored nose is pressed against her skin, that strange green tongue darting out and licking her palm lovingly. In the next, the wolf pup's razor-sharp teeth are lodged deep into the flesh of her hand, and Dagny's eyes are glowing with enough brilliance to rival the silver sun.

And on her left hip, just above the crease of her thigh, is a brand new swirling bond mark, beaming with the same light that's in Fenryr's eyes. Vicious snarls and howls break out over my shoulder as Fenryr loses control, and I don't need to look to know his transformation is well underway.

I keep my eyes locked on Dagny, my skin shivering as I attempt to remain calm. Sweat beads across my brow despite the coolness of the dungeon, the veins in my forearms bulging as my canines lengthen, piercing my lower lip and causing blood to flow down my chin. It lands with a delicate plop onto the stone floor, and Dagny whips her head toward me, her eyes like twin fog lights in the night.

“ You, ” she whispers, her voice holding an otherworldly quality that has my spine tensing, freezing my muscles and sucking the air from my lungs. “ You hurt her.”

I try to take a step back, but despite all the power I throw against her hold, it does nothing. What is going on? This wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't part of the plan.

One look at her, and it's clear her demon half has taken over—pushed her consciousness to the furthest corner of her mind in an attempt to protect her. It's exactly what I wanted to happen that night long ago, when she was attacked by the antethorpe herd outside of Kaabl's palace—but not now. Not here, not when she's just bonded with Fenryr.

A wicked smile tugs at Dagny's lips, showcasing the row of razor-sharp teeth lining her gums. And for all the animalistic energy building within mine and Fenryr's veins, Dagny looks calmer than ever. Scarily tranquil.

I blink, and her smile is gone, her attention focused on Fenryr and the awful black blood spattering against the walls as he yanks and claws at his restraints.

“ Stop that.”

Her voice fills the room, brimming with enough power to thicken the air. And to my utter surprise, the green-eyed demon obeys. Like a switch was flipped, Fenryr takes a seat on the ground, his muscles taut and attention focused solely on the silver light exploding from Dagny's outline.

“ Good boy.” That same eerie smile spreads Dagny's mouth, pulling at her eyes and giving her a deadlier appearance than before. And when she turns her gaze on me, I know I'm a goner.

“ Does the kitten want to show his claws? ” Her smile morphs into a smirk, throwing my earlier taunt back in my face. “ Pity. It seems you no longer have use of them. ”

She blinks, and precious oxygen sails in through my gaping mouth, allowing me to think somewhat coherently again. But it doesn't matter because, in the next blink, Dagny takes it all away again, showing me just a fraction of her glorious power.

“ Get on your knees.”

Against my will, my body follows her command. My knees slam against the frozen stone as a cruel, high-pitched laugh echoes along the walls. “ Good. Now crawl to me. ”

I lower my palm to the floor, unsure if she's using her power or if I'm going willingly. My claws slice out of my fingertips, raking against the stone as I slowly crawl to her, pulled by that ethereal thread tying our souls together.

I stop at her feet, and Dagny crouches, formless black smoke billowing at her back, gradually taking on the appearance of feathered wings. She leans forward as far as her chains will allow her, cupping my chin in her small, clawed hand. My head tips back, and the weight of her malicious sneer hits me full force.

Dagny tilts her head as her canines lengthen, her razor-sharp claws scraping the skin of my cheek, leaving tiny red gashes in their wake. “What was it you said to her earlier? Oh, I remember!” Her palm tightens painfully around my jaw as she jerks forward, stopping when our noses barely touch. “You said she can only harm you if you let her. Isn't that right?”

This time, when she smiles, I have no doubt what emotion is hiding there—it's the same one I see every time I stare into my reflection, the same thread that holds my soul together. Malice.

“ Seems you’re not quite as clever as you think.”

An explosion of power smacks me in the chest, vibrating through my body and turning my bones to dust as I’m propelled backward through the air. I smash into the opposite wall, sending rubble and dust flying from the force of the blast. My skull is the last to impact, echoing throughout the room with a sickening crack as stars swim behind my eyes.

I slump to the floor just as the dungeon door slams open, followed by an unmistakable utterance of rage. Slaine.

“Malice! What have you done ?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:02 am

6

Dagny

As soon as the bond with Fenryr snaps into place, I cease to be.

Well, at least that's what it feels like as I float aimlessly in the endless void of my subconscious. It's a lot brighter here than I expected, and every few seconds, my senses are consumed by a brilliant explosion of color, a kaleidoscope of hues that dance and converge and burrow into the deepest parts of my psyche.

Every time I try to move, the invisible hands holding me in place turn to stone, keeping my body curled in the fetal position, blocking out all sound save for the irritating rumble of someone's voice.

Voice... that voice... it sounds familiar...

I blink rapidly, attempting to clear the fog of confusion coating my mind. Where am I? What happened to Malice? To Fenryr?

Slowly, the bleak nothingness fades away to the sight of four stone walls shimmering with a beautiful onyx hue. It's like I can see the magic living in them, breathing life into the stone and lacing the atoms with a strange, humming power.

I blink, and it's gone, replaced with the sight of frozen, lifeless gray stone. That voice I heard earlier breaks through the violent ringing in my ears, and though I don't want it, my attention is drawn to the intruder. Slaine.

“How could you let this happen?” he demands, his face purpling as his rage rolls off him in waves, infecting the air. “You assured me Fenryr’s familiar had no way to break through the wards you placed!”

Slaine’s words strike me as odd. According to Malice, there is no way to ward against a soul born of the human realm—which Fenryr’s familiar is.

It seems I’m not the only one he’s been lying to...

“He must have found a way through,” Malice says, twisting his face into one of mock astonishment. “I could never have seen this happening...”

As he says the last part, his eyes find mine across the room, and heat sizzles in my veins. “Not in my wildest dreams...”

I know he's not talking about Fenryr’s familiar. He’s talking about me. About whatever happened when I blacked out.

Malice turns back to Slaine, his expression the picture of confusion. “I came in to check on the human, and Echo had already bonded with her. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry! Just fucking fix it!” he snaps, his milky eyes lighting with rage.

“There is no way to fix it. It’s done.”

“Then I’ll just kill her,” he snarls, taking a step toward me. Before he takes another, Slaine’s muscles freeze, held mid-step by an explosion of Malice’s power—one that’s palpable in the air.

“I noticed you failed to bring a guard with you. What a silly thing to do.”

“Release me at once, Gylden filth, ” he snarls, attempting to break free of Malice’s vise grip. “I said release me!”

“We had a deal,” Malice whispers, his pupil blowing, consuming the red of his iris in a single blink. “You don’t touch her. You don’t think about touching her.”

The invisible vise tightens around Slaine’s neck, turning the skin of his face purple, then blue as he struggles for breath.

“Say it,” Malice whispers, his words slinking through the air with an ominous warning. “Say it, and I’ll let you go.”

Slaine reached to his neck, clawing at the air in desperation. “Fine,” he chokes, expelling the last of the breath in his lungs. “Fine. I won’t... touch her...”

“ Much better. ”

The dark energy is sapped from the room as Slaine falls to the floor in a limp heap, clutching his throat as he takes deep, ragged breaths. When he raises his head, there’s enough fire in his eyes to melt The Far Place, and his tone is just as heated. “Take Fenryr to Kaabl’s cell. If we can’t fix this... the best thing to do is separate them.”

“I hoped you’d see it that way,” Malice murmurs, staring down his nose with disgust at the heaving demon lord. “I’ll take him now. As long as you stick to your word.”

Slaine waves him off, still trying to return to normalcy as Malice steps over to Fenryr, keeping his one good eye on me as he unlocks the chains holding him to the wall. A light clanking breaks the silence, punctuated by the occasional whimper as Malice drags Fenryr from the cell.

Just before they step past the threshold, Fenryr’s arm snaps out, and he grips the

frame with a powerful clawed hand, unwilling to let Malice take him from me.

“ Dagny! Please, I have to be with her ! ” His voice is heavily distorted due to his muzzle, but the shot of pain that travels down the bond is clearer than anything he could say. So much yearning. A war between urgency and bleak desperation.

It doesn't matter. The next moment, Malice slams the dungeon door closed, leaving me alone with Slaine. By now, he's returned to normal, and while I was busy staring after Fenryr, it appears he's risen to a stand.

As soon as Slaine hears the click of the door, he stalks toward me, stopping a few feet from my slumped frame. His eyes travel over my body, stopping at a few key areas that have a disgusted shiver running down my spine. I hate the way he's staring, licking his lips like I'm some kind of rare meat. I want him to stop.

“If you don't stop looking at me like that, I'll pluck your eyes from your skull.”

Slaine tips his head back with a hearty chuckle. “Oh, I'm sure you'd love to do just that.” He lowers his face, his malicious smile showcasing each one of his pointed white teeth. “But I am out of your reach, and looking is the only pleasure I'm allowed—so I think I'll do as I fucking please.” His grin turns sour as he lets out a breath through his nose. “I know what Malice would do if I did more than look... but it is so very tempting,” he murmurs, licking his lips. “I see why they kept you around for so long. Pretty things are so hard to come by in this place. It's nice to look upon true beauty for once in my life.”

My organs recoil as Slaine leans closer, taking a deep breath of my scent, and the beast beneath my skin rises with a snarl, warning him to back off.

Instead of moving back, Slaine inches closer, a sheen of awe coating his milky white eyes as he inspects the silver ring around my iris. “Who are you?”

His smile widens when I don't respond. "I guess that's the wrong question. A better one would be— what are you?"

"Why ask me?" I shrug. "I'm only going to lie."

Slaine's mouth pops in a full-bellied laugh, the corners of his eyes crinkling as an unusually wheezy sound enters the room. "I was wondering what type of creature could cause six of the greatest demons in The Far Place to lose their heads. I'm glad I have my answer now, little creature."

He reaches up, cupping the side of my face in a palm, and his skin is so cold, it freezes the words in my throat. "I'm glad we've had this talk. Until later, Dagny Olavera."

With that, Slaine tears his hand from my face and stalks out of my cell, slamming the door closed with enough force to shake the walls. Leaving me with one thought, and one alone.

We're so fucked.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:02 am

7

Cyprien

I stare blankly at the bleak stone wall opposite the one I'm chained to, counting the rings of snow lichen across the cracked slabs. I've been locked away in this frozen hellhole for the better part of a week with nothing to do, nothing to ease the rapid thoughts flitting about my mind, filling me with anxious energy.

Gods, it's so lame here.

"Is anyone else thinking about how much this sucks?" I grumble, laying my head back against the wall as a sigh puffs from my lips. "Seriously. I think I'm going to lose it if I have to sit here for another hour doing nothing."

Lir groans from his position at the far-left corner of the cell, his sapphire eyes rolling to the back of his skull. "Even starving and near death, you still find new ways to be irritating."

"At least I'm not boring, like some."

At this, Roark snorts a laugh, and a haughty smirk makes its way onto my face. "You see? Roark gets it."

"Easy, thumper," Roark growls, his voice cracking from disuse. "I still think you're annoying as fuck."

“Well, that’s not very nice.” I frown. “Suppose we all drop dead in the next minute? Would you really want those to be your last words to your loved one? Could you live with the guilt?”

“If I’m dead, I don’t suppose I’ll have the luxury of feeling anything,” Roark replies. “But yes. To answer your question.”

Lir lets out a rare chuckle, and though it's at my expense, I can't fight the rush of joy it brings. “You’re such a sweet talker, Roark. I’m so glad I’m rooming with you instead of someone with a modicum of charisma and the ability to hold a pleasant conversation. That would be so tiring.”

“I guess the welwigs knew what they were doing when they dragged me to this place,” Roark mumbles, crossing his arms behind his head. “They realized what a gift to this world I’d be.”

“They brought Abaddon’s soul here,” Lir reminds us, swirling a fingertip on the stone with a faraway expression. “We’ve angered them, that’s why this is happening. We were never supposed to be here. Clearly, it was a fluke.”

“Yet here we are.” I cross my arms with a rare frown. “You know, I hate to say it, but maybe Malice was right in one aspect—that we don’t need Abaddon. Maybe the fates want us to be here. Maybe this was always how it was supposed to be?”

“Gods, the sound of your voice is making my head pound.” Lir brings his clawed fingertips to his temples and massages gently. “It’s clear the only thing the fates want us to be is dead. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“I don’t know...” I bring a finger to my lips, staring off into the distance, deep in thought. “I still think they want us to live.”

“Wrong again, cottontail. ”

Malice’s face appears in the shadowed hallway just outside the cell door, the twin sconces hanging from the frame casting eerie shadows along the harsh panes of his face. Silent as a cat, he steps toward the bars with a smirk, stopping just shy of the iron rods.

“And what the hell would you know?” I snap, narrowing my eyes in a glare. “You’re in the dark just like us.”

Malice’s lip curls back in a sneer. “It must be nice to have a mind absent of thought. No, cottontail, I am not in the dark. I kicked, and clawed, and scraped my way to the light. I know more than your smooth little brain could comprehend. ”

“Care to share with the class?” Lir asks, glowering at the red-eyed demon.

Malice smiles, but it holds no joy. “I will. In time.”

I roll my eyes. “Sounds like he’s talking out of his ass again.”

“ Why you... ” Malice stops, forcing his eyes closed and taking a deep, steadying breath. “I don’t know why I’m speaking to you. You’re not the one I came here for.”

Malice turns toward Lir, though his wicked words project into all three of our minds, carried by the bond we share as parts of Abaddon’s soul. And he only says four little words.

Be quiet. They’re listening.

He slowly reaches through the bars, his hand inching toward the sconce hanging from the frame of the cell door. His eyes hold a different emotion than his tone as he says,

“I came to check on you lot and make sure you weren’t up to anything nefarious. ” His eyes glow as he stares into Lir’s eyes, a slow smile creeping over his face as he raises a hand to the sconce, something small and glittering clutched in his palm. “I’m glad to see you’re just as I left you.”

As Malice speaks, he balances the ring of a shimmering blue key on one of the sconce's flanges, his voice covering the gentle clank of the metal. It’s placed in such a way that the slightest vibration could cause it to fall to the ground—just within reach of Roark’s long arms—and I have no doubt Malice has cooked up some twisted plan that involves us.

But I know better than to ask. Instead, I wait for Malice to finish, watching the gentle twitch of his fingers as he stabilizes the key. When he’s done, he turns to us with a crooked smile, pushing his voice into our minds once more. When this falls, you may free yourselves. No sooner.

I can’t help but roll my eyes. Or you could just give it to us. No need to be so extra about it.

No.

Fine, I groan. I’ll bash my head against the wall a couple of times. That should do it.

A low growl rumbles in Malice’s throat, showcasing his irritation. If you make it fall , it will be too soon. There’s a method to the madness, one that would take your pea-sized brain far too long to comprehend.

My own rumbling snarl answers his haughty tone as Malice turns on his heel, clawed finger wagging over his shoulder in a farewell.

Remember, wait for it to fall. Not a moment sooner.

He slips back into the shadows, and the only thing letting me know he actually left is the slam of the dungeon door in the distance.

My gaze finds Lir, then Roark, my mind a mess of questions and possibilities. It's clear Malice has something planned—the only question is what.

I lay my head back against the stone with a sigh, allowing my eyes to close as my headache throbs behind my eyes. I don't know much, but I know whatever it is doesn't matter. Not really. Not even if it ends in my death.

The only thing that matters is getting back to my little breeding bunny. And if going along with Malice's plan is the way to make that happen, then I'll just have to go with it.

Anything for her.

8

Dagny

Hungry. So very, very hungry.

My tongue slides across my lower lip in an attempt to wet the chapped skin, but my mouth is so dry, I doubt it's doing anything. A bucket of ice chips sits on the cracked gray stone just inches from me, but I can't bring myself to reach for it. The more I drink, the worse I feel, and every time I consider why, bile rises in the back of my throat, my stomach flipping and threatening to expel the little water I've managed to consume in the past twenty-four hours I've been locked alone in this cell. I'm not sure if I still need it to survive, but I'm certainly not taking any chances.

And then there's that nagging desire in the furthest corner of my mind, growing stronger with each desperate heartbeat and every shallow breath. Fenryr... I wonder if he's okay...

It's only been a few days, but since our bond snapped into place, it feels like I've known him for eons. Like my soul had been searching for him across worlds and throughout time, so when we finally found each other, I was able to breathe for the first time in my life.

But he's gone now. Gone, just like the others. Just like always.

I've often wondered if I'm cursed—if at some point, I did something bad and the gods decided I deserved to be alone—but no amount of tears I could cry or anguish I

could carry would prompt them to give me an answer.

Perhaps it's better that way.

I lay my head back against the cracked stone and let out a breath, the thick cloud of vapor swirling in front of my face and blocking my sight. When it clears, my heart skips a beat at the sight of a glowing red eye blinking lazily in the shadows.

“Malice?” As soon as his name rolls off my tongue, he steps farther into the room, head lowered and shoulders hunched like a lion stalking its prey. Anxiety heats the back of my neck, but it's not uncomfortable. Just the sight of him alone has the bond roaring to life, my skin prickling with desperation to feel his clawed hands on me. “What are you doing here?”

He brings a clawed finger to his lips, a barely discernible smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth as he speaks into my mind. I brought you something.

My eyes track down his body, over the quivering muscles covering his arm, and stop at his fist. What is it?

Something to keep you alive, he answers.

Malice walks over to me, halting when there's less than a foot between us. With a wary gaze, he crouches in front of me, holding out his closed hand with a pained expression.

It doesn't look like you want to give it to me...

He shakes his head, his smirk dropping as his lips press into a thin line. I don't. But my desires mean little in this instance.

I tilt my head, waiting for him to open his fist and let me see what it is. With a sigh, he obliges, clawed fingers uncurling one by one and revealing a small ball of yellow wax resting in the center of his palm.

What is that? I ask.

Something to dampen your power.

Malice shifts his hand toward my mouth, and I jerk back as far as I can, my eyes widening as a rush of adrenaline floods my system.

I don't want it, I snarl, my lip curling back to reveal sharpening canines. If you want to kill me, you'll have to try a lot harder than that.

Malice rolls his eyes but still closes his fist around the wax and brings it back to his side. The last thing I want is to harm you, Dagny. I'm surprised you still think so little of my affection for you.

I scoff, forgetting I'm supposed to speak into his mind as my irritation crests. "Your affection ? That's rich, coming from the guy who's literally trying to poison me."

Malice's smirk returns, but there's no humor in it. He leans forward, stopping when our faces are inches apart. His nostrils flare as he inhales deeply, and a low purr rumbles in his chest as his pupils expand, devouring the warm red of his iris in a single heartbeat.

"Perhaps I need to do a better job of showing you the depths of my devotion, " he murmurs. "Perhaps I need to make you understand."

Malice inches closer, brushing his lips against mine and causing heated sparks to erupt between us. My eyes flutter closed as warmth builds in my core, spreading to

the tips of my fingers with each powerful throb of my heart. There's no denying the emotion Malice is able to draw out of me—no way to fight against it or suppress it—not even if I wanted to.

My back arches, pressing my breasts flush against his toned chest and drawing a desperate groan from his clenched teeth. Snaking a hand around my waist, his arm works as an iron vise, holding me in place as he closes the distance between us. And when his lips crash against mine, the rest of the world falls away. I forget about the danger we're in. I forget about my responsibilities, my fears, my eagerness to be free of this prison—all of it just evaporates, leaving me with the taste of burned cedar on my tongue and fire in my veins as Malice claims me as his. His mouth works expertly with mine, each sweep of his tongue, every gentle nip leaving me breathless and shaking and desperate for more.

The beast within me rises, obliterating any thought other than Malice. Mate. Bond. The half of me that terrifies me the most wants my mate more than anything, and right now, I have neither the will nor the desire to fight against it.

Malice's hand slides up my spine, cupping the back of my neck and holding me in place as he devours me. My body is putty in his hands, moving with him and molding to each gentle twitch of his muscular frame. I never realized what this feeling was before, but it all becomes clear here in Malice's arms. I want to please him in the way only his mate can. To bring this powerful creature to his knees and make him beg.

But before I can do any of that, Malice slides his other hand between my cleavage, drawing my attention to the pleasurable sensation of his rough skin on mine. I wait for him to touch me as I've been craving, but he continues up my neck and jaw, stopping there and teasing the corner of my mouth with his clawed thumb.

Malice breaks the kiss abruptly, a low whine echoing in his chest as he stares deep into my eyes. My mouth falls open with a question, but before I get the chance to

voice it, Malice's fingers shoot past my lips, forcing something small and round to the back of my throat.

He rips his fingers out just before my teeth clamp down—a mistake I realize only after Malice uses his hand to hold my jaw closed. With his other, he pinches my nose closed, cutting off my oxygen and ability to spit out the weird wax ball.

Swallow, he orders.

When I refuse to do so, he painfully tightens his grip around my jaw. A cruel smirk tugs at his lip as the tips of his claws dig into my skin, dotting the surface with bright red pearls of blood. Swallow and you get your air back. It's really very simple, little one. Obey.

My gaze hardens as my heart rate increases, desperate for the oxygen my mate is withholding. Is he allowed to do that?

Fuck you, I snarl, fighting against his hold as dark spots line my vision. You and your creepy-ass, ugly-ass eye.

Malice sighs heavily, and his grip tightens further. Impossible creature... would it kill you to listen to me for once?

Actually, it would. My eyes narrow on his insipid smirk, rage heating my skin. Why do you look so happy?

Because the wax is already dissolved.

My eyes widen as my tongue rolls around my mouth, searching for the small ball of gods-know-what. It's gone. Shock courses through my veins, only to be replaced a moment later with a molten fury, one that coats my hazy vision with silver, further

obscuring it. But it doesn't matter. I don't need my sight for the pain I'm going to inflict on Malice.

Before my power has a chance to explode, Malice releases my mouth and nose, stepping back as oxygen rushes into my lungs. The relief is so great that I forget about my anger for a moment, but as soon as I lay eyes on that glowing red eye, it all comes back to me.

"What the fuck was that for if it was going to dissolve?" I ask, my voice shaking with pure rage. "What the fuck was the point?"

Malice's smirk widens to a full-blown grin as his shoulders rise. "What can I say? I'm a bit of a sadist."

"You're a psycho is what you are."

"Such sweet words," he murmurs, rising to stand as his voice enters my mind once more. Slaine will be here soon. It would be wise not to mention what transpired here. I would recommend staying quiet entirely, but I doubt you possess the ability.

I bristle at the insinuation. And why the fuck should I do anything you recommend ?

Malice blinks, that eerie smile still in place as he says, Because it is the only thing that will keep you alive.

I'm about to remind him the only reason my life is in danger is because of him, but before I get the chance, the door to my cell is thrown open, revealing the outline of Slaine. Without a word, he stalks into the room, hateful clouded eyes pinned on me and brimming with repulsion.

"Step out of the way, Malice. It's time."

“Time for what?” he asks, though he never turns to address Slaine. His fist clenches at his side—the only display of anger he allows to peek through his carefully constructed mask. “I surely hope you don’t intend to harm my mate. Not when I’ve already had such an... unpleasant day.” At this, he turns his head slightly, his good eye glowing molten as he glares at the demon lord. “Is that what you’re doing, Slaine?”

Slaine takes a threatening step forward, but I don’t miss the flash of fear that enters his gaze. “I need to test her, Malice. If she’s not a halfling, you have nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?” Malice’s voice lowers to a deadly pitch as he turns fully to face Slaine, dark shadows swirling over his shoulder, showcasing the power brimming beneath his skin. “I know what your tests are. They’re not exactly painless.”

“Pain is the best way to draw out a halfling’s demon, and the only way in her case,” Slaine says, waving Malice off. “She’s much too young to have control of it—or is that knowledge too advanced for your kind?”

“She’s a human, ” Malice snarls. “It will kill her.”

“I’ll tell Zairn to take it easy. I’m certain the mighty Abaddon’s mate can handle it.” Slaine’s lip pulls back in a sneer. “We have a deal, after all. I’ll respect it and keep her alive until I find out you’ve been lying to me.”

The fact Slaine says “until” and not “unless” tells me all I need to know, and it has my stomach clenching. He’s already made up his mind that I’m a halfling, and he’s going to do everything he can until he finds a reason to kill me.

My eyes find Malice’s brimming with a desperation that pales in comparison to the

panic filling my lungs, seeping out of my pores, and infecting the air around me.

Help me.

Malice shakes his head, his lips pressing into a pale white line. I am, my wildfire. I promise I am.

But right after he says it, he turns and storms out of the dungeon, leaving me alone with Slaine. Leaving me to a world of pain and torture.

I only hope I can survive it.

Malice

Watching Slaine's soldiers drag Dagny from her cell and into Zairn's torture chamber is a pain I've never experienced, and if given the choice, I would rather have my skin peeled from my bones and set on fire.

You have to do this. This is the only way. You have to let him do this.

But as I say it, bile coats my mouth—a reminder of how I've failed my mate. If I were good enough, she wouldn't be going through this in the first place. Wouldn't be in danger. Wouldn't be in pain.

My claws dig into the flesh of my palm, causing dark blue blood to pool and drip to the floor of the observation room. I'm helpless to do anything but watch through the clear barrier as Rai straps an iron bridle to Dagny's head. My inner beast threatens to burst out of my skin as he yanks her back roughly, causing the metal to cut the skin around her lips as he chains her to the chair in the center of the room.

She doesn't struggle, doesn't move, doesn't blink—just stares blankly at the opposite wall, her pupils dilated. The substance I gave her earlier was laced with arachnyx venom—just enough to dampen her powers and make her numb to whatever pain Slaine plans to inflict. The venom paralyzes the nerves, but it also delivers a powerful hallucinogenic into the system, leaving the victim immobilized, both body and mind. But just because she won't feel anything and won't remember doesn't take away any of the remorse coursing through my blood.

“I hate you, Malice. And I always—always—will.”

Her words play in my mind as clearly as if she just uttered them and twice as painful. Dagny has every reason to despise me, every reason to want me dead. And if I thought my death would secure her safety, it would already be arranged. If I thought there was any other way than this...

No. I’ve run through all the different paths and outcomes, and none exist.

I keep my eyes locked on Dagny, unblinking for fear the moment I do everything will fall apart—that her demon will emerge and Slaine will slaughter her before I have the chance to do anything about it.

The bond thumbs rapidly as I watch Zairn step toward her with a large curved knife, his lipless mouth peeled back in a revolting sneer. I have no way of knowing what he says to her, but her lack of reaction eases some of the tension in my shoulders. The venom is working. Good.

Zairn’s skin turns purple in anger as he raises the blade above his head, but before he can lower it, two of Slaine’s soldiers rush forward, grabbing his arms and stopping him from inflicting his death blow. Slaine barks an order from the corner of the room, and Zairn is hauled away from Dagny and out of the room. He kicks, screams, and fights, but is much too weak to do anything against two Naif warriors in their prime.

Good. He reacted just the way I thought he would.

My eyes flit from Dagny toward Slaine, and I let out a deep sigh of relief to see he’s falling into line just as planned. The false demon lord holds out a pale hand, grinning maliciously as a small paring knife is placed into his palm. His fingers curl lovingly around the hilt as he stalks toward Dagny, his head lowered and shoulders taut as he closes in on his prey.

Filthy scavenger.

My lip curls back as Slaine stops in front of Dagny, running the edge of the blade lightly across her forearm. Instead of the fear he's expecting, Dagny just stares off into the distance, her gaze covered in a misty film due to the influence of the venom.

Just like Zairn, Slaine takes her lack of reaction to heart, forcing the blade deep into the flesh of her forearm. Dark blood pools from the gash, covering her skin and seeping into the stone of the torture chair, staining it purple. And still, Dagny doesn't seem to notice.

Slaine's mouth opens in a silent bellow as he slashes wildly, placing dozens of shallow wounds along her arms, chest, and neck. With each blow, he grows more vicious, slicing deeper and deeper until finally, I can no longer control my beast.

A film of shadows cuts across my vision as my wings burst from my spine. My claws elongate, my muscles quiver and strain, the disgusting squelching sound overshadowed by a cacophony of pops and crackles as my bones adjust to my growing size.

A bellowing roar pours from my open mouth as I slam into the barrier, pounding against the thin wall of magic and creating spiderweb cracks throughout the structure. The force of my blows shakes the entire room, threatening to send the stone walls of the castle crumbling around us. Sensing this, Slaine whips his head in my direction, searching for me through the one-way barrier. His mouth pulls into a frown as he lowers the blade to his side, all his anger at Dagny refocused onto me.

With a snarl, he throws the knife to the floor and storms toward the exit, barking some order at one of the soldiers before disappearing into the hallway. As soon as he leaves, I rush out of the observation room and down the stairs toward the torture chamber, narrowing my gaze on the group of soldiers barring the doorway.

“Move.” The single word passes my lips with enough violence to make them cower, and after a couple of shifty-eyed glances, they step to the side.

I’m through the door faster than they can blink and propelled across the distance with a single beat of my powerful wings. I fall to the floor at Dagny’s feet, curling my arms around her and hooking them at the back of the chair.

“Wildfire,” I choke, burying my face into her knees. “I’m so sorry, my wildfire. Look what he did to you... your beautiful skin...” I release my grip, pulling back to inspect the oozing gashes on her arms and chest. How could I let this happen?

Loathing spreads throughout my veins, filling me with disgust—and it’s all for myself. I did this to my mate. I’m the reason she was hurt. The reason she’s bleeding.

“Why did the gods curse you with a mate like me?” I wonder aloud, reaching to cup her cheek. Healing magic thrums warm at the base of my palms, and though it’s weak, it will be enough. Slaine’s soldiers watch in awe as I slide my hand down her neck, then over her chest and arms, healing her wounds everywhere my skin touches.

Sweat beads along my brow as I focus on the last—and deepest—of Dagny’s cuts, my vision fading in and out of focus as I pour the last of my magic stores into her, desperate to undo some of the harm I’ve caused my beloved.

It’s not part of the plan, and I’m well aware I might be dooming us all by using my power like this, but I just can’t bear the thought of Dagny holding these wounds a second longer than she has to. I won’t allow it.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, knowing she can’t hear me, knowing she wouldn’t care if she could. Knowing it’s what I deserve, and I have no right to be upset about it. “Let’s get you out of here.”

I slowly stand, unhooking the iron bridle around her head and then her wrist and ankle restraints. She's so incredibly light when I lift her into my arms, so small and fragile in comparison to my fully-shifted form—and remorse courses through me anew.

I sigh, pressing my lips to her forehead, allowing the bond to settle enough for me to think clearly. If anything, it makes things worse, and when I finally turn to address the soldiers, my composure is ready to snap.

“Get out of the way,” I snarl, my eyes locking on the one blocking the exit with his body. “I’m taking her back to her cell.”

“Slaine wants to try again. He thinks that?—”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I snap, taking a threatening step toward him. “You let me out, or you start losing pieces of your body—your choice.”

The demon shifts his milky white eyes to his comrades, but all of them are turned toward the ground. “I don’t know...”

“Slaine and I have a deal. He’s put her through the test, and he has his results—she’s human. If he wants to continue playing this game, my half of the arrangement is forfeit. And then we all burn.”

The soldier scoffs. “All of this for a pathetic human whore. Ridiculous, really.”

Instead of answering, my lips peel back in a malicious smile. Your tongue will be the first I cut out. “What’s your name, soldier?”

He frowns, cocking his head to the side. “What does that have to do with anything?—”

I'm across the room before he can finish, one hand holding Dagny to my chest and the other outstretched, wrapped around the soldier's jaw like a vise. My smile spreads as the demon's eyes roll back in agony, the movement accompanied by several sickening pops as his teeth break and his jawbone is ground to dust in my palm. A high-pitched scream explodes into the air as a river of blood pours from his open mouth, coating the armor covering his neck and chest. My mouth turns down in disgust as I curl one of my wings forward, covering Dagny from any possible spray and the revolting smell of sulfur infecting the air.

Once I'm sure she's safe, I turn my attention back to the lowly soldier. With one swift movement, I tear his lower jaw from his skull, sending a shower of dark blue fluid onto the floor and revealing muscle, connective tissue, and— just what I was looking for.

Throwing the jaw bone to the floor, I reach up, wrapping my blood-slicked fingers around the blue fleshy thing dangling from his open throat, my smile splitting my face in two from his gurgling pleas of “mercy.”

I rip the useless organ from his body, shredding it between my claws before tossing it to the floor and crushing it beneath my heel. The soldier who dared to call my mate pathetic slumps to the ground in a limp, bloodied heap, either dead or close to it.

The rest of the soldiers stare in abject horror, their skin transitioning between shades of green.

“Slaine's going to kill you,” the one on the left whispers, his milky eyes darting around the room as if the great Slaine will appear and smite him. “You... you can't do that...”

“Perhaps, and I just did.” I kick the fallen soldier to the side, refusing to look at any of them. Ants. Not even chess pieces. Fucking bugs to be squashed. “I doubt Slaine

will care after he hears you all were plotting to take him out while he slept tonight. He might just reward me.”

The same soldier who spoke earlier turns a deathly shade of white. “We would never?—”

“Then I suppose our friend there deserved to die, yes? He was such a nuisance after all. Best not to trouble Slaine with the specifics behind his death.” I lean in with a bright smile, pleased when the soldier shifts back against the wall with a gulp. “You do agree, don’t you?”

“Of course, Malice.” The soldier sends a pointed look to the rest of the group, who parrot his words exactly.

“Wonderful!” I step back, sending my new friend a wink before ripping open the door and stepping out of the torture chamber. I slam it closed behind me and head off down the long tunnel toward the holding cells, clutching Dagny’s tiny body to my chest like it’s the last time I’ll ever get to hold her like this. And for all I know, it probably is.

My chest twinges as I turn to the left down another narrow passage lined with empty cells—at least, it seems that way—but the low hisses and moans reverberating from the shadows tell me otherwise. I hasten my pace, keeping my eyes forward and my wing curled around the beautiful creature in my arms until I reach the end, where the magic-fortified cell is. I wave my hand in front of the door, and the deadbolt creaks open slowly—another reminder of how little magic I have left in my body.

With a sigh, I step into the chilled cell, my mouth turning downward in a frown as I take in the bare floor and frost-covered stone. I place her gently in the corner of the room, keeping my eyes on her as I strip my dermal suit. My skin burns as it’s exposed to the air, but it’s only for a moment, and certainly not enough to distract me.

I kneel on the stone, spreading the fabric along the ground as best I can to make a little spot for Dagny to rest on. I fold one of the sleeves in an attempt to create a pillow, but it's far from what I envisioned. Another sigh passes my lips as I gaze at the sad excuse for a bed, but I can't do anything else at this point.

"Just a little while longer," I whisper, turning to pick Dagny up and move her to the spread. "Just a few more days, and all of this will be worth it. I promise."

She doesn't respond, but it's not like I expect her to. She's still deep under the influence of the arachnyx venom and won't be fully conscious for another couple of hours. Still, a painful ache travels down the bond, knowing what I've put her through, knowing what I still must.

I lean in, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. The bond screams in agony as I pull away, but it's a pain I can manage. I've felt it since the moment I locked eyes with Dagny—that ever-present, overwhelming need to be with her, to be in her skin. Waiting just a little while longer will be worth it—or at least, that's what I tell myself to make it through the day.

My body trembles as I close and lock the cell door, the clang of metal like claws on a chalkboard as a million fire ants race across my skin. Each step away from my mate is like walking over hot coals, and I know it's the gods punishing me for what I've done.

I try to push the feeling to the back of my mind like I've done hundreds of times before, but by the time I make it to the main floor of Slaine's palace, I'm no better off than I was when I first left her. The soldiers dotting the hall give me shifty looks as I pass by on the way to my room, their faces saying everything they're too scared to—something is wrong with me.

And they would be very, very correct. But it's not to do with anything they could

comprehend.

Those curious eyes track me all the way to my room in the far corner of the palace, and long after I shut and bolt the door. As soon as I'm alone, I let loose the snarl that's been building in my chest all day, letting out a fraction of the anger I've been forced to suppress.

I hate it. I hate it all.

Turning on my heel, I stalk over to the corner of my room where a small blue table sits, blending in with the bare stone walls. My hand wraps around the neck of the crystal canister sitting atop it—my only decoration—and I place the opening to my lips, taking a massive swig of the shimmering blue fluid inside.

The welwig sap burns my throat on the way down, but it's accompanied by a wonderful warm tingling sensation in the tips of my fingers and toes. The headache brewing for most of the day subsides as the knots between my shoulder blades melt away. Closing my eyes, I take another sip of the viscous liquid and slump to the floor, leaning my head back against the cool stone as the drug flows through my system.

I like to use this time to empty my mind—clear away any assumptions or nagging thoughts that hinder what I set out to accomplish—but as I sit here alone, all I can think about is my mate. What she's thinking, what she's feeling, what she's... everything.

What I told Dagny was true; she changed everything . And not in a way her, I, or the gods themselves could have foreseen. When Abaddon was sundered, and the others and I came to be, it was never my intention to betray the demon lord's wishes. I wanted the same things he did—peace for all in this land, and equality no matter the species. I just so happened to also want to live to see it. I had hoped the years would turn my brothers to my side—that after a few years of independence, they too would

realize Abaddon didn't have to be resurrected in order to take back the throne from Slaine. They would understand we can do it, but only if we do it together.

Then Fenryr had to go and figure out the loophole. That Abaddon's one true mate—fated by the gods—could be used in place of Abaddon's heart, and reverse the sundering. But only if she was willing to be absorbed in the process.

“Quite poetic,” I murmur, swirling my finger absentmindedly around the rim of the bottle. “And equally as ironic.”

Due to the nature of the bond, Abaddon's mate should be more than willing to give up her life for his. If Fenryr told Kaabl, he would no doubt seek her out, use her in some demented ritual to resurrect Abaddon. I would not let that happen. Could not, for the same reason I know Abaddon would abhor the idea of his mate being used in such a way.

Love.

A powerful emotion—one I had only dreamed I would get to experience—one that has the potential to unravel all my carefully laid plans, of which some are twenty-one years in the making.

Love.

I felt it before I met her—as if my soul knew she was out there, worlds apart. And now that I've found her, the real battle has begun. Because I still haven't figured out a way to keep her—safe, mine, none of it—and it's driving me mad.

I take a large gulp of the blue sap in my cup, focusing on the way it burns my tongue and throat, filling my stomach with liquid fire. Still, it won't dull the agony that being away from her brings. That constant tug, ordering me to go to her. To correct this

great wrong. To finish what I started and complete the mating bond once and for all. To have her. To fill her. To consume ? —

But it's not time. Not even close.

I sigh, closing my eyes and swallowing the last of the welwig sap. There's still so much to do. So little time to accomplish it.

I've bought us a few hours—maybe a day if I'm lucky—but before long, Slaine's curiosity with Dagny will turn into something much deadlier. And then all our lives are forfeit.

I only hope my plan is sound enough to save her. Because everything is meaningless if it's not.

10

Kaabl

“Would you get him to stop that? It’s so distracting.”

I turn my gaze toward the iron bars of the cell I’m sharing with Fenryr, unsurprised to find Malice’s grinning face staring back. His long fingers curl around the cool gray rods one by one, his hooked nails extending past the flesh and clicking rhythmically against the metal.

It’s only been two sun flips since Malice dragged Fenryr in here—fresly bonded to Dagny and out of his mind—and he’s already back to rub salt in the wound.

What do you want, Malice? I’m in no mood to be taunted. Neither is Fenryr.

His smile turns feline as he shifts his gaze to the space just over my shoulder. “Taunt? You ? I would never. Why, I’m merely concerned about our dear friend. He’s useless to me if he tears his heart out, after all.”

I turn my attention to the blood-covered creature yowling in the corner of the room, frowning at the dismal sight. With the way Fenryr’s fingertips are slashing into the center of his chest, it does appear that the green-eyed demon is attempting to cut his very own heart out. My chains will not allow me to go to him, and though I’ve tried hundreds of times since we’ve been together, my thoughts can’t get through to him. If they are, he’s refusing to listen—too consumed with thoughts of his mate to do anything else—the same as Roark when he was unable to touch Dagny after bonding.

I still can't quite believe Fenryr's alive , that he's here and drawing breath, looking at the same four stone walls as me. Where Malice hid him away and what happened in these months we've been apart, I'm not sure. But if his physical deterioration is any indication, it must have been terrible.

A powerful sigh blows past my lips as I pull my gaze from Fenryr to the hateful creature on the other side of the bars, still waiting for a response. Go away, Malice.

“Now you're making me feel unwanted.”

My eyes narrow. You are unwanted.

Instead of anger, Malice's smile widens with amusement. “I bet you won't be saying that in the next sixty seconds.”

What do you m ? —

Before I have the chance to finish my thought, Malice unlocks the cell door and storms inside, blowing past me without so much as a glance as he heads to the far back corner where Fenryr is sitting.

Malice! If you hurt him, I'll ? —

“Rip my head off? Claw my eyes out and feed them to an antethorpe?” He turns his head to give me a mocking wink. “You had your chance, dear Kaebl. Such a shame you squandered it.”

A silent growl builds in my chest as he turns back to Fenryr. I said don't fucking touch him!

Malice sighs, turning back to me with a sour expression. “Must you be so dramatic?

Your shouting is giving me a terrible headache, and I need to focus.”

Focus on what? What are you going to do to him?

He brings a hand to his face, pinching the bridge of his nose as a sigh blows past his lips. “If you would shut the fuck up for a single moment, I could show you.”

Malice reaches into a secret pocket on the side of his hip, pulling out something small and white, curved and cresting to a needlepoint tip just like...

Another arachnyx tooth.

Curiosity overwhelms me as Malice turns his body to the side, allowing me to see each one of his movements clearly. First, he snaps the pointed end of the tooth off, exposing a vein of clear liquid resting in the center of the bony structure. One by one, he dips the tips of his claws into the pool of venom, coating each thoroughly without making contact with the skin.

Once he’s done, he crouches to Fenryr’s level, his glowing red eye tracking each of Fenryr’s movements, waiting for a chance to strike. The moment Fenryr turns his head, Malice lashes out, sinking his claws deep into Fenryr’s arm.

It happens instantly—one second, Fenryr is yowling and flailing, and the next, he’s perfectly still. The paralytic flows through his system, freezing his muscles and nerve endings and forcing him into a calm state. His eyes, once crazed and swirling around his skull, are now sitting in one place, staring blankly at the far wall.

“Much better,” Malice murmurs, retracting his claws and wiping them off on Fenryr’s tattered jacket. He turns his head to face me, his smile threatening to split his face in half. Now you know what to do.

I blink, confused as to why he's speaking directly into my mind. Is he not supposed to be here? Is Slaine listening?

What are you talking about?

Malice sighs, pushing to a stand. That was a demonstration, you sweet, smooth-brained creature. His smile drops as he faces me fully. You do still have the tooth I gave you, don't you?

My eyes narrow, flitting toward the corpse in the corner of the room, where my treasure is hidden. I do.

Excellent! He claps his hands together, his grin returning tenfold. Now you know how to use it when it's time.

Time for what?

Malice's eye twitches, but his demented smile never fades. I have neither the time nor the energy to explain my plans to such a bumbling imbecile. You'll just have to trust that it's in all our best interests.

Rage lights my veins, heating the air around me. I'll never trust you again.

Malice sighs, his eyes trailing to the ceiling. Fine. Then just do as you're fucking told for once.

He turns from me and presses his palm to Fenryr's chest. Sensing a threat, my beast rises to the surface, but then a weak golden light spreads across Fenryr's skin, faint but undoubtedly real.

Healing magic. Why?

Sweat beads across Malice's brow as his power spreads, threading Fenryr's mutilated flesh together at a rate that's much too slow for a demon of his caliber. Something is wrong. Malice isn't as strong as he wants me to believe... then why is he pretending?

"Fuck," he curses, his brow pinching as he attempts to heal the deepest of the wounds—the one right above his heart. The golden light flowing from his palm sputters, then fades entirely, leaving the gash half-mended.

Malice sits back on his heels, his muscles quaking as he sucks in shallow breaths of air. "Fuck... I knew I shouldn't... shouldn't have used it all..."

I tilt my head, confused by Malice's words. It sounds like he made a mistake—like he used too much of his power doing something he wasn't supposed to. But what?

Everything okay? I ask.

He shakes his head, gazing at his palms with frustration pinching his brow. I don't know... I don't know if it will be enough...

I don't suppose you're going to elaborate on that?

Malice's mask slips back into place, and he raises his head with his signature grin. Nope. He takes a deep breath, then rises to a stand on shaking legs, refusing to address the rare moment of weakness. Everything is fine. It will have to be.

His eye twitches as he stalks toward the exit, his shoulders taut. As he passes by me, he tosses something to the floor, just within reach. A key.

Malice pretends not to notice it, so I don't, either. He stops in the doorway, his hand curling around the iron bars as he turns his head to the side, not looking but addressing me all the same.

Well, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you two now. Places to be and lords to sabotage and all that . A low laugh rumbles in his chest as his gaze cuts toward me, shining with a cunning light. Fenryr will have use of his body in a few hours—well after the sun flips to night. Well after Slaine has lain down to rest for the day. And Fenryr will be pissed.

That's... good to know.

Malice's smile widens. Zairn's sleeping quarters are right above this room—quite the design flaw if you ask me. In the past, he's had the unfortunate experience of having his sleep disturbed by angry prisoners. It's rare, but when it does happen, he takes a very... personal interest. I've heard he gets so upset, he travels here in the dead of the night without any guard to accompany him.

Malice's eye shines with a knowing light, and he turns, walking out of the room without another word. But he doesn't need to say anything else.

I understand his plan now.

11

Dagny

Warm. So, so warm...

My eyelids flutter, struggling to open as a flurry of sensations hits me all at once. Smell, touch, taste, and feeling flood my system, overwhelming and beautiful and euphoric after being in the dark for so long. My fingers curl in one by one, the joints protesting after being locked in the same position for gods know how many hours.

I'm not exactly sure what happened or where I am, but the warm body folded around mine fills me with a sense of safety, of completeness, and despite what my body demands, I just want to lie in this position, drinking in this sensation for as long as I'm able.

A rough palm slides along my arm, following the dip and curve of my collarbone before resting lightly across my windpipe, needlelike claws scraping my pulse point absentmindedly.

Where am I? What happened?

I try to shift to a sitting position, but the hand tightens around my throat, holding me in place. "Don't get up yet. Just a little while longer. Just... let me hold you."

The silky voice crests over my skin, raising the hair at the back of my neck as my pulse increases, warning me of something despite the pleasant warmth spreading

from my heart. Something's not right...

Even as I think it, I sink further into the stranger's clutches, nuzzling my cheek against his abdomen as the heat spreads to my fingers and toes and blinding silver light explodes behind my lids. "This is nice..."

"It's more than nice," the voice whispers. "It's everything I've ever dreamed of."

My mouth tips upward in a smile, the joy in his voice contagious. Desperate to put a face to the beautiful voice, I crack my lids as far as I can, blinking away the sleep film coating my eyes and making my vision hazy.

A glowing red orb stares back, piercing through the dark shadows of my cell like a beacon, shining with a kind of quiet desperation I've never seen on any man, animal, or beast.

"Malice?" I reach a hand to his face, brushing my fingers against his cool skin to make sure he's real. A spike of rage pierces through the fog coating my mind, but I can't for the life of me figure out why. I care for Malice—my mate—what reason is there to keep my hands away when I know he wants me to touch him as much as I do? When the bond is screaming that this is right.

"I've missed you," I whisper, sliding my hand to his brow. "You feel like home."

Malice's eyes flutter closed as he releases a breath, broad shoulders settling as if a great weight has been lifted. A rare, genuine smile tips his mouth as I brush my fingertips through his hair, marveling at the silkiness of the long red strands.

"I've been waiting a lifetime to hear you say that," he murmurs, leaning in to press his lips to my forehead. "They're so much sweeter than I thought they'd sound."

“Mmm.” I allow my eyes to close as Malice slides his other hand over the curve of my hip, my heart thrumming in answer to the appreciative hum vibrating his chest. My blood is on fire, my skin bathed in molten gold, but still that nagging voice in the back of my mind lingers, telling me to pull away. Ordering me to remember.

“Malice?”

“Yes, wildfire?”

My brows knit in a frown as I search his gaze for the answers I so desperately need. Why can't I remember anything? What happened to me?

“What's going on?”

“Hmm?” His tone is distracted, his focus entirely on the bare strip of skin showing through the tear in my bodysuit. His claw hooks on the fabric, shredding through the material and doubling the size of the hole.

“Malice?”

Instead of answering, Malice slides two of his fingers through the slit on my hip, his bare skin brushing against mine, drawing sparks of electricity everywhere he touches.

“Malice? What are you?—”

“Shh,” he murmurs, scraping his nails against the side of my neck. “I have a secret to tell you.”

“A secret?”

“Mm-hmm.” He gazes downward, his genuine smile turning into something far more

sinister. “We don’t have much time, though, so you’ll have to listen carefully. Can you do that for me, kitten?”

I nod hesitantly, hoping what he has to say will clear up some of my confusion. Malice’s smile widens, pulling at the corners of his eyes as he leans in like he’s going to whisper something in my ear. But instead of that, his sinful voice enters my mind, his words enough to shock me back into reality.

I’m breaking us all out of here tonight.

Eight words, and my world flips on its head. I stare at Malice, my sworn enemy and mate, unable to believe what I’m hearing.

“What?”

Shh. He brings a clawed finger to his lips, his eye glowing with mischief. Remember, they’re listening.

I shake my head, my thoughts too tangled to make any sense of the situation. With every blink, though, my memories come racing back, dozens of fractured frames and distorted images that make me dizzy. Malice betraying us. Locking me away. Force-feeding me some kind of poison that made me go unconscious.

“Let go of me,” I snap, wriggling against his hold to no avail. “Let me go right this moment!”

Malice sighs, tightening his grip as he stares deep into my eyes. “We were getting along so well, too.” He blows out another breath, his eyes trailing to the ceiling. “I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“What are you talking about? Get off me!”

He shakes his head, his voice entering my mind for the second time. I will right after you listen to what I have to say. It's important.

“There's nothing you could possibly say that would make me?—”

I've been plotting to kill Slaine this entire time.

I freeze, his words knocking me for a loop for the second time in five minutes. But then I remember how many times he's lied to me, and my walls come back up. I don't believe you.

And why would you? He blinks, his smile dropping along with his carefree demeanor. Except I'm afraid I'll need you to trust me to do what comes next.

Why?

He sighs. Because I need your help. Because you're the key to our freedom.

I don't understand...

He stares, unblinking. Did Kaebl ever tell you who your father was? What you are?

We didn't really get the chance to talk about it. I narrow my eyes in a glare. We didn't really talk about anything, due to literally getting attacked by evil soldier demons.

Malice's lips press together in a frown. Still, someone should have explained it to you.

And what was stopping you, exactly?

He shakes his head. Oversight. It does happen from time to time.

I scoff, rolling my eyes. I'm tired of hearing your voice. Just say what you need to say and get out of my cell.

Malice lets out a breath, his claws extending as the muscles along his forearm ripple, his irritation clear. I suppose it's best to start at the beginning. Your father—Erik—was Abaddon's right hand, and his most loyal soldier. The last of an extinct species of demons with black-feathered wings—Sables—he was equal parts powerful, capable, and brilliant. A fantastic asset on the battlefield, and a better friend. His gaze turns mournful as he recounts the memory. When he died... the entirety of Abaddon's kingdom mourned.

Kaehl told me he was... murdered. And Zairn... I can't finish the statement. That my father was tortured before he met his end.

Malice nods, his jaw ticking. He was hit by an ambush as he was collecting sap from the welwigs. Slaine explained it away as rogue demons with a score to settle, and Abaddon never knew the truth until it was too late. That Slaine was behind it all from the start.

I worry my lip between my teeth, stomach churning from all this talk of death and betrayal. Despite the fact that Malice has told me so many lies, I can't help but feel that this time, he's telling the truth. But why?

I tear my gaze from him, my eyes latching onto a spiderweb crack in the wall just over his shoulder. I suppose if he's finally decided to be forthcoming, I should get as much information as I can. My wings... does that mean I'm half Sable? I ask.

Malice nods. Correct. Also your propensity toward magic—driving magic, in particular.

Driving...?

What you did with the antethorpe—when you were able to control it for a moment. It's incredibly rare, and only Sables have been known to have that ability. It's why they were so feared, and why they were eventually wiped out. He smiles knowingly. Well, until you, that is.

And because I'm half Sable... that makes me, what? Extra strong?

A silent laugh shakes Malice's chest. You are extra strong because you are a halfling—born of two different worlds, belonging to neither—possessing the unique ability to draw from the magic of The Far Place at will. Adding the fact that you're part Sable means you're likely to become the strongest being in The Far Place.

He says it so matter-of-factly, but the information makes my head swim. I hate to break it to you, but I'm pretty sure that thing with the antethorpe was a fluke.

He shakes his head. It wasn't. It was barely a drop of the power you're capable of.

I don't believe you.

This time, Malice does let out a quiet laugh. Stubborn. One of the many traits you gained from Erik. Your nose, your ears... your eyes you get from your mother, though.

A painful twinge rings in my chest at the mention of Mom, and despite all the other questions running through my mind, demanding to be answered, I have to know. You met my mom?

Malice's smile turns sad, his eyes creasing at the corners. Abaddon did. He liked her very much. Your father brought her to The Far Place many times, until Slaine began

his crusade, and it was no longer safe to do so.

Do you know how they met?

He brushes his thumb gently over my pulse point, his grin spreading. It was fated by the stars. Erik was off on a hunt in the human realm, and what was supposed to be dinner turned out to be his one true fated mate.

My nose crinkles. He tried to eat her?

A chuckle rumbles Malice's chest. Don't act so shocked. Besides, it's not like he was going to kill her. Just... nibble on her soul, if you will.

My stomach churns at the thought that I may soon have to consume something similar. Gross. In all regards.

Malice stifles a laugh, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood. I suppose it does sound strange to someone who consumes... crackers and peanut butter...

I smack his chest lightly, suppressing my own laughter. We sit in comfortable silence for a few moments, breathing in each other's presence and pretending the outside world doesn't exist.

My fingertips swirl on his chest absentmindedly as I process everything he just told me, my mind turning to dark places it hasn't gone since I was locked in Kaehl's dungeon, alone and in the dark and trapped with my thoughts. Malice?

Yes, wildfire?

I tease my lip between my teeth, considering whether it's worth it to ask him. Do the other pieces... do they remember my mom, too?

He looks off into the distance, nodding. They hold different memories, but yes. We were all greatly saddened to hear of her passing. But the fact she held on so long after the passing of her mate just goes to show how much she treasured you.

My mind turns to the last image I have of my mother—finding her in the forest, her face bloated and purple, the squeal of the oak branch attempting to support her weight as she swung lifelessly in the breeze.

Malice frowns, no doubt having seen flashes of that moment—or at the very least, felt the rush of emotion down the bond. I never knew... you were the one to find her...

Tears well in my eyes, but I force them back, not willing to let him see me crumple. It was a long time ago.

And still just as painful. Don't you dare mitigate it. His arms curl tighter around me as he lowers his head, pushing his face deep into the crease of my neck. My sweet, sweet wildfire. To go through such pain and still be so kind and good... what a rare treasure you are. What a brilliant, lovely creature.

I close my eyes, focusing on the rush of my pulse and the pounding in my temples—anything other than that place, that feeling. I can't go back there. If I do, I'll be lost for good. The shadows are growing, closing in, and I can't, I can't, I can't?—

“If you can fear, you can also be brave,” Malice whispers, folding his wings around us, blocking me from sight and the shadowed figures roaming on the wall. “It doesn't just apply to outside threats, wildfire. The monsters within us are just as terrifying.”

I pull back to look at him, the shadows casting harsh panes along his jaw and brow bone, highlighting the jagged scar running vertically across his pitch-black eye. “Where did you hear that?”

Malice tilts his head, his grin widening. “Abaddon loved that phrase. I imagine Erik told it to your mother, who in turn gave it to you.”

“She never told me the part about monsters.”

“No. That’s just a little flair I added to it,” he murmurs, gaze swimming with a tender emotion I can’t quite place. “Something just between us.”

A pleasant hum echoes in my chest as I give in to the bond, letting the comfort of Malice’s embrace lull me into a false sense of safety. Suddenly, helping him doesn’t seem like such a bad idea, and it’s impossible to remember why I was so against it.

Malice?

He nuzzles his face against my neck, a low purr building in his throat. Yes, little one?

I just... I want to tell you that I’ll do it. I’ll help you with whatever you need.

He pulls back, his brow raised in shock. You will?

I nod. Anything... anything to get all of us out of here safely. But it has to be all of us. Even Kaebl.

Malice’s face sours at the mention of the golden-eyed demon, but it’s gone in the next blink, replaced with an expression of profound relief. I’m so happy to hear you say that.

A mirroring smile spreads my lips as I stare up at my mate, pleased I could make him this happy. What do you need me to do?

You? His smile morphs, turning into something much darker. Deadlier. You just have

to relax.

He slides his hand over my shoulder, sweeping along my forearm and stopping at my wrist. His palm curls around my hand as he threads his fingertips with mine, his pinky wrapping around mine like a vise and forcing it back painfully.

Malice? That hurts.

I know, wildfire. His canines slice out, piercing his lower lip as he continues pulling back on my finger. I'm so sorry for this.

Using more force than before, he yanks my finger to the side, a burst of agony flaring from the joint and sparking stars behind my eyes as a crack breaks the air. A film of silver cuts across my vision as that thing living under my skin opens its eyes, desperate for control after being forced into slumber for so long. An ancient energy flows into my veins, sucked from the stone, the earth, the stars. It settles into the space just below my skin, exploding from my pores in a violent burst of light and power.

My vision tunnels, spiraling out of control as a blast of energy shakes the four surrounding walls, threatening to send the castle tumbling to the ground. I clutch onto something warm and familiar as my head drops back and an otherworldly screech echoes from my open mouth, piercing through the clamor of falling stone and screaming voices. And through it all, there's a voice—soothing and stoking the flame all at once, pushing me toward the edge.

That's it, wildfire. Burn for me. Break for me.

I follow the voice over the ledge and into the sky. And as I fall, I swear I can see a pair of beautiful onyx feathered wings spreading out from my shoulders, slowing my descent.

But then the madness takes hold, and I crash all the same.

Kaabl

My claws slice past my fingertips, digging into the cool stone of the dungeon floor, still trembling in the aftermath of the great blast that shook the castle. I stare past the shadows into the corner of the room where Fenryr is sitting, checking for any sign of movement. His bright green eyes stare aimlessly at the far wall unblinking, his chest rising and falling imperceptibly with each shallow breath. He looks more like a corpse than a living creature, but I know it's due to the arachnyx venom Malice injected into him earlier. The only concern is how long it's taking him to return to normal.

Just as I consider going to him, another explosion emanates from down the hall, causing spiderweb cracks to spread along the ceiling. The stone shudders, attempting to withstand the blows to the foundation, to keep the castle standing. The blast comes on so strong, so sudden that I nearly prick my skin with the arachnyx tooth pinched between my fingers. I readjust my grip, breathing past the spike of adrenaline as pieces of rubble rain onto my shoulders and head.

What sort of creature could have caused an explosion so powerful?

I only need to think about it for a moment before the answer comes to me. Dagny. It could only be my mate.

I push to my feet on quaking legs, using the wall for support. The room fades in and out of focus. Agony flares in every part of my body as my wounds pop open, sending

a river of dark blue blood coursing to the floor. I take a step toward Fenryr, my chains clanking heavily and drowning out the rhythmic drip, drip, drip as the last of my life runs from my veins. But I have to keep going. I have to wake Fenryr up before?—

“What do you think you’re doing, you little rat?”

Zairn’s grating voice echoes off the walls, stopping me in my tracks. I turn my head slowly, finding his milky-white gaze narrowed in hate, a bloodthirsty snarl pulling at his lipless mouth. “I know what you all are up to,” he sneers, pointing an accusatory finger through the bars. “I know the red-eyed freak is behind all of this! That the explosion was just a diversion, a way to get me away so you can escape.” He shakes his head, his hand curling into a fist at his side. “Well, I won’t allow it! I know your secret—that if I kill you, all the others will die.” His snarl turns to a cunning sneer as he continues trying to get a rise out of me. “And then when you’re all dead and gone, your sweet little halfling pet will be at my mercy. Oh, but I won’t kill her right away. No, no—I know thousands of other uses for her.”

My beast rears its head, furious at the insinuation. I grit my teeth as my canines elongate, piercing my lower lip and adding to my list of injuries. Every molecule in my body wants to react, to lunge across the room and tear Zairn’s head from his shoulders for thinking about my mate in such a way. But I can’t. Not yet.

Fixing my face into one absent of emotion, I slide my hands out of sight, snapping off the tip of the tooth just like Malice showed me. Refusing to give Zairn the satisfaction of knowing his words affect me.

Frustrated with my lack of reaction, Zairn throws open the cell door with a vicious growl, so focused on my expression that he doesn’t notice me coating my claws in the venom. He storms across the floor, his eyes shooting fire, claws extended and reaching for my throat.

Just before he reaches me, Zairn steps into the pool of blood I left behind, placing the entirety of his weight on the foot resting in the liquid and sending him off balance for a moment—but it's all I need.

I lunge for Zairn, my claws extended as far as possible, and a silent war cry builds in my chest. He jumps back at the last second, his eyes widening in shock as the tip of my index finger clips his arm. My body slams to the floor, agony spreading through my veins and stealing my breath, but I barely sense it. I did it. I won.

Zairn dusts himself off, his gaze filled with disdain and a touch of amusement. "Imbecilic Gylden slug. Do you really think a little scratch is going to hurt me? It will take..."

A rare smile tugs at my mouth as I watch Zairn's face drop, his gaze shining with fright as his muscles are frozen in place. Shivers wrack his body as he slumps to the ground, foam frothing at his mouth as he fights against the poison coursing through his veins. He blinks once, twice more, and no longer—lost to the powerful paralytic.

Tearing my gaze from the sight, I reach into the wound on my side, wincing as the flesh bubbles and protests against the intrusion. My fingers curl around the small key lying deep within my flesh, and I draw it out slowly, my nose curling in disgust at the squelching sound that accompanies the movement.

I insert a blood-coated key into the lock on my wrists, sighing in relief when the cuffs spring loose and clatter to the floor. I unhook my ankles and neck next, setting the heavy metal collar lightly on the ground so as not to arise any more suspicion.

My vision tunnels as I straighten, but I fight against the agony spreading to my fingers and toes, focused on one singular task—freeing Fenryr.

He stays utterly still as I unlock his chains, leaving the muzzle for last. Just as I insert

the key into the side, heavy footsteps sound down the hall, heading in the direction of this cell. Before I get the chance to remove his muzzle, a dozen of Slaine's soldiers pour into the room, their claws bared and gazes full of bloodlust.

The entire horde jumps on top of me, attempting to pin me to the floor and put me in chains. I kick against them, slashing wildly in an attempt to take out as many as I can before they kill me, before I get to see Dagny one last time. I fight and fight, getting lost to the sounds of screeches and screams, choking on the scent of blood filling the air, drenching the tattered remains of my armor. Before long, my muscles weaken, the last of my energy sapped from my veins and joining the pool of blood growing beneath me. And I know soon, their attacks will overwhelm me.

Suddenly, the soldier to my left freezes, muscles locking and expression settling into stone as his body slumps to the floor. One by one, seven soldiers follow, dropping to the ground like giant white flies. But as soon as they fall, the last five take their place, pinning my arms and ankles while the fifth crouches by my head, pulling out a long curved blade meant to separate my neck from my shoulders.

The demon's muscles tremble as he lowers the weapon, but just before it makes contact, a ball of dark green shadows flies through the air, connecting with the demon's side with enough force to knock the blade from his hands. The metal clatters to the floor as Fenryr's ear-piercing screech echoes off the walls, accompanied by a wet squelching noise that has my gut churning.

I look to the side just in time to witness Fenryr pulling his arm from the soldier's chest, his skin covered in dark blood and a beating heart clenched tightly in his fist. The soldier's eyes roll to the back of his head as his body slumps to the floor, a sea of purple spreading out from the hole in his chest and seeping into the surrounding stone.

Two of the demons that were holding me rush to subdue Fenryr, leaving one of my

arms unattended. While the remaining soldiers are distracted, I lunge for the one holding my other arm, sinking my claws deep into his arm before slashing the second. It's only a nick, but it's enough, and after a few moments, they fall to the floor, immobilized just as the others.

With the last of my strength fading, I push into a sitting position, desperate to help Fenryr. However, when I blink away the haze coating my sight, I find Fenryr standing over the bodies of two headless soldiers, his chest heaving and splatters of dark blood coating his arms, face, and chest.

A low, vibrating growl echoes from his chest as he turns slowly, blinding emerald orbs piercing me through the shadows, promising a painful end.

Fenryr, it's me. I call into his mind, but once again, he doesn't seem to hear me. His head lowers as his shoulders hunch, muscles straining with each predatory step he takes toward me.

Fenryr, you have to stop!

Still, my words have no effect. I blow out a sigh, racking my brain for something—anything—I can say to him to bring him back to reality.

I know where Dagny is. I can take you to her.

The green-eyed beast stops dead in his tracks, rising to his full height and tilting his head to the side. “Dagny?”

Yes. I nod for good measure. You want to see her, don't you? You miss her?

A low whine replaces the vicious growl from just moments ago, and a flash of humanity replaces the mad glint in his eyes. “Take me to her.”

I nod once more, focused on taking deep, steady breaths as I attempt to pick myself off the floor. To my surprise, Fenryr appears at my side, his arm outstretched. “The faster you move, the faster I get to my mate.”

Right. I take his hand, allowing him to haul me to my feet. I brace one hand on the wall, the other on Fenryr’s shoulder, and lead him out of the cell. To finally—finally—be reunited with my mate.

I can only pray to the gods that she’s still in one piece.

13

Lir

The first crash happened about ten minutes ago, originating from the opposite end of the cell block and strong enough to shake the very foundation of the castle. The key Malice hung a few days ago wobbled but refused to fall despite its precarious position. Ever since, the three of us have been silently staring at the small metal chunk that holds our freedom, willing it with our minds to tumble.

If I had any magical energy left in my body, I would simply make it drop, but I've long since run dry, and without a food source, there's no way to restore it.

"Do you think Malice is playing a trick on us?"

Roark doesn't take his eye off the key, but his brow furrows in concern. "It has crossed my mind."

"Well, then there's the source of our problem," Cyprien grumbles. "If you think it, it becomes reality. All your negativity is fucking up the vibes." He waves a hand in the air with an exasperated sigh. "If I were that key, I wouldn't want to help you, either."

Roark grits his teeth. "The key ? The inanimate object doesn't want to help us? Is that really what you're going with?"

Cyprien brings a finger to his lips, seemingly deep in thought. "No, that's ridiculous. I said it didn't want to help you out specifically."

A low growl builds in Roark's chest as his eyes flicker between purple and onyx, the vein on the side of his neck thrumming with a murderous rage. Before he has the chance to lunge at Cyprien, another explosion breaks the tension, shaking the walls of our cell with twice as much violence as before. Spiderweb cracks spread across the ceiling as rubble rains down on our heads, covering the ground in a thick layer of dust and stone.

"That's not good," I murmur, tugging weakly against my chains as the walls continue to vibrate. "Not good at all."

Cyprien whips his head toward me with a glare. "What did I say about the negativity? You're making it impossible to?—"

"You're impossible!" Roark slams his fist against the wall, carving a deep crater into the stone and adding to the violent tremors wracking the castle. "It's not going to fall! It's never going to fucking fall! Malice left us here to die, to laugh at us, and I?—"

A gentle tinkling noise pierces through the chaos, stopping Roark mid-sentence. We all whip our heads toward the entrance where a small iron key is lying inside the bars—well within Cyprien's grasp.

"Oh my gods..." Roark is the first to speak, his voice filled with awe and a sprinkle of irritation. "The bastard actually did it."

"I guess the bad vibes worked," I say, turning to Cyprien with a raised brow. "You can admit you were dead fucking wrong at any time. I'm patient."

Cyprien tilts his head, his expression eerily stony. "Nobody likes a sore winner, Lir."

Irritation heats the back of my neck as I watch his mouth tip upward in a maddening smirk. Don't react. Don't react. Don't react.

“You little shit-stirring, maggot-eating, sun-dried piece of rotten haggis. You have no right to?—”

“WHY?”

Cyprien and I whip toward Roark, our mouths slightly ajar at the look of utter fury pinching his bearded face.

“ Why ,” he repeats, “am I the only fucking person who would rather leave this hellhole than sit around arguing like a pair of babbling geese?”

I bring a hand to my mouth, stifling my laugh—noting that Lir does the same, his shoulders shaking silently as he tries to hold in his chuckle.

Roark’s gaze narrows, holding out his hand with an expression made of stone. “Give me the fucking key. Now.”

Choking down his amusement, Cyprien tosses the key to the murderous demon. As Roark unlocks his cuffs, I make eye contact with Cyprien, my mouth pulling upward into a rare smirk. “ Babbling geese?” I mouth.

“I know, right?” Cyprien mouths back, his expression closing off as he gestures to my left, where Roark is offering me the key. I quickly unlatch my restraints and pass it off to Cyprien, attempting to rise as he inserts it into the lock on his wrist. A powerful sigh blows past his lips as the chains clatter to the floor, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as his raw, throbbing skin is freed of the iron. Roark shuffles over, offering his forearm to aid Cyprien despite their earlier argument.

Once we’re all upright, we look toward the cell door, the same question swirling in our minds.

“Well?” Cyprien asks. “What are we supposed to do now?”

I inspect the thick iron bars, seriously doubting our ability to knock them down with sheer strength alone. If we all work together, maybe, but I doubt any of us will be able to stand after.

A faint snapping noise draws my attention to the ceiling, noting the fine fissures spreading down to the walls, splitting the stone supporting the cell bars. The iron screams as the stone gives way around the supports, crumbling to the ground in a heap of dust and debris. And with the stone goes the bars, crashing to the cracked stone floor with a crash loud enough to wake the dead.

We share wide-eyed glances, none of us sure if what we’re witnessing is reality or some crazed hallucination.

“So fucking creepy,” Cyprien whispers, shaking his head slowly. “This is bullshit. How could he possibly know that would happen?”

“I’m not sure I want to know,” Roark grumbles, taking the first step toward freedom. “Come on. I need to find Dagny.”

My chest pangs at the mention of our mate, my veins filling with the same desperation in Roark's voice. “She can’t be far. The explosion came from the other wing of the dungeon.”

“How do you know she caused it?” Cyprien asks.

“No other being in this world could turn Slaine’s castle to rubble in one blow. It has to be her.”

I stumble after Roark into the darkened corridor, pressing a palm to the wall to

remain upright as we move in the direction of the explosion. As we prepare to walk straight through the four-way split in the tunnels, a faint green light draws my attention to the hallway on my right. I grip Roark's forearm, pulling him to a stop as the twin emerald orbs draw nearer, bobbing lightly with each step and accompanied by a low, warning growl.

It can't be...

“ Fenryr ?”

The demon halts, eyes narrowing to slits as the growl turns to a snarl. The light in his eyes is snuffed out in a blink, eclipsed by the shadows swirling over his tensed shoulders, consuming the familiar green as his canines elongate, piercing his lower lip.

I blink past the shadows, taking in the hollow cheekbones and tattered rags hanging limply over his battered, malnourished frame. “ Fenryr... is that truly you? ” I whisper, my voice shaking with awe and disbelief.

I would advise against touching or talking to him. He's... consumed by other things at the moment.

My gaze widens as I look past Fenryr's shoulder, finding Kaehl's golden eyes staring back. “You... how did you get out of your cell?”

I could ask you the same thing. He takes a step forward, careful not to brush against Fenryr. But we don't have time to explain. We have to get Dagny out of here before ?

Another explosion breaks out, weaker than the last but originating from the same area as all the others. An ear-shattering, demonic shriek pierces the air at the same time a

blast of wind rushes through the western tunnel, powerful enough to send the group of us flying sideways through the air.

My body crumples to the floor as a series of cracking, thudding, and crashing sounds fill the tunnels, accompanied by another blast of air that sends pieces of the ceiling crumbling to the floor. I lie on my back, watching the hairline fissures spread through the stone slab, then breaking away, sending a massive chunk of debris falling straight for my head. A large, calloused palm wraps around my forearm, yanking me out of the way just before it makes impact with the ground, shattering into hundreds of tiny chunks. The air thickens with a cloud of debris and the screams of a thousand frantic demon soldiers as the foundation of the castle crumbles and falls away, drowning out all sight and sound with its thunderous surrender.

That same hand yanks me to my feet, dragging me down the passage that leads to the stairwell—away from Dagny.

“Stop!” I scream, fighting against his hold to no avail. “We can’t leave her!”

The creature in front of me doesn’t respond, just tightens his hold as he drags me up the crumbling staircase to the main level of the palace. I look over my shoulder, my vision tunneling as I search through the chaos for the other soul pieces—but they’re nowhere to be seen.

“Stop!” I command, the demon's claws slicing through my skin as I try to pull my arm free one last time. “We have to go back!”

A wolflike snarl pierces through the chaos as Fenryr whips his head to face me, his eyes pitch black and expression devoid of humanity. “We go to Dagny.”

“Dagny’s in the dungeon, you stupid mutt!” I snap, rearing back my free hand to deliver a blow.

Something solid barrels into the center of my back, knocking the air from my lungs and pushing me farther in the direction Fenryr is pulling me. I whip toward the threat, only to find Cyprien's yellow eyes staring back, just as shocked as I am.

Kaabl and Roark stumble into view a moment later, their skin covered in soot and large gashes staining their arms and faces. I'm so consumed by the sight, it takes me several seconds to notice Fenryr tugging on my arm, desperately trying to move me toward the doorway.

The entrance to the dungeons caves in with a boom, causing a series of vibrations to travel along the ornate floor. The stone beneath my feet fissures, cracking beneath my weight like thin ice over the lake, and my eyes find Kaabl's, reflecting the same sense of dread filling up the pit in my stomach.

Go, now!

At his order, I allow Fenryr to pull me through the open palace doors. We stumble outside, rolling down the staircase in a tangle of limbs and wings before crashing to the ice below. Pain bursts across my forearm as a small pop breaks the air, and I look down with hooded eyes to see my left arm bent at an odd angle.

I blink against the searing agony, struggling to my knees as a mournful howl echoes into the barren landscape. I turn to find Fenryr crouched on all fours, his chin tipped back as the hollow note bursts from his open mouth.

A flapping sound draws my attention to my left, where Cyprien is lowering to the ground, his face pinched in agony as his broken wings beat erratically against the roaring wind. Kaabl and Roark stumble down the same stairwell Fenryr and I used, their wings hanging limply from their shoulders, brushing the frozen steps and coating the tips in ice.

Just as they make it to the bottom, Fenryr latches onto my forearm, his eyes glinting with a terrifying desperation as he attempts to haul me away from the crumbling palace. I pull against him, refusing to let him take me any farther from my mate—my Dagny.

“No!” I yell. “No! I won’t leave her down there!”

Fenryr snarls, jumping away just in time to dodge the blow intended for his face. He crouches low, his chest heaving as his gaze flickers with shadows, his shoulders trembling as he tries to gain control of his beast. “ She’s going... going to meet us there.”

“Meet us where ?” Cyprien demands. “We have to save her before the castle?—”

Before he can finish, Fenryr turns and starts running in the opposite direction of the palace, his injured and bleeding legs taking him as fast as they’re able to the line of welwigs that line the outskirts of Slaine’s territory. Kaabl stares after him for a few moments, then turns his attention to Roark, his chin tipping in an inconspicuous nod.

Roark lunges, grabbing Cyprien’s arm in his massive palm and using his inhuman strength to haul him, snarling and fighting, across the ice after Fenryr. I try to push to my feet, to run back into the castle, but then Kaabl is there, his face like fire as he blocks the entrance.

We have to go, Lir. We have to follow Fenryr.

“But Dagny?—”

She’ll be okay. He looks over his shoulder, his eyes pinching in jealousy. She’s with Malice.

He reaches for my arm, his intention clear—but we both know he’s not strong enough to handle me the way Roark is Cyprien. I wave him off, rising to a stand and casting one last, mournful glance toward the castle.

Lir, we have to go.

My breath billows out in a thick cloud of vapor as I stumble after Kaebl, the tree line seemingly miles away. Fenryr is a pinprick in the distance by now, racing full tilt toward the welwigs despite the toll it’s taking on his body.

We make it halfway to the trees before a massive tremor shakes the earth, accompanied by a thunderous roar of cracks and pops that has us freezing in place. I turn, and my heart skips a beat at the chaos that greets me.

Unlike earlier, the rumbling refuses to cease, causing the ice beneath the castle to fissure and break away. In the next blink, the ground caves in, giving way to a massive chasm that seems to split the earth in half. The great stone towers fall inward as the foundation collapses, crushing the flood of soldiers attempting to flee the crumbling structure. All at once, the castle is lost to a cloud of thick, billowing snow, spreading across the land in a great white explosion.

“NO!” The scream that tears from my chest threatens to cleave the sky apart, filled with enough rage and anguish to bring me to my knees. The ice rumbles beneath me, answering my pain with a cacophony of cracks and grinding as the fissures spread across the landscape at an alarming rate.

Come on! Kaebl yanks me backward across the ice, refusing to look back at the wreckage, focused on making it to the tree line before the ground gives away. Kable makes it one single step beneath the canopy and collapses, dragging me beneath the shimmering white leaves just as another wave of energy travels across the land, widening the chasm and causing the world to shift on its axis.

I peek through the curtain of leaves, looking at the cool gray sky as dread settles in the base of my throat. She has to be okay... If she's not, I can't... I won't be able to go on.

The bond vibrates, warm and soothing and filled with a living, breathing energy that assuages all of my fears. I blink, and a ball of bright light shoots toward the heavens, cloaked in swirling red shadows and accompanied by a piercing demonic scream. The shadows turn, beaming straight toward the line of welwigs at an alarming speed.

Through the haze, Malice's face appears, eyes filled with the same darkness swirling around his shoulders and lips peeled back in agony. His wings are in tatters, his skin scorched and falling off in places, but none of that matters. Because in his arms is the creature my soul has been crying out for.

Dagny.

Standing against the thick fog are a pair of wings—beautiful onyx feathered ones that drape luxuriously over Malice's forearm. Her eyes are closed, her body limp, but the glowing silver light pulsing from her skin is bursting with energy, with light, with life. The sight has my eyes misting, my soul singing, and suddenly, everything is perfectly, utterly fine.

She's alive.

14

Fenryr

The silver sun beams into my eyes, searing my retinas and blinding me to everything other than the sight of my mate floating toward me. Her beautiful feather wings flutter gently in the howling wind, reflecting the sunlight like millions of gleaming black diamonds.

Waiting for Malice to bring her to me is agony, more so than the pain throbbing from my shattered wings or the dozens of oozing, festering wounds that cover my body.

Malice lands silently on the ice, his hands curling protectively around the luminous creature in his arms. The light beaming from her pores casts a silver glow along the left half of Malice's face, casting shadows along the hollow of his cheek and highlighting the soulless void of his damaged eye.

"Is this what you've been looking for?"

" Yes, " I whisper, reaching for the woman my soul has been yearning for—dying for. " Give her to me. "

A puff of vapor billows out from Malice's nose as he clutches Dagny tighter to his chest, unwilling to let her go. "Only if you promise to give her back."

My lip peels back in a snarl, my vision flickering with shadows. " She's MINE. Only mine."

Malice's eyes trail to the skies, another breath puffing from his chest. "I don't have fucking time for this..." He takes another deep breath, closing his eyes in an attempt to calm his beast. "You can hold her until she wakes. But that's all."

He walks the last few feet to where I'm waiting, passing Dagny into my arms with an order I can't hear past the violent rushing in my ears. Electricity flows through my veins as soon as I touch her, warming my chest and filling my eyes with tears. A desperate whimper echoes into the air as I push my face into her neck, needing her closer, needing to be inside her skin. To be the air she breathes, the moisture leaking from her eyes, the words rolling from her tongue. To occupy every single molecule that touches her, every object she lays her eyes on, every thought in her mind.

Even that would not be enough.

I pull back, my eyes glossing over as I stare down at my beautiful mate. Mine. Always mine. The bond settles with a great sigh of relief as I reach a hand up to her face, brushing the dark brown hair off her forehead, wishing I could stay in this moment for an eternity.

Dagny's eyelids twitch gently, and a moment later, I'm blessed with the beautiful warm brown of her eyes. She stares unblinking, the silver ring around her iris gleaming with the same power as the sun.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, my voice cracking. "So mine."

Her lips part, but no words form. Instead, she reaches up, placing her little hand over mine with a look of wonder as the bond purrs in contentment. I'm about to lean in and kiss her when Malice's voice sounds out, breaking me from my trance and dragging me back down to earth.

"I hate to break up the warm welcome, but we don't have much time."

I tear my gaze from Dagny, looking past the horizon to the spot where Slaine's castle used to be standing. Sure enough, from the depths of the chasm, beneath the rubble and destruction, hundreds of bodies are starting to rise, dazed and hurt but still alive—calling out to the skies with promises of pain and revenge. Whether Slaine survived the chaos matters little—if he's alive, he will want someone to answer for the destruction of his castle. If he's dead, his remaining army will want someone to pay for their lord's demise.

Malice shuffles over to Kaebl, pressing his palm to Kaebl's shattered wing as a weak golden light flares to life. The skin begins to knit together, forced closed from the healing magic sputtering from Malice's veins. But then the light dies—the wounds half-mended and bone still broken—and Malice falls back on his heels, his chest heaving and the color rushing from his face.

Sweat beads across his forehead as he leans forward, his face pinching as he attempts to fix the wing again. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. " He shakes his head, trying a third time only for the golden light to sputter out faster than the last. " No. This is not supposed to happen... "

"What's wrong?" Dagny asks, her groggy voice laced with worry. "Can I help?"

"Nothing," Malice quickly answers. "And no, sweet thing. We can't risk you using too much of that wonderful power too soon. Your mind is already so close to breaking."

His brows furrow as he pushes the last of his magic into Kaebl's wing, his skin growing paler the longer he tries. And with each passing moment, the cries of Slaine's army grow nearer, rising from the depths of the rubble with the promise of revenge and death. We don't have much longer before they're on top of us, but we can't leave Kaebl here. If he dies... we all do.

“Why isn’t it working?” Cyprien asks.

Malice doesn’t respond for a long minute, his eyes wide and fixed on Kaabl’s wing as if he can’t quite believe what’s happening. “Her wounds... I wasn’t... I didn’t have enough power to heal her and Fenryr and Kaabl... I knew it, but I couldn’t... I wouldn’t...”

Malice trembles, crumbling under the weight of his mistake, but the rest of us are silent for a different reason. Malice never does anything that would indirectly harm himself. He knew healing Dagny was the wrong thing to do in the moment, yet he still did it, knowing it might doom us all.

I gaze around the circle, taking in the injuries of the other soul piece. There’s no way we can run fast enough to escape, and Roark’s wings are useless, meaning it would take both Cyprien and Lir to carry him in their state. Dagny is the only one other than Malice who has use of her flight muscles, but it’s not like she has the experience to fly in a blizzard with a three-hundred-pound demon in her arms—not like she could carry me or Kaabl after she’s already used up too much energy.

I make eye contact with each of the demons, the same thought ringing throughout all our minds. We’re not going to make it out of this alive.

But Dagny still can. I gaze down at the beautiful creature in my arms, my chest aching at the thought of being apart from her, of death separating us. But it’s the only way.

I look toward Kaabl, who dips his chin in a terse nod. His golden eyes then trail to Malice, an unspoken conversation warring between the rivals.

Take her, Kaabl says, his eyes on Malice but his voice echoing into all of our minds. Fly as fast as you can to the space between worlds—get her as close to the doorway

as you can. The rest of us will stay here and fight.

“No!” Dagny’s voice breaks the silence, filled with desperation. “No, you can’t! We’re all making it out of this alive!” She turns her head toward Malice, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “You promised! You promised we would all get out of there alive.”

“And we did, wildfire,” he whispers, stepping toward us with an expression pinched in agony. “But I made... I made a mistake. Now, we just have to make sure you live. As long as you’re okay... so is everything else.”

“No!” She fights against my hold as Malice reaches for her arm, her eyes filling with a blinding silver light. “No! There has to be another way!”

“There isn’t, sweet thing,” he whispers, his voice cracking heavily. “You can’t fly like this—not in a blizzard and not fast enough to escape them. Even if you could, you would have to carry one of us?—”

“Then let me do it!”

“Dagny...” Cyprien shuffles forward, his face set in stone. “You have to go now.”

“No!”

“Dagny, please, ” Malice begs. “Please... don’t fight this. We need to get you to safety. We need to get you away from here and back home.”

“I am home. With you all, I finally am,” she whispers.

Malice smiles, but it's not a happy one. “I know. And you’re mine —you are all of ours. Which is why we need to do this. Please let me do this, wildfire. Let me do this

one good thing for once in my miserable fucking life.”

Dagny stares for a long minute, seeing past the mask I’ve worked so hard to build over the years. The one I didn’t realize I was wearing till I laid eyes on her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, the silver ring around her eyes spreading, consuming the color in a single blink. “But no. ”

She tears away from my grip, barreling toward Kaebl’s slumped form before Malice has a chance to stop her. “Wait!” he screams. “You can’t use any more magic!”

“I know,” she says, crouching down to wrap her arms around Kaebl’s torso. “I don’t need it.”

Dagny’s skin bursts with an iridescent glow as her feathered wings spread out, fluttering violently in the roaring blizzard. Sweat beads across her brow as her flight muscles strain, attempting to lift their bodies into the air.

A burst of power explodes from Dagny’s throat, filling the air with a scream that shakes the ground and cleaves the skies. Frozen in utter disbelief, I watch my mate—the most powerful being in this world—soar above the canopy, her beautiful wings staining the dark skies with brilliant inky feathers.

Too awestruck to move, to react, I stand on the ground, my heart following my mate into the atmosphere. Malice wraps his arms around my middle, pushing off the ice with a mighty roar as Lir and Cyprien carry Roark into the air.

We fly up, up, up, chasing the shadowy streak flying across the landscape. And from down below, a furious roar thunders across the distance, filled with enough hatred and rage to bring the castle to its knees a second time.

Slaine's bellow fades to nothing more than a whisper as we continue our climb into the upper atmosphere, then disappears entirely as we cut horizontally through the sky, heading back into Abaddon's territory.

But the fury lingers long after it's gone.

15

Malice

We fly for hours—past the point of exhaustion, longer than any living creature should be able—and then we keep going. And all the while, the blizzard roars around us, the violent gusts of wind and ice threatening to send us off course or, worse, crashing to the ground.

I readjust my grip on Fenryr as a surge of air jolts my body to the side, so suddenly it nearly causes the limp body to slip from my fingers. My claws pierce his skin, latching onto the unconscious demon as I straighten out, angling my body back in the direction of the breeze.

Fenryr passed out two hours into the flight, and it has made navigation far more difficult. Though I am amazed at how long he was able to remain conscious in his grim state. I suppose it just goes to show how powerful of an influence the mate bond holds. How it can push the weakest of bodies onward—to fight, to protect, to claim.

I should know. It's what kept me going in Kaabl's dungeons after all.

A frown pinches my brow as I shake away those memories, needing to clear my mind and focus on the task at hand. If I'm not careful, I'll miss it entirely, and all of this will be for nothing.

My flight muscles are seizing by the time I spot the clearing in the endless stretch of welwig forest. I tip my wings downward, my grip tightening around Fenryr as we

shoot to the ground, the wind and ice whipping against my skin, freezing the tears of agony leaking from my eyes. I attempt to slow our descent just before we crash, but all my weakened muscles can manage is a pitiful flapping motion before Fenryr and I smack into the unforgiving ice.

I look at the skies, my eyes widening at the sight of Dagny floating to the ground, her face pinched and sweat dripping from her brow despite the effortless way she lowers herself and Kaebl to the ice. As soon as his body touches down, Dagny steps back, her face raised to the heavens as she sucks down heaving lungfuls of air, showing a hint of her fatigue for the first time since we began our journey.

I lie there for a few moments, knowing I should get up but bound in place by the stunning creature before me. Even though we just finished a four-hour flight through a raging blizzard, fearful and fleeing for our lives, Dagny seems calm—standing tall and proud just like the true goddess she is. The tips of her feathered wings rattle in the breeze, each barb encased in frost, glinting in the sunlight like millions of tiny diamonds. Her eyes shine with the same brilliant silver I witnessed in Slaine's dungeon. The same energy that had the power to turn a castle to dust.

Magic . Pure and raw and unyielding. It lives in her, is drawn to her just as I am. And if she doesn't learn how to control it very, very soon, it will destroy her.

“Look out beloouooooooooow!”

Dagny skitters toward the edge of the clearing, her face pinched in fright. As she dives behind one of the welwig trunks, my gaze snaps toward the jovial voice that caused her to flee, a spike of anger heating my veins.

My irritation turns to horror at the sight of a massive Roark-shaped mass barreling down from the skies, and without thinking, I grab Fenryr and roll, moving out of the way just before Roark slams into the ice, digging a horse-sized crater right where my

head was.

My shock turns to rage as I turn my attention to Cyprien, floating weightlessly to the ground with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I shout. “What would possess you to just fucking drop him?”

Cyprien shrugs, his smile threatening to split his face. “He was heavy.”

Lir touches down beside his counterpart, his mouth pressed into a thin white line. “He’s lying. Roark said something to piss him off and his grip ‘slipped,’” Lir says, using air quotes around the last word.

Cyprien waves him off, turning his head in a slow arc as he searches the clearing. “The details don’t matter. Where’s my bunny?”

“Your wha—OOMPF!” The air is pushed from my lungs in a violent puff as Cyprien’s foot presses against my sternum, my ribs cracking beneath his full weight as he uses my chest as a springboard. I roll onto my side as the pain radiates, my vision tunneling, focusing on the angelic face peeking out from the tree trunk, at the twin silver orbs shining with distrust.

She blinks, and the apprehension on her face is wiped away, replaced with a smile born of moonlight, of euphoria. She steps out from the tree, her arms spread wide as she welcomes her mate.

Cyprien collides with her, knocking her backward off her feet and sailing through the open air. In a flash, Cyprien is wrapped around her, twisting sideways to protect her from the inevitable crash. As soon as they make impact, Cyprien rolls to his back, clutching the little one to his chest so tight, I’m fearful he might break her.

He pushes his face into her neck, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as relief floods the bond, filling all of our veins. Soft sobs wrack his chest as he runs a shaking hand up her spine, feeling her as if for the very first time—as if he can't quite believe she's real.

A low whine echoes in Lir's chest, and in the next moment, he's there, thick, hot tears streaming down his face as he curls over Dagny and Cyprien. It's such a profound sensation of solace that it warms my chest and fills the space where my heart should be.

Roark finally pushes to a sitting position, rubbing the part of his head that hit the ice the hardest. He blinks rapidly, his expression morphing from one of pure rage to an inexplicable longing, softening the corners of his eyes as an invisible thread tugs at the corner of his mouth.

He goes to her just as the others and is welcomed just as wholeheartedly. And I know I shouldn't, but I can't help but look toward Kaehl. He's frozen in place, golden eyes swirling with a torturous emotion as he watches the soul pieces reconnect with Dagny.

With great pain, he tears his gaze away from her and turns it to me. For the first time in my life, I think I feel sorry for you.

I shake my head with a scoff, though his words cause a throbbing ache to emanate from the deep cavern in my chest. "I don't need your pity."

No. I suppose you don't. He turns his head slowly, focusing on the four embracing figures once more. Hers, then.

"Sure. But I'd rather have her heart."

Kaehl nods, his eyes never leaving his would-be mate, never blinking. Hearts are strange things. If it beats and screams and aches, is it love? Or is it a disease? Affection or affliction? He shrugs, his gaze unmoving. Perhaps it's both. Maybe it's nothing. Perhaps it's everything.

My throat tightens as I follow his line of sight, throbbing agony spreading from that hollow pit as I lay eyes on my mate.

There's only one way to find out which it is.

16

Dagny

The warmth thrumming down the bond has my toes curling, my adrenaline spiking, and my head swimming.

But all of it fades away as a deep, arousing voice breaks out from the center of the clearing. I poke my head under Lir's bicep, a frown pinching my lips and a hateful glare directed at the irritatingly gorgeous, red-eyed demon.

"We need to get off ground level," Malice repeats, tone laced with irritation. "Preferably before the sun flips."

"Why?"

As if in answer, a rhythmic clicking noise echoes from deep within the forest, low-toned and thudding, like a heartbeat. The sound vibrates through the air, raising the hair on the back of my neck as a million tiny spiders wriggle beneath my skin, scrambling to get out.

"What the fuck is that?" I whisper, clinging to Lir as my eyes scan the shadows. "What the fuck was that?"

"Arachnyx," Malice deadpans. "Just one, but the fact it's awake this early means it's already smelled us."

I swallow past the lump in my throat, my tongue like sandpaper as I ask, “How do we get off ground level, again?”

Malice’s lips spread into a smirk as he gestures for me to follow. He turns on his heel and stalks toward the other end of the clearing, where Kaabl waits at the tree line with Fenryr’s limp body draped over his shoulders.

Malice waggles his fingertips and winks before disappearing behind a welwig trunk that’s as wide as Roark is tall. Kaabl stands in place for a moment, staring with such strong longing that it causes my chest to constrict. He blinks, and the connection is broken—and he follows Malice behind the tree.

With a resigned sigh, I push out of my mates’ embrace and stand, breathing through the wave of dizziness that hits me, threatening to send me back to the ground. Once I know I can stand, I slowly force my feet forward, determined to get away from the eerie clicking noises and the beasts that accompany them.

With Lir, Cyprien, and Roark on my heels, I stumble across the clearing, following Malice’s footsteps around the back of the mighty tree trunk—but he’s not there, and neither is Kaabl or Fenryr. I’m about to call out for them when I catch sight of a dark shadow at the base of the trunk. I move closer, my mouth opening wide in a gasp when I realize what I’m staring at.

The tree has been hollowed out. But why? And how far down does this tunnel go?

Throwing caution to the wind, I grab onto the sides of the trunk and feed my legs inside, finding no bottom in sight. Taking a deep breath, I push off my perch, my stomach flying into my throat as I fall down the hole.

The wind whips around my head, filling my ears with a high-pitched screaming as I hurtle through the tunnel. Just when I decide there’s no end in sight, the tunnel

curves, slowing my descent as it gradually bottoms out.

When I reach the end, I'm met with the sight of a small circular room, the walls carved from shimmering blue ice. There's no adornment to the space—only an ominous doorway cut into the stretch of wall opposite the tube I just entered from. Kaehl and Fenryr are nowhere in sight, but when I cut my gaze to the left, I find Malice standing by the doorway, his lips tipped in an eerie smile.

“What is this place?” I whisper, unable to take my gaze off the shimmering blue walls. Now that I think of it, they remind me of the tunnels Cyprien brought me to when I first entered this world. Though unlike them, the walls of ice in this room are rougher, as if carved by hand. “Did you build this?”

Malice's eye gleams with pride. “I did. It took nearly five years, but it was well worth it.”

“Is this where you locked Fenryr away?” I ask, my tone souring as I remember all the awful things he's done. “Where you hatched your traitorous plans?”

A deep sigh puffs from Malice's chest, all the arrogance fleeing with his breath. “I do most of my plotting out in the open air, under the light of the flipping sun. It helps me think, so to answer your question... no. ” My face sours as Malice turns on his heel, stalking toward the carved doorway with his fist clenched at his side.

“Where are you going?” I demand. “ Stop! ”

He freezes just before passing into the shadows beyond, the muscles showing through his torn armor rippling with discomfort, fighting against the invisible force holding them in place. But it only lasts for a moment.

I blink, and Malice's head is turned toward me, a secret only he knows shining in his

bright red eye. “You’re welcome to follow whenever you’re ready. I have a feeling you’ll enjoy what’s on the other side.”

In two steps, the shadows envelop his body, blocking out the powerful outline of my mate as he descends deep into the earth. I turn my head, making eye contact with Roark, Cyprien, and Lir, before scurrying after Malice.

Just past the doorway are a set of stairs, though I can’t see past the third step due to the endless black void that lies just beyond. I swallow thickly and descend, blinking rapidly against the encroaching darkness. The farther I go, the thicker the air grows. Humid and stifling, the air clings to my skin and coats my nose and throat in a thin layer of dew that has me huffing for breath.

A blast of heated air strikes my face as I step onto the ground level, blowing my hair back off my face and bringing tears to my eyes. I blink as my eyes adjust to the orange light glowing from the sconces lining the circular room, casting a warm hue onto the walls and floor. A dense fog swirls through the air, originating from the large, heated pool in the center. The water encased within is crystal clear, shimmering with the same magical energy that lives in the earth, the trees, and in my veins. A healing bath.

I shift my gaze to the side, electricity crackling in my veins as I make eye contact with Kaabl. Slowly, he rises from the water, his golden eyes unblinking and fixed on my parted lips. Water streams down his bare chest, hundreds of tiny droplets beading across his freshly mended skin and sliding between the sculpted grooves of his abdomen. As each one falls, it ripples the surface of the water, spreading out in a halo that travels to the edges of the pool, inviting me closer.

I take one step in his direction and?—

“Cannonball!” Cyprien yells, sweeping me off my feet in one powerful movement

before propelling us into the air. We crash down a moment later, breaking the surface of the water in a mighty splash before sinking to the base of the pool. The dirt and grime of the dungeon is sucked from my flesh in an instant, billowing out in a thick gray cloud before disappearing entirely. I'm overcome by an intense stinging sensation as the magical properties of the water penetrate my wounds, clearing the infection and threading the jagged edges of skin back together. I resurface a few seconds later, coughing and sputtering yet utterly relieved as the last of the pain fades away. As soon as I recover from the shock, Cyprien's laughter makes its way to my ears.

I whip my head in his direction, my eyes narrowing in a glare. "That was uncalled for, Cyppy."

His eyes flash with joy as a delighted purr rumbles in his throat. Ignoring my irritation, he wades closer, wrapping his muscular arms around my waist and tugging me flush against him. "I love it when you call me that. I've missed it so."

I smack his chest lightly, trying to hold on to my irritation as an answering smile tugs at my lips. "I missed you too, you big goof."

"Your goof," he murmurs, his lids lowering as he takes his lip between his teeth. "I'll be anything you desire as long as you keep smiling that way."

"Try being a little more conscientious." Lir's sullen tone breaks out over my shoulder, and my face heats as I turn my head, finding him topless, dripping with the same shimmering water as Kaehl and just as stunning. His sapphire eyes are narrowed in a glare directed at Cyprien, irritation rolling off his shoulders in waves. "You could have harmed her."

"It was just a little water." Cyprien rolls his eyes, his grip tightening possessively around my waist. "Healing water, mind you. If anything, I was helping by getting her

fully wet.”

“I can think of more than one way to get her wet,” Roark chimes in, a smirk pulling at his bearded mouth. A large wave ripples from the far end of the pool as he delves inside, causing the water to lap at the edges of the pool, nearly overflowing as it accommodates his enormous frame. “Too many to count, actually.”

“I like the sound of that,” Cyprien murmurs, his eyes flickering with shadows as his claws extend, scraping lazily down my spine. “What do you think, bunny?”

I take my lip between my teeth as a spike of adrenaline courses through my veins, blanketing all rational thought in a thick cloud of desire. The bond purrs in agreement, quivering in anticipation of having all my mates at once.

“She needs rest and a meal first.” Malice's voice echoes off the stone walls, breaking me from my trance and sending me crashing back to reality. I pull away from Cyprien with flaming cheeks, unable to bring my gaze to meet Malice's heated stare.

“We all need something to eat,” he continues, turning his attention toward Roark. “Especially that one.”

My stomach flips at the mention of food, and the blood drains from my face as I'm reminded of what I might need to consume now that my powers are awakened. “I don't... I'm not hungry.”

Malice's gaze squints with sympathy. “You don't have to worry about that, little one. You are still very much human—at least partly—and you can still have your beloved crackers and nut butter.”

“But in Slaine's dungeon...”

“A side effect of your demon fully awakening,” he answers. “Not to mention the stress of being locked away in a dark pit with the constant, looming threat of death. That would make anyone lose their appetite.”

“Oh,” I whisper, a wave of relief pouring over me. “That’s good to know.”

He nods tersely. “Yes. The rest of us, however, will need something more... substantial. We can’t go to the human realm to hunt—I’m certain by now, Slaine has surrounded the door between worlds—but the creatures of The Far Place will work for the short term.”

“But the creatures here are so gross ,” Cyprien groans dramatically.

“Agreed,” Lir murmurs, his face pinching in disgust at the thought. “I think I’d rather go without sustenance.”

“Speak for yourselves.” Roark rises out of the water, palm pressed to his rippling abdomen. “I’m fucking starving. I’d eat an arachnyx soul if that’s what’s available.”

“We all know your standards are nonexistent, Roark—no need to remind us.” Cyprien rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “I personally will not be partaking in that meal.”

“We’ll hunt along the coastline,” Malice interjects. “The beasts there are far better than anything found inland and are much easier prey.” His gaze narrows on Cyprien in a hateful glare. “You will partake, and you won’t complain—because you will need all your strength if you want to protect Dagny.”

At the mention of my name, Cyprien’s demeanor changes entirely, his expression softening at the corners of his eyes and the curve of his mouth. “Fine. If it means I can better serve my mate, I’ll try it.”

“As will I,” Lir agrees, nodding his head with resolution. “Gladly.”

We all turn our gazes toward Kaebl, who shrugs nonchalantly. It’s our only option. I have no objection.

“Perfect.” Malice claps his hands together, his smile widening. “In that case, I’m going to check on Fenryr.”

I gaze around the pool, noting for the first time he’s not with us. “Where did he go?”

I put him in the bed chamber, Kaebl responds, nodding his chin toward the stairwell Malice is disappearing into. His body is mended, but he refuses to wake.

“Is that normal?”

Kaebl’s mouth presses together in a thin, pale line. No. But he used up so much strength to escape Slaine’s palace, it’s to be expected.

Fear clutches my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs at the thought my mate might never awake from his hibernation. “Take me to him.”

I will once your wounds are fully healed. Kaebl gestures to the faint pink scars peppered across my arms and neck, still tingling as the magical properties of the water mend the damaged cells. You still need a few minutes.

“I’m fine. I want to see my mate.”

Kaebl tilts his head, his eyes flashing with an indiscernible emotion. As you wish. Follow me.

Kaebl steps out of the pool, water glistening from the shuddering muscles along his

spine, dripping from the tips of his freshly healed wings. My eyes track down his spine, heat rising to my cheeks when I notice he's fully nude. If he turned slightly, I could see the outline of his ? —

I'm flattered by your ogling, but I thought you wanted to see your mate? Kaabl cuts me a look out of the corner of his eye, his mouth tipping in a rare smirk.

Cyprien's chest shakes with a chuckle under my palms as I push away fully, turning my back to both of them as I wade to the edge of the pool. The fabric of my suit clings to my body as I push out of the water, highlighting the curve of my ass and thighs. A thrill runs through me at the feel of four sets of eyes locked on me, tracking every slight movement.

"Are you sure you have to go?" Cyprien asks, his voice raw and gravelly. "It would be so much better if you stayed... just like that."

Let her go, Cyprien, Kaabl orders, his golden eyes narrowed in a glare. Don't be so selfish.

Cyprien mumbles something indiscernible under his breath as he walks to Kaabl, making sure to keep my gaze above his waistline. With a flick of his wrist, the water is sucked from my skin and clothes, raining down to the floor in a luminous shower.

Before I can thank him, Kaabl turns on his heel and hurries up the stairwell, leaving me no choice but to follow. Just before we reach the top, Kaabl cuts to the left, passing through a narrow tunnel I hadn't noticed on my way down—the opening cloaked in shadows and perfectly hidden from view.

The passage opens a few steps in, widening to a space that could easily accommodate three demons standing shoulder to shoulder. It goes back as far as I can see, the endless stretch of tunnel illuminated with iron sconces every few feet.

Another shadowed doorway appears a few steps in, the archway crudely carved and cracked in several spots. Kaebl gestures for me to step inside, and despite the anxiety coursing through my veins, I don't hesitate. As soon as I step into the room, a flash of green in the corner catches my eye. I blink against the dark shadows coating the air, my heart thudding wildly against its cage as I take in the sight of my mate curled in the corner—seemingly deceased. His eyes are closed, body utterly still, save for the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

In the next moment, I'm crouched in front of him, my hand reaching for his face, far paler than the last time I remember. At my touch, his eyes twitch but refuse to open, and my heart clenches with fear. "Why won't he wake up?"

"He will eventually," Malice answers, stepping out from the dark corner where he lurked. "Just give it time."

I brush my hand over his forehead, my eyes widening as I take in the raw pink flesh around his mouth—rubbed raw and scarred from months of being stuck in that awful muzzle. I brush my fingers over his cupid's bow, tracing the peaks and valleys of his face and committing them to memory. My eyes scan Fenryr's freshly healed skin, stopping at the glowing bond mark shining through the fabric covering his hip. With everything that happened, I haven't had time to process this newest bond. It all happened so fast that I haven't even asked his familiar's name.

"Where are the familiars?" I ask, turning my head to face Malice. "Shouldn't they be here?"

Malice's lips spread in a sly smile. "They're in the human realm with Nya, hunting. She's keeping them preoccupied." His expression changes, turning to one of amusement. "If you miss them, I'll have her bring them back."

"That would be nice," I murmur, turning my attention back to Fenryr. "Maybe if his

wolf comes, he'll wake up?"

"Maybe."

Before I can say anything else, Lir, Roark, and Cyprien barrel into the room, their multicolored eyes shining like fog lights through the dark.

"What are you doing to her?" Lir demands, stalking over to Malice with an accusatory expression. "What have you done?"

"Wha—nothing!" he scoffs. "Get that fucking finger out of my face before I snap it off."

"I felt her pain through the bond—we all did," Lir snarls, his canines lengthening and shoulder muscles rippling with his transformation.

"She's hurting over Fenryr, you pea-brained imbecile." Malice rolls his eyes, smacking Lir's arm out of the way as he stalks toward me. "She's perfectly fine otherwise."

"And we were all getting along so nicely," Cyprien mumbles, catching my eye with a teasing wink. While Roark goes over to whisper something to Lir, Cyprien bounds over to me, throwing his arms around me in a violent embrace. "I missed you, bunny."

"I've only been gone for a few minutes," I say, moving back from Fenryr so Cyprien doesn't accidentally crush him. Once we're far enough away, I turn, allowing Cyprien to squish me fully against his bare chest.

"It felt like an eternity," Cyprien murmurs, a purr rumbling deep in his throat. "I wish to always be by your side. If I could crawl into your skin, I would."

“I have no doubt about that,” I whisper, holding in the chuckle that tries to break free. “I don’t think you would fit, though.”

“That’s what you said the first time we fucked you, and look how well that went.” His brows wiggle as a shocked laugh falls from my open mouth.

“Stop harassing the poor thing,” Roark says, appearing at Cyprien’s side with a smirk. “And hand her over. I haven’t gotten a chance to hold her properly.”

“We can share!” Cyprien tries to dodge Roark’s attack, but it’s too late. In the next blink, I’m ripped from Cyprien’s arms and folded up in Roark’s, his great purple wings wrapping around my body and cutting out the light.

“Much better,” he murmurs, pushing his face deep into the curve of my neck, taking a breath as if he’s been without for years. “My sweet little doe. My heart is finally full. I’m so happy to have you back.”

“As am I.” I reach up to his face, cupping my palm over the unruly beard spreading over his jaw. “So, so happy.”

“That’s quite enough.” Cyprien’s distraught outburst has a giggle rising in my throat. Not wanting to torture him, Roark unfurls his wings, allowing Cyprien access once more. Before he can get to me, Lir rushes forward, pressing his body flush against my back, curling his arms around my throat possessively. He leans down to my ear with a rare chuckle, relishing in Cyprien’s pained whine.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Lir murmurs, his breath coasting over my skin and sending a shiver down my spine. “Do you want that, Dagny?”

I nod, my eyelids lowering as a rush of warmth spreads from my core, curling my fingers and toes. Instead of giving in to the bond’s desires, Lir leads me toward the

bundle of furs in the corner of the room, allowing me to pick my spot before curling up next to me.

Roark and Cyprien join us in the bundle of furs while Kaebl turns and walks toward the exit, his shoulders tense and fist clenched at his side. Before I get the chance to ask where he's going, he disappears into the shadows, leaving us all confused.

"He'll be fine," Malice answers, his glowing red eye piercing me from across the room. "I'll sleep out there with him tonight." Seeing the look on my face, he adds, "And every other night after, if that is what you desire."

As he leaves, a painful throb echoes down the bond, crying out for him to reconsider, ordering me to call him back. If I said the word, I know he would, but I'm still not sure if I trust him enough to sleep next to him.

As I lie back against the furs, I tell myself I'm doing the right thing, that it's what I must do. But as I do, I know I'm lying and will break for Malice eventually.

But that's tomorrow's problem.

17

Kaabl

I toss and turn for hours, the warmth of the furs doing nothing to assuage the frost seeping beneath my skin, the knowledge that Dagny is in the other room and I cannot touch her. When I can't take any more, I rise to a sitting position, swiping my palm across my sweat-coated forehead with a silent groan.

I need some fresh air.

I know I shouldn't, that if I travel to ground level, I'm at risk of running into a horde of arachnyx or any other nocturnal creatures of The Far Place. It's a risk to my life, yet I can't stop crawling toward the small tunnel leading to the exit.

As soon as I'm free from the hollowed welwig trunk, I breathe a sigh of relief, the crisp night air flowing down my throat and invigorating the blood in my veins. My wings materialize from the shadows, snapping down in a powerful movement that has me launching into the skies. I freefall for a few seconds, relishing in the violent wind whipping around my head, sucking the air from my lungs.

My wings spread, slowing my descent just before I reach the canopy, allowing me to gain my bearings. My claws extend, wrapping around the twining limb like a vise to gain purchase. A flapping sound breaks the silence as my wings beat the air, keeping me balanced as I settle atop my perch. The crystalline leaves of the welwig rustle in the breeze like wind chimes, filling the night air with a sweet, melodic tinkling.

The branch creaks beneath my weight as I lower my chin into my hand, my eyes lazily scanning the horizon as my mind is tormented with thoughts of the past.

A rustling noise breaks out to my right, raising the hair on the back of my neck and sending a spike of adrenaline rushing through my veins. My muscles tense, preparing for a fight—but then Malice’s smirking face peeks out from the branches of the tree on my right, and irritation replaces every ounce of anxiety in my body.

What do you want?

“So rude, ” he grumbles, climbing to the top of the welwig and positioning his body in the same way as mine. “If you didn’t want me to follow, you shouldn’t have made such a ruckus when you were leaving the lair.”

I wasn’t aware I did.

Malice nods. “You’re heavy-footed, dear Kaehl. It’s your burden to bestow on the rest of the world.”

A puff of vapor billows out from my nose with my scoff. If you came to mock me, I suggest you find another spot to perch.

Malice shrugs. “I just thought you might like some company.”

I don’t.

“Pity.” He shrugs again but refuses to leave. He does, however, remain silent—a small mercy after all he’s put me through.

We sit in silence for a long while, listening to the tinkling of the welwig leaves as we breathe in the fresh night air. But being in his presence brings up those awful

memories, and before I can stop, I ask the question I swore I never would.

Why did you do it?

Malice stares out at the horizon, refusing to look despite my stare boring a hole into his profile. “Do what?”

Any of it. All of it. I blow out a breath, attempting to keep my anger in check. Why spare us? Why do any of it at all?

He turns his head to the side slowly, a knowing gleam in his glowing red eye. “After all these years, all that logic you possess, and you fail to understand. The irony has never been lost on me.” He shakes his head sadly. “It doesn’t matter... The reason I originally started this all ceases to matter. It all changed the moment I saw her, the moment I knew she was real.” He laughs softly. “The fates really are cruel. Offering her when I had already set it into motion—when there was no going back.”

You could have told me what was happening. You could have shown me where you buried Abaddon’s heart so we could reverse the sundering and stop Slaine ? —

“And that is exactly why I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t want to reverse the sundering. I couldn’t—wouldn’t—forfeit my life just to kill that misty-eyed freak. Not when we could do it without Abaddon. Not when we still can.”

You’re a fool, then.

“No, Kaebl—you are. And if not a fool, then willingly blind to anything that doesn’t fit within your narrow-minded view of how things should be. Things are hardly black or white, no matter how much you wish it to be. There were alternatives to getting what you wanted—what we both wanted—and when you and the others failed to accept that, I had to move on alone. I had to find a way to survive.”

Kaehl's gaze narrows, though his expression remains stony. And you had to betray the rest of us to do it.

"Yes."

And if Dagny never came along?

He shrugs. "You and the others would be rotting in Slaine's dungeons. He would be dead, and I would be ruling his wretched kingdom. That, and searching the world over for my mate." He looks off into the distance, a wry smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "You know it's funny... just how much seeing her for the first time changed everything."

Why change the plan at all? Seems like you'd still get everything you wanted, plus Dagny all to yourself.

He shrugs. "Maybe it's because I don't really want to be a king. Perhaps it's because I was afraid I would fail. Maybe it's because I wasn't ambitious enough to do it on my own."

You're lying.

He chuckles softly. "I guess I am. When you lie to others so often and for so long, it becomes a comfort to lie to yourself as well." He stares into the distance, his eyes glossing. "Truthfully... it's because I knew she'd never forgive me."

His eyes find mine across the distance, and I'm struck with an overwhelming flood of devastation down the bond we share. "She would never forgive me if I left you to die or I ripped her away from any of her other mates. This path—the one where I save you—is the one where I have a chance. A possibility of her mercy, no matter how small."

You love her.

“I worship her,” he answers.

The absolution in his tone strikes me to my core, and I tip my head to the side, seeing Malice in a brand-new light. Then we are not so different after all.

His gaze cuts to the side, shining with a secret shared between just us two.

“I guess not.”

18

Dagny

This is not where I fell asleep.

Panic floods my system as I stare at the dark brown furs I'm currently nestled in—a completely different shade from the beige ones I remember Lir putting me to sleep in. The smell of burning firewood clings to the pelts, warm and smoky and subtle enough to be pleasant. It covers my skin, fills my lungs, and blankets me in calm, similar to the sensation I experience with my mates.

As the last of my anxiety washes away, I become aware of a warm, nuzzling pressure on my hip. I pull the blanket up to look, and my mouth pops in surprise to find Fenryr curled around my lower half, nuzzling his cheek against the glowing bond mark on my hip.

A low chuckle rumbles in his chest, and I have no doubt he senses my gaze on him. Never breaking contact, Fenryr straightens out, keeping one hand on my stomach as he positions himself at my side.

“Hello, pup. Sleep well?” Fenryr’s hushed tone pours over my skin like warmed honey, sending a pleasurable shiver down my spine as all my fine muscles tighten and twinge in anticipation. The heat running through my veins travels to my face, flushing my cheeks and filling my head with a rhythmic whooshing. His clawed hand slides over my abdomen, tearing through my bodysuit and exposing my lower stomach to the cool morning air.

“ Fenryr? ” I whisper, turning my head to the side to find a pair of hooded emerald eyes staring hungrily into mine. “ You’re awake.”

Fenryr’s lips pull back into a smile, his canines lengthening past his bottom lip as he shreds through the rest of the fabric, exposing me fully. “I’m starving. ”

I swallow hard, my eyes widening as he shreds through the remnants of my clothing, careful not to nick my skin with his razor-sharp claws. Something thick and hard presses into my hip, and I gaze downward, my eyes widening in shock to find Fenryr’s bare cock pressing against me. It’s equal in size and girth to my other mates, but unlike theirs, Fenryr’s base is adorned with two swollen, bulblike structures. A knot.

“ Fenryr...”

“Mm-hmm?” The absentminded noise rumbles in his chest as he lowers his head to my neck, raking the pointed tips of his canines against my pulse point. My breath quickens as he bites down, pinching the skin but not quite breaking it, and my body reacts with a rush of pleasure that spreads through my veins like wildfire. I lose all sensibility as the bond ignites, filling me with a hunger that only my mate can satiate.

“Please, Fenryr,” I whisper. “I need you.”

With a possessive growl, Fenryr rolls me to my side, pressing his abdomen flush against my back as he yanks the remaining fabric from my body. His hips jerk, brushing the head of his swollen cock against my ass as his palm slides over the curve of my hip. With a groan, Fenryr pushes the head of his cock past that tight ring of muscle, drawing a gasp from my parted lips as a shock of pain floods my system. My body tenses, fighting to accommodate the sheer size of Fenryr’s cock as he pushes it deeper and deeper inside.

“Your ass is fucking amazing,” he chokes, lowering his head to my shoulder and sinking his teeth into the flesh with another throaty moan. “So fucking tight.”

A whimper pours from my lips as he thrusts, but it’s overpowered by his sadistic chuckle. “Crying already? I’m not even halfway.” Another thrust, and tears spring to my eyes, rolling over my cheeks and coating my face in moisture as Fenryr groans in ecstasy.

“I can’t wait to fill you with my cum,” he whispers, his voice a sinful hush. “It’s all I’ve been thinking of. All I’ve been dreaming of.”

His cock slides deeper, filling me past the point I thought was possible. And it hurts, but it also feels so good— too good. The only thing that would make it better would be another filling my pussy.

There’s a rustling noise, then claws scraping against the floor as someone crawls over to Fenryr’s bed. A moment later, a pair of glowing blue eyes shine in front of me, glossy and unfocused after being yanked from slumber.

Lir blinks, and his expression morphs to one of ravenous hunger, his nostrils widening as he scents my arousal hanging heavy in the air. “ So sweet, ” he whispers, his eyes flickering with shadows as he reaches a clawed hand up to my face. His palm curls around my jaw as Fenryr pushes his hips flush against my ass, his cock settling in the deepest part of me.

Lir lunges forward, capturing my scream as he crashes his mouth against mine. The cry turns to a whimper as Lir’s lips work against mine, bruising and passionate and all-consuming. The discomfort fades to a blissful sensation as my body adjusts to Fenryr’s size, a feeling that crests as he begins moving gently inside me. Lir trails his hand down my stomach, his fingertips stopping at the apex of my thighs. A lazy smirk pulls at his mouth as he teases them closer to my clit, moving at an

excruciating pace.

“Please,” I whimper, wriggling my hips to entice him closer. “Please, Lir.”

“You know I can’t deny you anything,” he murmurs, his eyes narrowing in concentration as he dips a finger into my dripping pussy. Another follows shortly after, and he curls them inward, pressing against the bundle of nerves begging for his attention. He continues thrusting as his thumb finds my clit, drawing gentle circles and bringing me to a new high.

My vision blurs as the sensation crests, spreading from my core in a flood of warmth and bliss and starlight. It travels to my fingertips and explodes from my open mouth in a scream of ecstasy as the world shatters around me.

My body shudders in the aftermath, my vision blanketed by a million shooting, swirling stars—but Lir doesn’t let me rest.

At his order, Fenryr rolls to his back, keeping his cock deep inside me as he wraps his arms around my middle, holding me flush to his chest. Lir positions himself between the V in Fenryr’s legs, his eyes flickering with shadows and a ravenous, animalistic glint.

He reaches down, palming his thick cock and stroking as his eyes trail down my body, stopping to appreciate the sight of my hole gaping around Fenryr’s length.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, taking his lip between his teeth as he presses forward, rubbing his cock around my entrance, coating the head in my arousal. “You’re so wet for me. So fucking needy.”

He pushes inside me, the fullness combined with Fenryr’s cock stretching my ass too much to bear. A pitiful mewl pours from my lips as he shoves his cock deeper, a

powerful growl rumbling in his chest as his eyes roll to the back of his skull. The sounds of our pleasure wake the others, and the next thing I know, Roark is crawling to me on all fours, his tongue swiping slowly across his bottom lip.

Roark kneels by my head as Fenryr and Lir continue thrusting, synchronizing their powerful movements and filling me so completely, it has tears welling in my eyes. Pleasure ripples throughout my body as Roark folds his palm around my throat, slowly cutting off my oxygen and making my head swim.

The room fades out of focus as Roark cups his other palm around my breast, gently squeezing and toying with the sensitive peak of my nipple. An appreciative hum echoes in his chest as his cock springs to attention, the head beaded with precum and inching toward my open mouth. I turn my head to the side, spreading my lips as wide as possible to welcome the pulsing cock. Salt coats my tongue as Roark thrusts inside, a husky groan exploding into the air as he hits the back of my throat.

As he starts moving, Cyprien appears at my side, his eyes flickering with shadows and canines lengthening. Kneeling by my chest, he slides his palm down my abdomen, stopping right as his fingertips brush my clit.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, spreading his palm over my apex as he appreciates the sight of my bared pussy. “I want to watch the way it quivers when you come on their cocks.”

Careful not to get in the way of Lir’s relentless thrusting, Cyprien draws gentle circles around the bundle of nerves, adding gasoline to the fire burning in my core. Electricity crackles through my veins, pooling in the tips of my fingers and exploding in a vibrant show of silver light as my pleasure crests.

“Come ,” Cyprien whispers, pressing the pad of his thumb against my clit. “Come for me.”

That last little touch is all it takes. My body spasms as I come, my release coming so sudden and violent it causes my vision to fade to black.

When I come back to life, Roark's cock is buried deep in my throat, keeping my moan buried in my chest and cutting off my oxygen. My eyes fill with tears as the head of his cock brushes my tonsils, a pit of dread building in my stomach when I notice he's not even halfway inside.

"Fuck yes," Roark groans, his eyes rolling to the back of his head as he pushes deeper still, causing the tears to spill down my cheeks. "You feel so fucking good."

A whimper shakes my chest as Cyprien continues toying with my clit, causing my muscles to shudder and convulse as he teases the oversensitive area.

"Eyes up here, beautiful," Lir breathes, drawing my attention back to the demons ravaging my lower half. "I want to watch your face when he fills you."

My eyes widen as Fenryr picks up his speed, his hips jerking erratically as he pounds in and out of my tight hole. His breathing quickens, his muscles quivering as his cock grows impossibly larger inside me. Fenryr thrusts once, twice more and stills, his cock pulsing with his release as the base swells, locking me in place. A groan explodes from his throat as his control snaps, and his claws extend, piercing my skin and dotting my hips with bloodred pearls, toeing the line between pleasure and pain.

As Fenryr fills me, Lir wraps his palms around my knees, using the added leverage to increase the pace of his thrusts. His eyes gloss over as he fucks me without abandon, like this is the first and the last time, and he needs to make it count.

"Mine, " he growls, pressing his hips flush against me, coating his skin in my arousal. "All mine. "

Lir's chin tilts to the ceiling as his muscles quiver, beads of sweat trickling down his sculpted abdomen and dripping to the furs below. His eyes roll to the back of his skull as his cock pulses, shooting hot ropes of cum to the deepest part of me, filling my womb.

A cry of ecstasy bubbles up my throat, echoing into the air at the same time that Roark mercifully pulls his cock from my mouth. He wraps a massive palm around the length, stroking slowly as he tightens the other around my throat. At the same time, Cyprien continues toying with my clit as Fenryr begins moving in my ass once more, giving me zero time to recover and driving me mad with the overwhelming stimuli.

"You take their cum so well," Roark murmurs, cutting off the flow of blood to my brain and causing my vision to fade. "But you haven't had enough yet."

Cyprien

A desperate mewl falls from Dagny's swollen lips as Lir slips his cock out of her dripping hole. Roark slaps a hand over her mouth, silencing her cry as Fenryr slides his still pulsing length from her ass, leaving her empty and needy.

Placing a bruising kiss to her shoulder, Fenryr places her onto the furs beside him, keeping her legs spread and pussy bared for me. As I kneel between her legs, Fenryr rolls out of the way, making room for Roark as he prepares for a second round.

I look deep into Dagny's eyes as I inch the head of my cock toward her dripping center, my mind a fog of want and a deep desire to fill her with my seed. My palms find her hips as I thrust forward, pushing past her entrance. A throaty groan echoes from my throat as her walls clench around me, drawing me deeper and threatening to send me over the edge.

My eyes trail down her curvy body, stopping to appreciate her full breasts and hips, and the gentle curve of her stomach. I can't help but think how she'll look when her belly swells—when I fill her with my litter. And suddenly, I can't wait any longer.

“Come for me, bunny,” I whisper, sliding my fingers down to her clit, teasing her with gentle circles as her hips open, inviting me deeper. “Come for me while I breed you.”

One more swirl, and she obeys. Her head falls back in a broken cry as her walls

collapse around me, allowing me to push that last length inside. My hips press flush against her ass as fire courses through my veins, boiling my blood and forcing a powerful groan from my chest.

“Fuck,” I curse, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as I find my release. My cock throbs, filling her with my seed as her walls contract and shudder in the aftermath of her orgasm, drawing out the pleasure spreading through my body. “Fuck, this pussy is amazing.”

Suddenly, my body is knocked to the side, causing me to pull out of Dagny far before I was ready. I jerk my head to the side with a frown, only for it to pull into a smirk as I watch Roark inching his cock toward Dagny’s pussy, glistening beautifully in the light.

Roark shifts forward, rubbing the head of his cock along the trail of cum leaking from her used holes, an appreciative hum echoing in his broad chest. “You’re finally ready for me, sweet little doe.”

With a groan, Roark pushes his massive cock past Dagny’s entrance, drawing a scream of ecstasy from her parted lips. Her cry is matched by the violent waves of pleasure shuddering down the bond, reflected in the expression on Roark’s face as he thrusts to the back of Dagny’s walls.

Her eyes flit downward, widening in shock to find him barely halfway inside, and a slow smirk creeps across his bearded face. “You’re doing so well, sweet girl. You can take it.”

Her brow pinches in concentration as she rolls her hips, opening up to take him deeper. Roark’s breathing turns ragged as he begins moving in her, gentle thrusts that turn to brutal strokes as he stretches her past the point of comfort.

Dagny's muscles twinge and shudder as Roark brings her closer to the edge, her gaze unfocused and breath coming in short, uneven pants. He slides his hand around her throat, applying pressure to her pulse points and taking away that last bit of control.

Roark pumps his hips, seating his cock as deep as it will go as Dagny comes, her release lost to the moan that explodes from the demon's mouth. The brand mark on his thigh glows with a radiant purple light as he fills her with another load of cum, marking her as his for all the stars to see. Keeping his cock deep inside her, Roark leans forward, capturing Dagny's breath with a bruising kiss. His chest rumbles with pride as he reaches a hand up to her face, cupping her delicate cheek with a great tenderness shining in his eyes. "You did so well," he whispers, placing one last chaste kiss to her forehead. "So, so well."

I push on Roark's shoulder, impatience roiling through my veins as I wait for him to move to the side. As soon as he does, I lie on the ground between Dagny's spread legs, my tongue swiping across my bottom lip as I gaze at her glistening pussy.

"You're so fucking full," I whisper, watching the flood of cum seep from her used pussy. "Just like a good breeding bunny should be." Smirking, I dip a finger inside Dagny's cum-filled hole, swirling it in the slickness before adding another, using the added girth to shove the cum back inside Dagny's cunt where it belongs. It's not enough. Never enough.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, Fenryr appears crouched at Dagny's side, one hand on her breast and the other on her lower stomach, pushing down gently. All the cum I pushed back inside seeps past my fingers and onto the furs below, and my frown deepens. "Don't do that."

Fenryr just smiles, his eyes narrowed and glinting with a ravenous light. "Move."

I sigh, but do as he asks. As soon as I do, he pushes Dagny's knees together and flips

her onto her stomach, pinning her arms behind her back as he straddles her thighs. With one hand clutching her wrists, he braces the other on the furs by her head, keeping him upright as he mounts Dagny from behind.

His hips press flush against Dagny's ass as he shoves his cock to the back of her walls, a deep groan overshadowing Dagny's shocked cry.

He pushes inside Dagny's pussy, stretching her. "You're mine. Mine to fuck, mine to breed." He leans down, nipping her ear. "You'll be so fucking full of my seed, the others won't matter."

He pumps in and out of her savagely, the veins along his forearms throbbing as he nears his release. A groan explodes from his open mouth as he slams forward, pressing the bulb at the base of his cock flush against her entrance. His canines extend, piercing his lower lip as he continues pressing his hips forward, causing sweat to bead along his brow. With one last thrust, Fenryr's knot slips into Dagny's cunt, swelling and trapping him inside as he comes deep inside her.

His hips jerk erratically, small movements that cause Dagny's body to move with his, locked in place by the swollen bud. A whimper echoes in his chest as his eyes fill with an animalistic hunger, and he snaps forward, sinking his teeth deep into Dagny's shoulder.

Her head falls, eyes hooded with a faraway look—too exhausted to react to the bite of pain. Fenryr stills at the sight but doesn't pull out, his cock still locked inside due to the swollen knot.

With a groan, he releases her shoulder and rolls onto his side, taking Dagny's limp body with him. His forearm wraps around her stomach, keeping her back pressed flush against him as he peppers kisses along the fresh bite mark on her shoulder. Lir, Roark, and I crawl to join them in the pile of furs, having to lie partially on top of one

another in order to have equal access to Dagny.

Fenryr stays at her back, kissing along her spine as the three of us reach out, running our hands over Dagny's beautifully curvy frame and bathing in the aftermath. Small mewls pour from her lips as her eyes drift closed, lost to the pleasure thrumming through the bond, sizzling in her veins.

Fenryr continues thrusting inside her every now and then, still rock hard and just as needy as before he came in her— twice .

“Stop being so greedy,” I grumble, locking eyes with Fenryr as jealousy roils in the pit of my stomach.

He continues pumping erratically, his breathing turning ragged. “I can’t stop,” he whines, lowering his forehead to her shoulder as a shudder runs through his body. “It feels so fucking good. So fucking tight.”

Dagny's eyes open lazily as a low moan fills the air, her back arching in an attempt to take Fenryr deeper, desperate to be bred. Her muscles quiver helplessly as Fenryr picks up speed, thrusting harder and deeper with each pitiful moan that falls from her lips.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck, I’m going to come again.” As soon as the words are out, Fenryr drops his head back with a throaty moan, his abdomen rippling, dripping with glistening beads of sweat. Dagny's eyes spring open, her face twisting in pain and pleasure as her stomach distends, filling with Fenryr's release.

His body shudders in the aftermath, his breathing ragged and his eyes swirling with shadows. But just when I think he's finally had his fill, his veins light with a new vigor, and he begins moving in her again. Dagny moans, the ring of silver around her pupil brightening with each hurried thrust, losing herself in the feel of her mate taking

her over and over again.

Sensing my shocked gaze, Fenryr locks eyes with me, giving me a hedonistic smirk as he reaches down and swirls his fingers around Dagny's clit.

A rustling noise draws my attention to the opposite end of the room, and my chest clenches in surprise at the sight of Kaebl standing at the doorway holding a pile of bundled armor, his shoulders quaking with an indiscernible emotion as a thick cloud of shadows swirls around his frame. His golden gaze is locked on Dagny and Fenryr, standing utterly still save for the slight tic in his jaw and the twitch of his upper lip.

The vein in his temple throbs as he watches, unblinking, eyes shining with a desperate hunger as Dagny comes around Fenryr's cock, filling the room with the sounds of her pleasure. His gaze travels down her trembling body with an intensity that heats the air, his breathing ragged and skin shuddering as he tries to stop his beast from breaking free.

Sensing his stare, Fenryr turns his eyes toward Kaebl, cutting him a sly smile as he continues fucking Dagny, pumping in and out of her without abandon, indifferent to the watchful audience. Fenryr thrusts once more and slams his hips against Dagny's ass, his attention refocusing on his mate as he pushes a third load deep into Dagny's womb.

Dagny cries out at the incredible sensation of fullness, her eyes unwittingly finding Kaebl's across the distance. Shock lights her pretty brown gaze, but it's overshadowed by the hazy film of ecstasy coursing through her veins, dulling her mind to anything other than the feeling of Fenryr's cock.

Kaebl continues watching in silence, but the aura from his outline betrays his innermost thoughts and desires. Just when I think he's going to lunge forward and join in, Kaebl pulls his gaze away, his movements choppy as he places the pile of

clothes on the floor. A spike of pain shudders down the bond, echoing in our souls, but it's gone as soon as it appears. With one last lingering glance at Dagny, he turns on his heel and walks out of the bedroom, each step looking more painful than the previous.

Dagny's cries soften to breathy moans as she finishes, eyes glossed and seemingly unaware of Kaehl's intrusion. Her body collapses as she rides out the last waves of pleasure, her skin glowing with an effervescent light that matches the ring around her iris.

Finally satiated, Fenryr slips his cock from her pussy, accompanied by a thick flood of cum that flows down Dagny's thighs, saturating her skin and coating the furs beneath. His grip tightens around her stomach as he pulls her impossibly closer against him, an appreciative hum vibrating his chest as he leisurely runs his palm over her skin, memorizing every inch of her.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to the tip of her nose, the pressure causing her eyes to open as a lazy smile tugs at her mouth. "Hi..."

"Hello to you too, my beautiful mate." I slide my hand over her forehead, brushing the fine strands of hair away to reveal more of her heart-stoppingly stunning face. "How do you feel?"

"Amazing," she whispers, her eyes fluttering closed as Lir and Roark begin massaging her neck and thighs. "I think I'm in heaven."

A low chuckle shakes my abdomen as I lean forward, brushing my lips against hers. "You did so well. Such a perfect little breeding bunny." I nip at her bottom lip, my blood heating at the little squeal that springs from her throat. "I can't wait to fill you again." I cut a glare toward Fenryr, my gaze narrowing for a single moment. "I would now, if someone hadn't kept you all to himself."

“Not my fault,” he murmurs, hiding his smirk behind Dagny’s shoulders as his hips jerk toward her ass. “I was quite literally stuck. She’s fucking addicting.”

“That’s an understatement,” Roark says, his eyes shining with a beaming purple light as he gazes down at his mate. “She’s like oxygen.”

“She’s life itself,” Lir agrees, pressing a delicate kiss to her thigh. “ Our mate.”

“Ours,” we all agree in tandem, sharing matching grins as the bond thrums with bliss.

I’m about to suggest round two when Lir’s smile drops, his head whipping toward the door Kaehl disappeared through a few minutes ago.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, shifting closer to Dagny protectively. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing.” Lir shakes his head. “Just Kaehl. He says he wants to talk to Dagny about something.” He turns toward her, a small smirk pulling at his mouth. “Whenever she’s ready, that is.”

Fenryr whines, his eyes rolling to the ceiling. “He always has to fucking ruin the moment.”

“Kill-joy.” Roark nods in agreement, irritation clean across his brow. “I guess we should take her to him... as long as Dagny feels up to it.”

We all look toward her, waiting for a response. After a few seconds, Dagny nods, her eyes shining with apprehension. “Okay... but can I... maybe take a bath first?”

Before I can answer, Malice appears in the doorway, a sinister smile pulling at his mouth and a ravenous glint in his molten red eye.

“What a lovely idea.”

20

Dagny

A growl rumbles in Cyprien's throat as Malice's sinful voice echoes along the walls, sending a shiver down my spine and filling my head with a loud whirring noise. I can't take my eyes off him, can't move, can't breathe while he's looking at me like that—like he wants to eat me.

“What do you want?” Fenryr demands, clutching my stomach possessively. “You weren't invited.”

Malice gives Fenryr no indication he heard him. He just keeps staring with that eerie, all-knowing smile. My neck heats as his gaze lowers to my bared center, thick shadows swirling in the corners of his eyes as he watches the line of cum dripping from my pussy. “You've never looked more beautiful,” Malice murmurs, his tongue swiping across his bottom lip. “You're glowing. ”

My lips part as the bond tightens, attempting to pull me toward my traitorous mate. I shake my head to clear the haze of desire, then reach for one of the furs. Malice's smirk drops to a frown as I pull the blanket over my body, followed by a muted whimper that strikes a chord in my heart. “Are you okay?”

“Just sorry to watch you cover yourself,” he murmurs, his eyes glossing with a faraway look, a fantasy swirling in the darkened corners of his mind. “You said you wanted a bath? I can help you down there.”

“Aren’t you the one who always says she doesn’t need any help?” Fenryr snaps. “You just want to take her from me.”

“I don’t want to. I’m going to,” Malice deadpans. “If you’d like to join us, you’re more than welcome.”

Fenryr ponders for a long moment, then loosens his grip, allowing me to push into a sitting position. I clutch the blanket to my chest as I meet Malice’s gaze, heat creeping up the back of my neck at the gleam of hunger that greets me.

“Follow me,” he murmurs, crooking his fingers in my direction before turning and stalking out of the room. I fold the furs around my body as I stand on shaking legs, focused on staying upright as the room tilts on its axis.

Cyprien and Lir rush to my sides, offering their forearms to help me balance as Roark and Fenryr lead the way out of the bedroom and down to the bath house. A blast of humid air greets me as I step into the heated room, filling my lungs with condensation and causing me to choke. I blink against the swirling fog as I attempt to locate Malice, but instead, I’m met with Kaebl’s stony expression, his eyes like twin golden flames flickering in the void.

I follow the valley of muscle trailing down his chest and abdomen, stopping to appreciate the deep v cut into his hips. I try to see where it leads, but the glare from the water's surface conceals what’s beneath, and I’m struck with a pang of disappointment.

Kaebl’s throat shakes with a silent chuckle as he observes the conflicting emotions running across my face, but before he has a chance to comment on it, Malice’s voice rings out from the far end of the pool.

“It’s not as impressive as you might think, I’m afraid.”

Kaehl cuts a heated glare toward Malice, his shoulders tensing. No one was talking to you.

“Ah, but the silence was stifling.” He leans back against the stone ledge, his smirk widening to a grin as he crooks his fingers, inviting me inside. “Come. No blankets allowed, though.”

I keep his stare, refusing to back down as I step away from Lir and Cyprien, unfurling my arms and allowing the furs to slide from my shoulders, pooling on the stone floor in a heap. Roark steps to the side, an appreciative hum vibrating in the base of his throat as he watches me pass by. The water laps my ankles as I step into the shallow end, the heated magic tickling my skin, traveling up to my waist as I wade deeper into the pool—toward Kaehl.

I stop directly in front of him, Malice’s heated stare burning into my profile as I tip my chin up to meet Kaehl full on. “Can you help untangle my hair?”

He nods, lost for words as I turn, lowering my head backward into the water. My hair spreads out in a sheet of dark brown strands, rippling with each slight wave and vibration.

Jealousy ripples from Malice’s shoulders in heated waves as he looks on, his skin roiling with the need to touch me, to take me from Kaehl. While the two of them exchange hostile glances, Lir, Cyprien, Kaehl, and Roark slip into the pool, their eyes wide as they wait with bated breath for the situation to play out.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” I ask, gazing up at Kaehl through my lashes. “Lir mentioned it after...” My face flushes as the memories come flooding in, causing Kaehl’s mouth to tip in a small smile, his eyes creasing at the corners.

There’s no need to be embarrassed, little one. You should take pride in pleasuring

your mates.

I lower my gaze as the heat creeps up to my eyebrows, unable to come up with a good response. “I will... from now on.”

Good. He nods resolutely as his fingers continue working the knots from my hair, careful not to make direct contact with my skin. As for what I wanted to talk about... it depends if you’re ready for it.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” I murmur, my eyes lowering in bliss as he rakes his claws lightly against the base of my scalp. “Go on. Spill.”

Kaeb1 sighs, turning his head toward Malice, bringing attention to the knowing glint in his eye. Malice and I spoke last night. I truly believe we want the same thing. And I’m not asking you to forgive him, but I do want to ask if you’ll give him another chance to prove himself.

“I honestly never thought I’d hear you ask me to trust Malice,” I whisper, my head reeling from his request. “What changed your mind about him?”

Just something he said. It reminded me that beneath his many flaws, there’s still a soul worth preserving. He turns his attention back down to me, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. Plus, he’s far more knowledgeable when it comes to halflings. It would be a shame to cast him out without trying to use it to our advantage first.

“Okay...”

Which is why I want you to let him train you.

I whip my head, my mouth falling open in shock at the dead-serious expression pinching his face. “Train me?”

Yes.

“As in?—”

“Magic.” Malice’s smile widens as he wades closer toward me through the pool. “I’m going to show you how to harness that lovely power in your veins.”

“Can’t someone else show me?”

Malice clutches his chest, covering up the gaping cavern where his heart should be. “Such cruel words. And after I went through all the trouble of getting you out of that disgusting dungeon.”

“Are we pretending that you weren’t the one who put me there in the first place?”

Malice waves it off with a smirk. “That was such a long time ago. So much has changed—the depths of my obsession with you, for starters. Why, it’s practically endless now.”

I purse my lips as a wave of irritation crests in my veins, though it’s overshadowed by the thrumming warmth traveling down the bond. “Kaebl might be ready to forgive and forget what you did, but I’m not. A few sweet lines won’t win me over.”

“I feared as much.” Malice’s smirk drops, his mask cracking as his chest heaves with a dejected sigh. “I know the last thing you want is to spend time with me right now, but it’s necessary. At least for the first part.”

“The first part?”

He nods. “You have to block the energy you allow into your body. Right now, it comes and goes as it pleases, surging whenever your emotions are out of control. If

you take too much too soon, it could shatter your mind.”

“And the others can’t teach me that because...?”

“Because I know the most about halflings of all of us—even Fenryr. With me, you’ll have the best chance of controlling your magic. Of course, the others can oversee and offer alternative strategies when we get further down the line in your training, but for this first step, you’ll have to trust me.”

I turn my gaze to the rippling water, focusing on the swirling clouds of vapor hanging just above the surface of the pool. Trust Malice... can I really do that?

“Okay,” I whisper. “Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll train with you.”

I bring my head up, surprised to find a genuine smile spreading across Malice’s face. “Perfect. Let’s go.”

I jerk, taken aback by the eagerness in his tone. “You want to start now ?”

“I’m not a patient creature, Dagny,” he whispers, his eye glowing with a deadly promise. “And I’ve waited far too long already.”

The air is sucked from my lungs as my eyes find his across the distance, that invisible cord wrapping around my heart and pulling tight as a wave of lust shudders through the bond. My mouth dries as Malice rises out of the pool, his sculpted body glistening in the flickering orange light as a thousand shimmering dewdrops bead across his skin.

“Meet me upstairs in five minutes,” he says, turning on his heel abruptly and stalking toward the stairs. He stops at the threshold, turning his head over his shoulder with a smirk pulling at his mouth, his words leaving me no choice but to obey. “I have

something important to show you.”

* * *

A few minutes later, the other demons and I are dried off and dressed in fresh clothing. An air of anxiety hangs heavy in the air as we all try to guess what Malice has in store for us. Kaebl stays in the bathing chamber as I lead the way up the stairs and into the main chamber where the exit tunnel lies, the lingering smell of Malice’s scent telling me exactly where he’s waiting.

We pour out of the stairwell, and sure enough, Malice stands in the center of the room, a secretive grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, highlighting the dimples carved into the hollows of his cheeks.

“Just in time. Follow me.”

Instead of heading for the exit like I expected, Malice walks to the opposite wall and places his hand on the shimmering ice, a rush of energy bursting from his skin in a glowing red light. A secret doorway opens like a gaping mouth. The shadows just beyond the threshold swirl ominously, warning me away from the space. Without waiting, Malice ducks into the tunnel, his outline disappearing as he descends into the earth, leaving me no choice but to follow.

I take a deep breath before descending the narrow stairwell, a shudder running down my spine as the air cools, whipping through the tunnel and caressing my exposed skin with its icy fingers.

I step into a small, darkened room with uneven floor and walls, as if less care had been taken to carve out this particular space. A single sconce hangs from the far wall, illuminating the room with a faint orange glow and casting flickering shadows along the outline of the fleshy creature heaped in the corner.

A gasp rings out over my shoulder, though I can't tear my eyes away to see which of my mates it originated from—I'm too busy staring at that horrible thing.

Mottled gray skin stretches painfully over four long, gangly limbs—disproportionately sized compared to its short, humanoid torso. Its fleshy abdomen undulates with each shallow breath, the air whistling between its ribs with a horrible rattling noise that sends a shudder down my spine. My gaze travels along the bony projection of its spine toward the head, my stomach clenching as I prepare to take in its face.

The gaping mouth of the kleptak is just as horrifying as I remember—possibly more so—because at this distance, I'm able to see every single hooked tooth lining its lipless, sucking maw. Though it possesses no means to see, the kleptak whips its head to the spot where I'm standing. The movement is accompanied by an ear-piercing shriek that reverberates off the walls and down to the marrow of my bones.

“What... why the fuck do you have that?” Cyprien whispers, his voice shaking with fright—the first time I've ever heard it like that. “Dagny! Get behind me!”

“Don't be so dramatic,” Malice murmurs, his glowing red eye materializing in the shadowed corner of the room. “Mor can't hurt anyone. Not with the way she's chained.”

“You named it?” Lir demands, his eyes wide in horror. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“So, so much.” Malice shrugs nonchalantly.

“Is this what you wanted to show her?” Roark asks, his tone equally as shocked. “For what possible purpose other than to terrify your mate?”

Malice rolls his eyes, his chest heaving with a sigh. “It must be so nice and peaceful to possess a brain filled with nothing other than fluff.” His gaze cuts across the room, narrowing on Roark’s bearded face. “I’m not trying to scare her, you oversized oaf. I went through great lengths to acquire Mor so we could use her to train Dagny.”

“Train me?”

Malice turns to face me with a grin. “Yes. Kleptaks are the closest creatures to demons in terms of intelligence and power. If you can learn to control Mor, you’ll be unstoppable.”

“She’s not going anywhere fucking near that thing,” Fenryr snarls, stepping in front of me protectively. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I thought they were friendly?” I ask, turning my gaze toward Cyprien, who told me the information originally. “Aren’t they?”

“I was just teasing you,” he murmurs, shaking his head resolutely. “Kleptaks... those things are some of the deadliest creatures in The Far Place. A single one can consume an entire group of demons in the blink of an eye.” He shivers. “Fucking soul suckers.”

I stare at the gaping hole in the center of its face, my stomach clenching as I realize what its purpose serves. “Isn’t that kind of what you guys do?”

His face pinches in indignation. “It’s different.”

“Doesn’t really seem like it,” I murmur, my gaze tracking down the outline of the kleptak, wondering how many souls it’s consumed. “So... how am I supposed to control it?” I ask, directing my question toward Malice.

“You’re not going near it,” Fenryr snaps, his gaze lighting with possessiveness. “I need to keep you safe.”

“She’ll be fine as long as she stays farther than three feet,” Malice says, his eyes trailing to the ceiling. “Luckily for you, we’re not going to do anything with Mor today. First, I need to show Dagny how to build her mental walls.”

My expression sours at the sight of the expectant grin spreading across Malice’s face, my brain failing to come up with a good excuse.

“Okay,” I sigh. “Show me how.”

Malice

“You’re doing amazing,” I whisper, my tone a revered hush. “Just a little more... There, just like that... Good fucking girl .”

The silver ring around Dagny’s iris fades as the last piece of her mental wall settles into place, her eyes returning to a lovely, warm chocolate brown as the untamed energy of The Far Place is cut off. She slumps forward in my arms, her body utterly spent, and a wave of relief travels down the bond in the absence of that thrumming, violent energy.

“How do you feel?” I ask, rubbing my palm soothingly over her spine. “Any better?”

“Yeah, actually... A lot better...” Dagny’s lids lower as her muscles unwind, sinking deeper into my chest and spreading pleasure throughout my being.

Dagny’s other mates sit in a half circle, worry rolling off their shoulders as they stare at the beautiful creature in my arms. They’re ready to spring into action and rip my head from my shoulders if anything goes wrong. As if I would let it.

Slowly, Dagny raises her head, blinking away the haze coating her vision as she stares deep into my eyes.

“What’s next?” she asks, her voice hoarse. “I’m ready for anything.”

“You’re ready to pass out, is what you are,” Fenryr grumbles, his expression pinched in distress. “Why don’t you take a little break? When Cyprien and Lir get back from their hunt with Kaabl, we can?—”

“Would you stop worrying so much?” I snap. “She wants to try. Let her.”

He crosses his arms, his lips forming into a pout. “I don’t want her to get damaged.”

“Would you listen to yourself?” I scoff. “She’s your mate, not a possession.”

“She’s mine. I fail to see the difference.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know why I keep fooling myself into thinking you’re capable of productive conversation. Just... stay quiet and let us work.”

I place Dagny carefully onto her feet, keeping one arm around her waist on the off chance her legs give out. “Good?”

“Perfect,” she murmurs, pulling her shoulders back and forcing her chin into the air. “What else can you show me?”

I gesture for her to take a seat on the floor, then crouch in front of her, reaching out and grasping her palms in mine. “Remember how you built the wall? Just do that, but in reverse—just a brick or two—enough to let a sliver of energy into you.”

Dagny closes her eyes, her face pinching in concentration as she attempts to chip away at her barrier. A rush of magic travels down the bond, filling my chest with its tingling warmth as a silver ring beams from beneath Dagny’s eyelids.

“Good. Now focus—bend it to your will—force it into the palms of your hands.”

I shift out of the way just before a powerful gust of air explodes from her palms, shooting through the space where my head used to be. Dagny's eyes widen as her barrier slams closed, cutting off the flow of magic and causing the wind to still.

"Oh my gods, are you okay?" she asks, her voice laced with desperation. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not this time." I grin, spreading my arms and tilting my head side to side to show I still have full use of my body. "You'll have to try a little harder next time."

"I think I'm good for a minute or two," she says, her head falling back to the heavens as she tries to catch her breath. "Just need a minute... that was harder than I thought it would be."

"It is. But it will be an immeasurable asset in battle."

"Yeah, unless they hit me with their air magic first," she murmurs.

"No, they won't. Most demons can't use magic. And if they can, they prefer to use their teeth and claws to fight. You can draw directly from the source, but others gain it from consuming souls—a lot—and there are simply not enough of them to support widespread use. Even Kaehl and I and the others have to use our magic sparingly."

"The energy... where does it come from? Why do I have access to it, but you don't?"

I let out a breath, my gaze flicking to the horizon as I consider how to answer her question. "To be honest... no one really knows why halflings have that gift. We've only observed that souls born in the mortal realm and brought here have a stronger tie to the magic in this place. So it's safe to assume your ability has everything to do with your lineage. However, we do know this place and all the magic flowing within it comes from the welwigs."

“The trees?” she asks, her lips parting in shock. “The fucking trees ?”

“No need to get so worked up about it,” I murmur, a silent chuckle shaking my chest. “And yes. They’re the... gods of this world, if you want to think of it like that. Everything in The Far Place begins and ends with those cursed trees—a giant, frozen, fucked-up circle of life. They feed the land, create the beings, drive us to hunger... no one knows how or why, only that they do.”

“That’s... ominous.”

I nod solemnly. “But they also provide us with drugs, so I have a soft spot for them.”

“Well... at least that makes sense.”

A chuckle shakes my chest as I look into her eyes, so warm and tender and different from the way I’m used to her staring at me. “Any other burning questions?”

“I think I’m good for now.”

“In that case...” I turn my attention toward the four demons burning a hole into my profile, a taunting smile pulling at my mouth. “Perhaps I should let Fenryr take you for a small rest. Just for the rest of the day. I see that look on your face.” I know deep down she wants to keep going, to train and fight until she physically can’t move anymore, but I also cannot allow her to push herself to that point. “We’ll start first thing tomorrow when the others return from their hunt. Deal?”

“Okay,” she murmurs, her gaze narrowing. “But not a minute later.”

22

Roark

“No. Go again.”

Dagny’s chest heaves with her frantic breath as she wipes her brow with the back of her forearm, her gaze unfocused and knees wobbling from the sheer effort she’s put into today’s session. Her lips pinch in a frown as she pushes her arms out, her palms flat and raised in the direction of Mor’s snarling form as Malice watches on, a tinge of pride shining from his cruel red eye.

Several sun flips have passed, and while Dagny has made excellent progress in the minimal time we’ve been training, she’s clearly hit a plateau. She’s had zero problems harnessing her magic to create large blasts of energy, but forcing it to bend to her will has proven more difficult than any of us imagined.

Just as the thought passes, a burst of energy explodes from her palms, screaming through the air and carving a deep crater into the wall, sending shimmering ice crashing to the floor. Dagny’s shoulders slump as a frustrated groan echoes in her chest, followed by a wave of emotion that travels through the bond and straight to the center of my heart.

“It’s okay, Dagny,” I say, stepping forward with every intention to hold her, comfort her. “You’ll figure it out. It’s just going to take a little more ti?”

“ Do not touch her, ” Malice snarls, the force in his tone causing me to freeze mid-

step. “Look.”

I pull my gaze from Dagny’s shuddering form, my attention drawn to the sucking kleptak curled in the corner of the room. Unlike a moment ago, the creature’s head is lowered, the muscles along its abdomen rippling as it attempts to move from its current pose—but no matter how much it tries, it cannot break the spell.

Dagny’s eyes are squeezed shut, her palms shuddering as an invisible stream of magic flows from her veins into the kleptak, overpowering its nervous system and forcing it to its knees. The creature lowers its lumpy, hairless skull in submission, a rhythmic clicking sound echoing from the base of its throat as it waits for her command.

“ Rise.”

The word shudders through the air, so strong and sure that my own muscles quiver, desperate to fulfill her order despite not being the target. The kleptak shudders to a standing position, a hollow rattle echoing in its chest as it tilts its head, regarding Dagny with as much curiosity as its expressionless face can manage.

“ Rise,” she repeats.

To my utter surprise, the kleptak picks its two front feet off the ground, balancing on its hindlimbs and exposing its soft underbelly. I’m about to remark on how spectacular the feat is when Dagny stumbles back, her eyes glossy and face flushed—her control over the kleptak broken.

Before anyone can react, her body slumps to the floor, the back of her skull thumping against the ice as her body succumbs to exhaustion. We all rush forward, deaf to the creature clacking angrily in the corner as we hurry to make sure Dagny is unharmed.

I crouch by her head, my movements frantic as I cup my palm around her cheek, searching her expression for signs of distress. “Dagny? Talk to me, little one. Are you okay?”

She nods slowly, the silver ring around her iris fading to a warm chocolate brown as the flood of magic entering her veins is cut off. She lies there for a long minute, trying to catch her breath, the uneven rise and fall of her chest accompanied by a hollow, wheezing noise. “I wasn’t expecting... well, that. ”

“How did it feel?” Malice asks, his eye gleaming with intrigue. “To force the energy into another creature’s soul?”

“Strange,” Dagny murmurs, her brow knitting into a frown. “I can’t say I enjoyed it. That, and now I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus.”

“Maybe we should take a snack break?” I suggest. “That always makes me feel better.”

“You think food makes everything better,” Lir grumbles, his eyes trailing to the ceiling. “But I agree. Dagny deserves a break.”

“Lucky for you lot, I came prepared.” Cyprien bounds forward, shoving a fistful of welwig tubers into her chest. “Eat up, bunny.”

Her face pinches, but she still accepts the gift, bringing the root to her mouth and biting off a chunk with a grimace. “Ugh. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to the taste.”

“They’ll keep you nice and strong, though,” Cyprien says, reaching out to pat her head. “Much more nutritious than that human garbage.”

Dagny shoots him a teasing glare, her jaw working around a second bite. “If I could lift my arms, I’d smack you.”

I exchange a glance with Malice, alarmed by the words falling from her lips. “Maybe we should call it quits for the day.”

“No!” Dagny pouts. “I’m so close to controlling it for real!”

“Roark is right,” Fenryr says, chiming in for the first time since Dagny started her training session with Malice. “Dagny deserves a treat.”

“A treat?” Cyprien perks up, his yellow gaze swinging toward Fenryr inquisitively. “What are you thinking?”

“Perhaps a trip to the coast?” Lir suggests, his eyes glazing with a faraway look. “It’s been so long since we went there... and we could be there for the sun flip.”

“I like this idea,” Fenryr murmurs. “Malice?”

He blinks lazily, his expression giving away none of his inner thoughts. “It’s too dangerous. We could be spotted by Slaine’s troops or taken out by a wild creature... any number of things could go wrong.”

“Aw, come on!” Cyprien whines. “I want to show Dagny the perks. You want to see the perks, don’t you, bunny?”

She looks from Malice to Cyprien, worrying her lip. “Maybe...”

“This is a horrible idea,” he murmurs, his eyes squinting shut. “Kaebl is going to be so fucking pissed when he comes back from his hunt.”

Malice raises his head, and I watch as he crumbles beneath the weight of Dagny's pleading expression. "Okay," he says. "Let's go."

* * *

The six of us soar through the sky, passing over the vast forest of welwigs as we shoot toward the northernmost part of the continent—where the land ends and the ocean begins. As we fly, we make sure to stay well away from Slaine's territory, gliding above the cloud line to avoid the risk of being spotted by rogue scouts. Though the possibility is extremely low, it never hurts to take extra precautions.

Suddenly, Malice cuts hard to the left, his wings tucked in as he dives toward a small outcropping in the cliffside—so brilliantly concealed I wouldn't have noticed if he didn't bring attention to it.

Carefully, each of us lowers onto the ledge, the flutter of wings the only sound to break the charged silence hanging in the air. Dagny settles into place at the very tip of the ledge, her feather-tipped wings spread wide and rustling with the force of the wind.

From this spot, you can truly see everything the coastline has to offer—the endless, turquoise-hued ocean, the towering glaciers, and the thin stretch of rocky shoreline at the foot of the cliffs, which is normally hidden from view. It's a stunning sight, but nothing—nothing—compares to the splendor of her smile, nor the brush of her hand in mine, or her laughter warming the frigid air.

I'm about to comment on it when Dagny lets out a little squeal, drawing my attention to where her arm is outstretched, gesturing to the group of penkins standing on the shoreline below. More than fifty in number, the winged creatures are all positioned shoulder to shoulder, their snow-colored feathers fluttering gently in the breeze as they stare out over the horizon.

“What are they waiting for?” Dagny asks, her voice barely a whisper.

As soon as she finishes speaking, an explosion of color spreads across the sky, so sudden and violent that it steals her breath in an awe-filled sigh. The shimmering aura dances across the silver sun, causing the shades to shift and burst, staining the atmosphere in brilliant hues of merging, swirling pigment. And at that moment, Dagny is just as enamored as the feathered creatures down below.

“It’s beautiful...” Dagny’s eyes reflect the kaleidoscope of colors swirling and dancing throughout the sky, her pupils expanding as she bathes in the extraordinary sight. “Stunning...”

“Yes, it is,” Malice whispers, unable to take his eyes off her profile. “Beautiful things are rare in this cold, cruel land—but it makes them all the more special when you find them.”

She turns to each of us with a small smile, the sight of it sending a shock of lightning to my heart. “I’m glad we came here. This is exactly what I needed.”

“I thought you might,” Malice murmurs, finally turning his gaze toward the horizon. “Your father and Abaddon loved this place as well. They would often come here to talk and be at peace when the responsibilities of the world became too much.”

“I understand why,” she whispers, her eyes glossing over at the mention of Erik. “Do you think my mom ever saw this place?”

“I know she did,” he answers. “It’s where your parents held their bonding celebration—just them, Abaddon, and a few trusted friends. It’s also the last place Erik saw your mother alive.”

“Before he sent her away?”

He nods solemnly. “Just before Slaine attacked, Abaddon had a premonition of something terrible to pass. Just a feeling—no hard facts—but it was enough for Erik to send her back to the human realm. He loved your mother more than life itself and would do anything to protect her.”

“Did he know she was pregnant?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper. “Did he... did he know I existed?”

He nods, reaching over and placing his hand on top of hers. “He did. She broke the news to your father in this very spot, under the light of the dark sun. When she was in the human realm, Erik would come here whenever he missed her—which was often—and he would sit, just like we are now, staring out at the horizon. I think it helped him remember what he was fighting for. Who he was fighting for. At the very least, it gave him some comfort.”

Dagny sits eerily still, her shoulders shuddering with the effort to hold in her emotion. “Thank you,” she whispers after a long while. “Thank you for showing me this place. If we... If the worst happens, I’m glad I got to know at least this small part of him.”

We sit there in silence for a long while, waiting for the sun to flip. As soon as it does, Malice squeezes Dagny’s hand, raising an arm to point out the group of penkins again. Their snowy feathers rustle in the breeze as they raise their heads to the heavens. Golden beaks open wide as a symphony of low-toned notes punctuates the silence, filling the air with their heartbreaking song. It’s beautiful and melodic and unlike anything else in this world or any other—and when I look to the side, I’m unsurprised to find Dagny’s eyes welling with unshed tears. The five of us curl around her, embracing our mate as the sonnet dampens, dissipating into the vast nothing of The Far Place.

Knowing this might be the first and last time we feel a moment of peace.

Fenryr

Malice's secret lair is a short trip from the ocean, but the journey back takes twice as long due to the powerful blizzard whipping through the land, forcing us in the opposite direction of where we want to fly. Every now and then, I'll turn my head to check on Dagny, only to be struck by the breathtaking sight of her soaring through the storm. Her face is the picture of serenity, and an air of power radiates from her skin, rivaling the raging wind. I know the others are thinking the same things as I am. It's mirrored in their eyes, in the rush of adoration that thrums through our shared bond. They're in awe of her. The beauty of her mind, the light of her soul, and the strength of her heart.

I keep watching her as we fly, unable to take my eyes away, wanting to live in this moment for a while longer. Knowing that as soon as we get back to the lair, the reality of our situation will consume us all once more, and we'll forget those few moments of happiness we shared on the cliffside. Ones we may never get to experience again.

When we finally make it back to the small clearing in the forest, it's too soon. We lower to the ground, an ominous stillness hanging heavy in the air as the wind is snuffed out, replaced with a harmonic tinkling noise as the leaves at the tops of the welwigs rustle in the breeze.

Not wanting to stay out here in the open, we hurry toward the entrance of the tunnel, pushing Dagny through before the rest of us follow. One by one, we step into the

circular room waiting at the base of the passage, blinking rapidly to adjust to the light glowing from the sconces on the carved walls.

The first thing I notice is Kaehl is standing at the center of the room. The second—and far more frightening—is the molten glow of rage in his eyes. The golden light casts harsh shadows along the planes of his face while highlighting the deep scowl creasing the corners of his mouth, making him appear far more tense than usual.

And just where did you run off to?

Before any of us can explain, Malice steps forward, his lips tipping into an answering smirk. “If you’re angry you got left out, you can just say that.”

Kaehl’s frown deepens. I’m not angry you left without me. I’m pissed you left at all. His gaze turns to Malice, his eyes narrowing in a deadly glare. Especially you. I never expected you to risk Dagny in this way. If Slaine’s scouts saw you ? —

“But they didn’t,” Roark interrupts, his tone soft in an attempt to prevent a fight from breaking out. “We were careful. Nothing happened to her. She’s safe, Kaehl.”

Shadows spread from the corners of his eyes, infecting the molten gold with inky, swirling tendrils of rage. That doesn’t matter! You took her away! You want to keep her from me! He takes a step toward Malice with deadly intent, his muscles shuddering as the last thread of control snaps and his inner demon bursts free. Just before he strikes, Dagny wrestles free of Cyprien’s hold, her body a blur of motion as she races to stand between the two demons.

“Stop it!” she yells, pushing her palms into Kaehl’s chest. “Stop fighting! This is stupid! No one is taking me away from you, Kaehl. No one. ”

Kaehl looks down at where her hands rest on his skin, the shadows retreating as a flash of yellow crosses his wide-eyed gaze. The rage rolling from his skin dissipates into the surrounding air as a blanket of calm falls over his expression, softening the creases at the corners of his eyes and the downward curve of his mouth.

He blinks, stepping back and allowing Dagny's hands to fall back to her sides—but I don't miss the way his mouth twitches in despair at the loss of contact. I'm sorry. I haven't been myself lately. I'm not sure why I...

"It's okay." Dagny frowns, debating whether she should try to comfort him. "I think we've all been a little on edge."

"Exactly! Don't beat yourself up over it," Cyprien pipes up, a massive grin spreading across his face. "We're used to you being a grumpy asshole. I personally have grown to find it endearing."

Lir cuts him a glare, clearing his throat loudly. "What Cyprien means is that we understand the outburst, and it's forgiven. Right, Malice?"

Malice's breath billows out in a thick cloud of vapor, his fist clenching at his side. "Sure, Lir. I absolutely understand that Kaehl is acting like a petulant child, and I forgive him for lacking the emotional maturity to express it in a healthy manner." He smirks. "Is that good for you?"

Seeing the bloodthirsty gleam in Lir's eyes, Roark steps between him and Malice, his arms stretched out to the side and expression set in stone. "That's quite enough."

Malice shrugs. "I was merely doing what Lir asked."

"You were antagonizing him."

He stares unblinking into Roark's purple eyes, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Perhaps I'm a little on edge, too."

Roark huffs, his eyes trailing to the ceiling. "That's it. Everyone go to the sleeping chamber— now. "

Cyprien's mouth pops open in disbelief. "Are you sending us to bed?"

"Yes. Now go," Roark orders. "If I hear any backtalk, I will make it impossible for you to speak for the rest of the night."

With a sigh, Dagny leads the way, the rest of us following like lost puppies as Roark takes up the rear, clearly not trusting any of us to behave. As soon as we make it into the bedroom, Roark points a clawed finger toward the bed of furs, the scowl on his face leaving no room for argument. "Take a seat."

Cyprien pulls Dagny into her lap as we all crowd around the furs in a circle, each of us vying to be the closest to Dagny. Once we settle, Roark moves to the corner of the room and returns with the bottle of welwig sap clutched in his palm. His gaze narrows on us as he brings it to his lips, not willing to take his eyes off us as he drinks. His throat bobs three times as he chugs the viscous blue liquid, and with each one, the crease between his brows eases until all the tension is wiped away.

Roark lowers the jug with an explosive sigh, his eyes watering as he passes the bottle to Kaebl. "Drink."

I don't think that's such a good ide ? —

" Drink, " he reiterates, thrusting it into his chest. "Don't make me get angry."

"I thought he was angry," Cyprien murmurs, causing Dagny to let out a hushed

chuckle.

“Silence, thumper,” Roark snaps, pointing an accusatory finger at Cyprien as he takes a seat in the open space. “You can speak after you drink. Not before.”

Cyprien shrugs, waiting for the bottle to be passed around the circle. As soon as each of us has taken a hearty drink, Roark lets out a breath of relief, his lips curling around the bottle for one last swig. “Doesn’t everyone feel better now?”

“I suppose,” Lir mutters, his scowl already softening. “But I’m a bit concerned that your solution is always to get drunk.”

“It’s yet to fail me,” Roark replies, his lips stretching into a wide smile as he passes the jug to Lir. “Go on. You know you want to.”

“Never said I didn’t.” He takes a large sip and hands it to Dagny, a pleasurable warmth thrumming down the bond as his fingertips brush hers. “How do you feel, pet?”

Before she can answer, a high-pitched mewl draws all our attention to the tunnel we just came through, and my eyes widen at the sight of Malice’s familiar emerging through the shadowed passageway. Nya’s red eyes glow like beacons through the dark, poised on Dagny’s face with a loving warmth I’ve never seen from the cruel feline.

“Ah. Look who found their way back.” Malice turns, running his palm over Nya’s arched back, his mouth tipped in a rare, genuine smile. “What have you done with the others?”

Nya meows, turning her head over her shoulder where four other familiars are crawling through the tunnel, their bright eyes wide and searching. Instead of running

directly to me, Echo bounds across the floor toward Dagny, stretching up on his hind legs and pressing his shadow-coated paws directly onto her chest. Tinkling laughter bounces off the walls as the wolf spirit laps at her face, a low-toned whine echoing deep within his chest. Comet and Honey follow suit, nuzzling their faces into her sides with their warm greeting, while Nya leaps onto her shoulders. A rumbling purr vibrates into the air as she rubs her fluffy black cheek against Dagny's, her eyes pinned on Bo—hopping across the floor far behind the others, his ears flopping and whiskers twitching with each hurried movement.

The only one that doesn't join in the embrace is Syn, Kaabl's familiar. Her long golden body is curled in the mouth of the tunnel, hidden by the thick shadows swirling within. Before I can comment on it, she slithers away, leaving Dagny and Kaabl behind. When I look at Kaabl, his eyes are fixed on the spot his familiar used to occupy, his mouth pinched in a pained expression.

I think I should go.

“What? Why?” Dagny whips her head over, an aching pang ringing down the bond. “We just sat down.”

I've been here too long already. He abruptly pushes to a stand, refusing to look at his mate as he stalks toward the exit. Have a nice time, everyone.

“Wait!” Dagny's plea has him freezing in place, his shoulders shuddering as he attempts to fight against her power over him. “Why don't you stay for the night? There's more than enough space...”

I can't.

The shadows swallow his outline as he steps through the doorway into the central room, his absence marked by a charged silence hanging heavy in the air.

“I suppose I should be going as well.”

Dagny turns her desperate gaze onto Malice, her eyes holding the plea she won't allow herself to speak. “Malice...”

“Yes, wildfire?”

“I...” She worries her lip, her eyes lowering to her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “I don't want you to go, either, ” she whispers. “I don't... please, can you stay?”

Malice lips part in shock, his chest expanding with a rush of elation as he stares dumbfounded into Dagny's eyes. “What... what did you say?”

“You heard me,” she murmurs, a rush of heat traveling to her cheeks.

“I know.” Malice turns and takes a step toward the furs, his movements cautious as if any sudden action or sound will cause her to change her mind. “But please... I need to hear it again.”

Malice kneels on the furs in front of her, careful not to disturb any of the familiars as he takes her delicate hands in his. That glowing red orb searches her face, looking for any sign of uncertainty. “Wildfire... do you really mean it?”

“I do,” she whispers, meeting his heated gaze with a small smile. “If you don't mind staying.”

“It's all I've been dreaming of,” he answers, his voice an awe-filled hush. “Nothing would make me happier than to lie next to you, my beautiful mate.”

Her lips spread in a rare smile as she reaches up and cups her palm around Malice's cheek. His eyes shutter as he leans into her touch, a delighted purr rumbling in his

chest. “Come on,” she whispers, patting the bare spot next to her. “Join the cuddle pile.”

A wave of pleasure thrums through the bond, filling all our veins as Malice settles down next to his mate, taking her hand in his and reveling in the feel of her after so long apart. We just sit there for the next few hours, drinking and talking and laughing and trying to forget what will happen in the morning.

And the horrors the new day will surely bring.

24

Dagny

My eyes spring open, watching the shadows dance along the ceiling, frozen in place by the heavy pit of dread spreading from my gut.

Something's wrong.

I rise slowly, careful not to wake any of my slumbering mates. My head swivels around the room, searching for something out of place, a threat, something to explain the niggling in the back of my mind and the tightness in my chest.

I hold my breath as I navigate the maze of tangled limbs, determined not to make a sound. My steps are silent but hurried, the chord tightening around my heart and urging me toward the exit, down the darkened stairwell toward the bathing chamber.

Heated air smacks into my face as I push off the last step, flowing over my skin and raising the hair along my arms from the temperature change. The thick vapor filling the room partially obscures the beastly outline crouched at the far corner of the pool, and though his face is hidden, the raw anguish rolling from his shoulders lets me know exactly who it is.

The pads of my feet smack against the water-slicked floor as I walk over to the golden-eyed demon, the sound like gunshots against the stifling silence. I sit beside Kaabl at the edge of the pool, dangling my bare feet in the heated water with a sigh.

Kaehl's stare burns a hole into my profile, but for whatever reason, I can't bring myself to look at him. Because I know if I do, if I hold the weight of that tortured longing one more time, I'll shatter.

"Where's Syn?" I ask, turning my attention to my hands clasped tightly in my lap. "I didn't see her with the others."

I sent her away.

"Why?"

He takes a deep breath in through his nose, forcing his eyes from my face to the far edge of the pool. It's too dangerous for her to be close to you. I refuse to allow her to complete the bond between us.

"Oh."

My throat tightens at the unexpected wave of rejection his words cause, and I fold my arms around my middle as a cold chill runs down my spine. Tears spring to my eyes as the wild thing beneath my skin rears up, filling my ears with her haunting screams of wrath and outrage, demanding Kaehl retract his statement. So this is why he's been keeping his distance and sleeping in a different room. Because he doesn't want to bond with me.

Noticing my expression—or perhaps the violent thoughts rushing through my mind—Kaehl reaches out, placing his hand on the stone just next to my thigh. I didn't mean it like that, Dagny.

"Then what did you mean?"

He shakes his head, his golden eyes filling with heated desperation. I want nothing

more than to bond with you—to hold you and to worship you and to connect with you as the others do. But it's too dangerous.

“Why?” I demand. “Nothing happened when I bonded with any of the others. If anything, it made them stronger. You don't have to lie to me. If you don't want me, all you have to do is be honest—”

Do not ever... Kaabl's voice enters my mind as a growling threat, cutting off my words and sucking the oxygen from my lungs. Don't you dare say that I do not want you. You are all I think about, all I dream of and more. If there were no sun, I would look at you to brighten my skies. If there were no wind, just your smile would be enough to keep me soaring through the atmosphere. There is no part of me that does not want to be completely, irrevocably linked to you. You are my mate, Dagny— our mate—and the only reason I have the strength to stay away from you is because it's the only thing keeping you alive.

“Kaabl...” I'm at a loss for words, the violent whooshing in my ears making it impossible to string a single line of thought together. “Kaabl, I?—”

Please... Don't. His eyes fill with sorrow as he inches his pinky toward my thigh, stopping just before it brushes my skin. The sound of my name rolling off your tongue is torture. It's everything I've ever wanted, and everything I can never have.

“Why not?” I ask, my heart thudding into my throat. “Why is it so dangerous?”

He just shakes his head, staring at that last little distance between us. Do you remember when Malice told you about Abaddon's sundering in Slaine's dungeon?

“Mostly,” I whisper. “It was hard to tell what was true and what was a lie.”

He nods solemnly. I imagine practically all of what he said was based on fact. The

only thing he would have to lie about would be motive—just in case Slaine was listening.

I take my lip between my teeth, pondering. “So the part about the heart... how Malice was created without one...”

All true. Abaddon’s living, beating heart is hidden somewhere in this world—buried beneath several feet of ice after all these years, I imagine.

“It’s still fucking beating ?”

Kaehl nods, seemingly unaffected by the information. High-powered demons like Abaddon and Slaine are incredibly difficult to kill. Sundering is the only known way, and even then, you have to collect all the parts and destroy them if you don’t want them to be resurrected.

“And Varys got to them first.”

Kaehl nods. He forgot the heart, though. The resurrection failed. Malice ran off into the night with the last piece that could bring Abaddon back, and the rest is as you know it.

Kaehl cuts me a look out of the corner of his eye. It’s that wretched heart that is endangering your life.

“I don’t understand.”

He lowers his head to his chest. The night before Fenryr went missing—the night before Malice kidnapped him—he discovered a loophole to resurrect Abaddon. Written in some ancient tome that took years to decipher was the key to it all; and the key was you.

“Me?”

He nods slowly. The act of creating living beings out of soul pieces is incredibly rare and only recorded once in the entire history of this world. In that instance, one of the sundered pieces of the demon lord was destroyed before it could be recovered, and they were forced to resurrect incomplete demons such as me. The corners of his eyes crease with despair as his mouth turns downward, clearly distraught over the part of the story he has to reiterate. They discovered the lord's fated mate could be used in place of the missing piece. That her soul could be forfeited so his could be whole. And it didn't matter how many pieces of the lord were missing—as long as they found his true other half, they could bring the demon back to life.

My eyes widen as horror floods my veins. “Did they find her? His mate?”

Kaehl's face pinches in disgust as he tips his chin. They brought her to an altar and bound her soul to each of the remaining pieces, then let the rest run its course. It worked remarkably well—for a time. But while his body was mended, his mind was shattered beyond repair. The loss of his mate—a woman he had only met for a few moments—was too much for him to bear. He turns his head to face me fully, drowning me in the weight of his gaze. She offered her life for him willingly, too. That's how powerful that kind of bond is, Dagny. If we bonded, there's no doubt in my mind you would offer your life to bring Abaddon back—your one, true mate.

“But you're my mate,” I whisper. “You and all the others. I feel it.”

He just shakes his head sadly. “Abaddon is your mate, Dagny. The rest of us are just pale imitations. We each have pieces of him, yes, but as a whole...” He lets out a heavy sigh. “The stars fated you to him for a reason, little one.”

“I wouldn't do that. I don't even know him!”

Yes, you do. His eyes shine with a tender warmth. You see pieces of him in me. In Cyprien and Lir and Roark and Fenryr... and especially Malice. And yes, perhaps you wouldn't do it right away. But if something threatened our lives, and you knew reversing the sundering would save us—save Abaddon—you would do it in an instant. Without knowing how, without knowing why, you would.

“You don't know that?—”

I do! It's exactly what happened in the other case. I didn't want to go into details, but... He lets out a puff of breath, his jaw ticking. When the lord's mate refused to give her life initially, they brought a knife to his throat— knowing how powerful that bond is—and acted like they were going to kill him. She gave up her life in an instant, and they hadn't even mated yet.

“That's... horrible.”

It was more than that. It was... devastating. He shakes his head. In the end, the kingdom was turned to ash, and half the world was drenched in flames. He cleared the continent, leaving only Slaine's and Abaddon's territories untouched at the edge of the world. And now... now there's truly nothing left on this half of The Far Place.

I swallow hard. “There are no more kingdoms? No more demons? They're all just... gone?”

There were never a great many here to start with—the weather and lack of resources make for bad living. The Gyldens and the Naifs are the last groups to remain— were the last groups—but after the slaughter of the Gyldens twenty-some years ago, on the night Abaddon was sundered...Slaine's kingdom contains all the remaining demons in this part of The Far Place. Kaebl shrugs. But the south still has many kingdoms and a variety of species and fauna living there.

“Can’t we leave, then?” I whisper. “Go south? Or anywhere that’s safer than here.”

Kaehl frowns, his shoulders tensing at the hint of desperation in my tone. I’ve thought about it many times. But to abandon our lands—Abaddon’s rightful territory—and give it to Slaine... He shakes his head. He will continue to build his army, grow his resources by creating more of those... creatures... and then take that army south and ravage their lands. Hundreds of innocent demons and creatures will be massacred, and while he wouldn’t necessarily succeed in the long run... I cannot allow his treachery to spread. I will not sit by and watch his evil drench the south in its filth. We must stay. We must fight.

“But... Everything is gone. Abaddon’s castle, Slaine’s castle...”

Kaehl’s gaze hardens as he stares at the rippling waves. We rebuild. But first, we take back what belongs to us. What belongs to you.

“Me?”

He nods slowly. You are Abaddon’s mate. My mate. This is as much your kingdom as it is anyone’s. And I’m going to do everything in my power to see you ruling it.

Warmth blossoms in my chest at the pride in his voice, but it’s overshadowed by the cold reality of the situation. “I don’t think I’m capable of that. Even if I wanted to, there’s no way?—”

You’re the strongest being in this world, Dagny Olavera. You’re the last person to realize it, but it doesn’t make it any less true. You will make an amazing queen. All you need is to learn to harness your power, and you’ll be unstoppable.

“I’ve been trying. But it... I can’t make any progress, and we’re running out of time.”

I know, his voice whispers. That's why I'm going to help you.

"You're going to train me?"

With Malice, yes. I think together, we'll be able to understand your power, so that you can.

"Okay," I whisper, knotting my fingers in my lap. "I'm willing to try anything."

Kaehl lowers his eyes, frowning at the sight of my nervous twitch. We'll figure it out, little one. I believe in you, in your power. Now, it's your turn.

I take my lip between my teeth, lost for words, for something to say that will fill the stifling silence between us. But there's nothing other than the screaming desperation of the bond, agonizing over being so close to him and unable to touch.

You should get some rest, Kaehl says, tearing his gaze from me and focusing on the far wall of the room. We have a big day tomorrow.

I nod, my words caught somewhere down my throat, wrapping like a vise around my aching heart as I walk away from Kaehl. I shuffle back into the bedchamber, lying at the edge of the furs next to Lir—leaving Kaehl just enough space in case he wants to come in.

But somewhere deep down, I know he won't.

25

Kaabl

I wonder if she can tell I'm staring at her ass.

My eyes trail over the gentle curve of her spine, lingering on the crease where the top of her thigh meets her pelvis. The longer I appreciate my mate, the faster my blood boils, heating my skin and filling my ears with a thunderous whooshing as the pressure in my veins spikes.

Dagny faces away from me, blind to my hungry gaze as she focuses all her attention on the snarling kleptak standing in the corner of the room. Her brow beads with sweat as her magic heats her skin, outlining her frame in a swirling cloud of vapor that moves and dances in the wind whipping through the space—a hurricane brought to life by the energy humming in her veins.

It's been seven sun flips since I offered to help Dagny with her training—seven long days and nights when I've teetered on the line between responsibility and reckless abandon. And while it's amazing to see her thrive and come into her power, it's equally as agonizing having to spend countless minutes in her presence, unable to connect the way my soul is yearning for.

This is the first time we've been truly alone since we came to Malice's secret lair, and though I know I should be focusing on the reason we came here—her training—I can't help but let my mind wander to a scenario where she's breathless for an entirely different reason.

“Gods... it’s working...” Dagny’s voice filters through the air in a gentle hush, her silver-ringed eyes widening in awe. “I’m doing it.”

I turn my gaze toward the kleptak in the corner of the room, pride welling in my chest at the sight of its head lowered in submission. So you are.

Of course, as soon as my words are out, the light in Dagny’s eyes flickers, her power over the powerful creature slipping through her fingers like grains of sand. Mor twitches, her abdomen undulating wildly as she strains against the band of magic holding her in place. Sweat glistens along Dagny’s upper lip as her brow furrows, using all of her strength to grasp at the fraying threads of control—but it’s not enough.

A wet clicking sound reverberates from the base of the kleptak’s throat as it straightens to its full height, the top of its head brushing the ceiling as it towers over a wide-eyed Dagny. She curses, jumping back just before Mor lunges, razor-sharp claws swiping the space where Dagny’s head used to be.

Instead of reacting, she stands frozen in place, her lips pinched in a thin line as she stares at the snarling creature. “Come on, Mor. Work with me.”

The beast tilts its head, the clicking sound increasing in pitch, reverberating off the walls and down to the marrow of my bones with a deadly warning— stay back.

Dagny sighs, her shoulders slumping as she turns her head away, too exhausted to try it again. She’s made a massive improvement in her driving magic abilities in the short time we’ve been training, but she still can’t control the kleptak for more than a few minutes without giving out.

Failure.

The word rings in my mind—but it doesn't belong to me—and I know if I don't do something, Dagny will spiral into that dark pit that lives in the furthest corners of her mind. Her shoulders slump, refusing to look me in the eye as she pretends to inspect a small crack in the floor.

It is anything but a failure, Dagny. You will learn to control it eventually. It's okay.

“Is it?” she asks, her voice soft as dark clouds swirl around her shoulders, thickening the air with charged emotion. “The monster who facilitated my father's murder is out there, drawing breath. Hunting us. I need to learn how to control Mor before he finds us, and it's too late.” She shakes her head slowly, a deep line forming between her brows. “I'm out of time—again. Everyone is counting on me, and I... I'm so scared I'm going to fail. But more than that, I'm angry. I'm so, so fucking angry, Kaehl—at Slaine, the stars, the fucking fates—but most of all, with myself. Because it's right there. I can see it, taste it. All I need to do is reach out and grab it, and I—” Her voice cuts off as a silent sob shakes her chest, her glistening eyes betraying all the hurt she won't allow herself to say. “Why can't I just do something right for once in my life? Why does it always have to be so fucking hard?”

I inch closer to her, afraid if I speak, she'll put her walls back up and close me off forever. Sensing my hesitancy, Dagny brings a hand up to her eye, wiping away a stray tear as she forces out a hollow laugh. “Look at me, crying like a spoiled child...”

As someone hopelessly incapable of showing emotion, it's refreshing to watch someone express it so freely. My lips tip upward in a grin as I reach out, wrapping my hand around hers and giving it a light squeeze. You're so much stronger than you realize, my love. An entire ocean of power is in your veins—a few drops are bound to leak out occasionally.

She returns my gesture, a small smile pulling at the corner of her mouth as a tingling

warmth spreads between our palms. “You’re sweet. More so than I deserve.”

I wholeheartedly disagree—on both points.

Her smile widens, the darkened clouds hanging over her head fading into nothingness. “Well, I think you’re sweet. When you’re not being a grump, that is.”

I tilt my head, a pleasant warmth blossoming in my chest as her tinkling laughter fills the space between us. I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to insult me in such a way.

“Don’t take it personally. I think I’m just delirious,” she says, taking her lip between her teeth as she gazes up through her lashes. “And anyway, you’re a hot grump, so it’s okay.”

Is that so? A rumbling growl vibrates my chest as I fight against my instinct to shove her smirking face into the ground and mount her. It’s unwise to taunt me, my love. Especially now, when I’m so close to the edge.

“The edge of what?”

Instead of answering, I turn from her, my muscles shuddering in protest as I stalk past her and toward the exit. Come. It’ll be dark before long, and you deserve a reward for all your hard work before bed.

“A reward?”

A silent chuckle shakes my chest at the sound of Dagny’s hurried footsteps following me up the stairwell. Her excitement rolls off her shoulders in waves and zests the air with a sweetness that clings to the tip of my tongue and causes my mouth to water.

As soon as we step into the sleeping chamber, Malice's glowing red eye snaps toward Dagny, searching her expression for any sign of distress. "How did it go today?"

Fantastic. She's getting stronger every day. I answer before Dagny has a chance to diminish her accomplishments, cutting her a glance to show her I mean every word. She was able to hold it for several minutes before it broke free.

"That's our girl," he murmurs, his gaze beaming with pride as he raises a carved stone cup into the air. "This deserves a toast."

"Did someone say toast?" Roark's eyes spring open, his voice graveled as his body is yanked from a deep slumber. "I heard someone say toast."

Lir, Cyprien, and Fenryr wake a moment later, blinking lazily as they stretch out on the massive bed of furs.

"Is Dagny back yet?" Cyprien mumbles, rubbing a hand over his face as a yawn tears from his mouth. "She's been down there with Kaabl foreve—DAGNY!" Cyprien springs out of bed, lunging across the room and crashing into Dagny with such force it sends them toppling backward to the floor. His arms circle around her back and head, protecting her from the icy ground and keeping her pressed against his chest as he peppers kisses across her face and neck, a low-toned purr vibrating in his throat. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Cyppy," she says, a laugh bubbling past her lips as the other three demons race over to join the cuddle pile. "I missed all of you—but it was only a few hours, and you were asleep for it all."

"It felt like an eternity," Lir says. "It always does when we're apart."

"But now you're here, so there's double the reason to drink!" Roark says, pumping

his fist in the air. “Malice?”

“Already pouring the cups,” he says, filling five more mugs with shimmering welwig sap. “Kaebl? Are you going to join us?”

I stand frozen in place as Dagny and her other mates move to the bed of furs, sitting around in a half circle as Malice hands out the drinks. If I stay for an hour, I’ll want to stay the rest of the night, and I need to keep my distance and keep an eye out for Syn in case she decides to disobey me and bond with Dagny.

I should stand guard at the tunnel. You all enjoy it, though.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” Dagny asks, the hesitancy in her voice mirrored in the anxious energy rolling from her shoulders. She gestures to the unoccupied space in the circle, worrying her bottom lip as the air thickens with anticipation. “Just for a little while?”

I stare hard at that spot, my abdomen rippling as I call upon every last drop of restraint left in my body. I want so badly to go to her, to hold her and smell her and touch her the way I’ve been craving, but it’s too dangerous. Dagny scans my expression, her face falling as she realizes what my answer will be—and though I’d rather gouge out my eyes than disappoint her, it’s what I have to do.

I’m sorry, I say. I can’t.

But as the words leave my mind, and I turn and stalk from the room, I know it’s a lie. Somewhere, deep down, I know tonight is the last night I’ll be able to stay away from her. It’s impossible to deny any longer, hopeless to ignore that last thread of control snapping, sending me hurtling into the abyss. As I fall, a single phrase whispers through the wind whipping around my head, commanding me to surrender to the dark desires of my beast—and I know tonight is the night that I break.

26

Dagny

I wake to a low hissing sound and a slight pressure on my chest—just enough to pull me from my delicious dream. I blink away the thick haze of sleep, finding it does no good due to the lack of light in the bedroom. A wriggling sensation draws my gaze downward, and shock clenches my chest as I come face-to-face with a pair of slitted serpentine eyes. My stomach clenches as a long, inky tongue flicks out, nearly brushing the tip of my nose as the snake samples the air.

“Syn?” I whisper, trying to think past the powerful whooshing in my ears and the pressure building beneath my skin. “What are you...? You’re not supposed to be here.”

A low hissing sound breaks the silence as the snake rears up, staring deep into my soul with its swirling golden orbs. Syn’s jaw extends, showcasing the two needlelike fangs situated at the front of her mouth, curved inward and dripping with a clear, viscous liquid.

I lie utterly still at the edge of the furs, too scared to breathe, to blink in case it triggers the creature to attack. And though fear is at the forefront of my mind, a calming warmth also spreads through my veins. Telling me it’s all going to be okay.

I glance to the side, and the air thickens with a charged stillness as I take in the sight of Kaabl lying next to me on the floor. His pinky reaches out, brushing against mine—barely a touch, but the contact has heated sparks dancing across my skin.

A small whimper pours from my lips, and Kaabl turns his head to the side, capturing me in his piercing golden gaze. His pupils expand, consuming the molten glow of his iris in a single heartbeat, concealing the ravenous hunger gleaming beneath. Quiet, little one. You'll wake the others.

“What are you doing here? I thought... I thought you couldn't stay?” I whisper, my eyes widening as his palm slides over the top of mine, enveloping it in his warmth. Instead of answering, his fingertips trail up my arm, following the gentle dip and peak of my collarbone and leaving a trail of tingling heat wherever he touches.

“Kaabl?” His name enters the air a breathless plea, a sound that has a growl building in the base of his throat and his abdomen shuddering with desire.

Syn slithers off my chest as Kaabl's clawed hand snaps up, wrapping around my throat and squeezing my pulse points, cutting off the oxygen to my brain and filling my ears with a loud whooshing noise. Pleasure spreads through my veins, overpowering the niggling fear in the back of my mind as I get lost in the sensation of my mate's touch. The loss of control is terrifying, but twice as exciting—and I have no doubt Kaabl feels the same way.

I can't fight it anymore, he whispers into my mind, his tone a sinful hush. You consume every thought I have—every fractured piece of my soul, even the ones I didn't know I possessed. I'm breaking, my heart—I've broken. For you. It could never be anyone but you.

Releasing my throat, he trails his hand down my center, his breathing turning ragged as he slides between the valley of my breasts, stopping for a deliberate moment before continuing his torturous exploration, leaving a trail of fire wherever his skin touches mine.

How I've missed this. Just touching you. Knowing you're here. That you're real. That

you're mine. His fingers splay across my stomach as a low growl builds in the base of his throat—possessive and animalistic and intoxicating—and the sound makes me forget all about why this is a terrible idea. I lose myself to the pleasure thrumming through the bond, the rush of blood in my ears, the ever-present, unyielding desire coursing through my veins, tearing at the threads of my soul.

I reach down, placing my hand on top of Kaebl's and directing him lower, desperate to feel his touch against that needy part of me. Kaebl obeys, stopping when his fingertips brush the apex of my thighs, his shoulders shuddering with the strength it takes to restrain himself. But he doesn't need to anymore.

"It'll be okay," I whisper, my eyes finding his through the dark. "You've fought it for so long. We both have. It's okay, Kaebl."

He shakes his head, his breath coming in uneven, shuddering pants. Too... dangerous... I... can't... can't... can't...

But it's not his decision to make anymore.

A bolt of searing pain spreads from the center of my forehead at the same time that a wave of power surges through me, originating from that invisible force tying our souls together. It flows through my veins, spilling out of my pores and open mouth, changing the sound of my screams to cries of bliss that explode into the silence with so much power that the walls shudder.

When I come back down to earth, a matching bond mark glows beneath Kaebl's skin, the brilliant golden hue stealing the breath from my lungs as I'm smothered by the weight of what I've just done.

The final thread of the soul bond snaps into place as Kaebl rolls on top of me, pinning me between his powerful forearms as a thunderous growl echoes into the air, filled

with a hunger I've never known.

I take in the thick shadows consuming his golden irises, the lengthening canines and enormous pitch-black wings spreading out over his shoulders, materializing from the depths of the shadows as his beast breaks free.

And at that moment, I know it's all over.

We break, together.

27

Malice

Mate. Mine. Dagny. Wake. Time to wake up. Take. Mine. Take. Take. Take.

WAKE.

My lids crack open, a thick haze of sleep coating my vision as I blink up at the ceiling, trying to discern the reason behind my rapidly thrumming pulse and the heat rushing through my veins, coating my skin in a thin layer of sweat and filling my ears with a thunderous whooshing.

I press onto my forearm with a soft groan, my eyes searching the shadows for the origin of that heavenly scent—the delicious fragrance that yanked me from my deep slumber—but I don't need to look for long. My focus is pulled to the two figures standing at the far end of the room, their bodies entwined and an electric heat rolling off their skin, filling the air with charged waves of passion.

Kaehl's gaze focuses on Dagny, gleaming with the hunger of a starving predator as he lifts her off the ground, his claws piercing her hips as he holds her aloft. Thick shadows swirl around her outline, inky tendrils rolling into the air and across Dagny's bare skin, touching and exploring the dips and curves of her luscious body.

Her hands find his shoulders as she wraps her thighs around his waist, her breath turning to jagged pants as she lowers slowly onto the waiting cock below. Never taking his eyes off her, Kaehl fists his cock, guiding the throbbing head toward her

entrance. As soon as he touches her, a wave of pleasure thrums down the bond we share, filling my head with a thunderous rushing sound and waking the beast lurking beneath my skin. It raises its head, scenting the air and blinking through the dark with hooded, feline eyes.

A surge of energy courses through my veins, overwhelming me with a desperate need, a thirst that can never be satiated, and I crawl toward them on hands and knees, my movements silent and eyes unblinking as I stalk to the opposite edge of the furs—finding it hard to concentrate due to the hushed sounds of pleasure rolling into the air.

Chest heaving, Kaebl pushes inside her, drenching his length in her arousal. His hands tighten around her hips as he thrusts to the back of her walls, the motion accompanied by a throaty groan as he seats his cock in the deepest part of her.

Dagny's hips roll, her swollen lips parting and heat rising to her cheeks as she attempts to take him further. Her back arches, pressing her perky breasts into his chest as a whimper echoes into the air, filling it with a charged energy that causes my skin to tingle and fills my head with a thick fog of want.

Kaebl begins moving in her—gentle thrusts that turn into powerful, animalistic movements that have her legs quivering and her head falling back in a silent scream. Dagny's eyes flip to silver just before they roll to the back of her head, lost to the sensation of Kaebl filling her, the rush of the bond, the magnetic energy thrumming through her veins as she finally succumbs.

My canines elongate, piercing my lower lip and filling my mouth with a metallic taste—but I hardly feel it. I'm too busy watching, imagining how her tight little hole would feel around my cock. How it would feel to fill her, to make her mine.

A low growl builds in the base of my throat as I straighten, my cock twitching in

anticipation. I close the distance in two large steps, all my fine muscles twinging and quivering as I press my hips flush against her ass. A whimper falls from Dagny's swollen lips as I slide my palm up her spine, marveling at the way her skin shudders beneath my touch.

My hips jerk, pressing the head of my cock against Dagny's tight hole at the same time Kaehl thrusts upward, causing a breathy moan to pour into the air as he fills her.

"Oh gods," she rasps, her head falling back against my chest as she loses herself to the mounting pleasure. "I'm going to come..."

"So soon? What a greedy little thing," I murmur, sliding my hand around her exposed throat as I gaze lovingly down at my mate, loving the way her expression twists and fractures as Kaehl pounds in and out of her mercilessly. My grip tightens around her pulse points, cutting off her oxygen and pushing her over the edge as her body succumbs to the rush of stimuli—and she comes.

Muscles shuddering and eyes rolling, Dagny falls forward onto Kaehl's chest, her moan caught somewhere down her throat, blocked by the vise curling around her windpipe. As soon as she goes limp, I shove my cock past the tight ring of muscle, loosening my grip and allowing the rush of pain to bring her back.

"Oh fuck." My eyes roll back as a wave of pleasure spreads through my body, pooling in the tips of my fingers and adding kindling to the fire raging in the center of my chest. "So fucking tight."

I thrust forward at the same time Kaehl fills her, and Dagny's eyes spring open, her body quivering, and a desperate mewl filling the air. Before she can wake the others, Kaehl claps his hand across her mouth, his eyes swirling with an ominous warning.

Quiet, little one. We don't want to wake the others just yet. Not until I've had my fill

of you.

Kaebel continues his powerful, hurried thrusts as I slide my length farther into her tight hole, stretching her past the point of comfort and causing her walls to shudder and convulse around me.

“Easy. Just relax,” I whisper, pulling her hair to the side and exposing the gentle curve of her neck. “That’s it. Just like that. Good fucking girl .” I lean down, brushing my lips over the sensitive area as my hips jerk, pressing deeper still. “Take my cock, sweet girl. You’re doing so, so fucking well.”

“ Malice... ” Dagny’s head falls back in a throaty moan as I bottom out, my cock pulsing in the deepest part of her, filling her and stretching her just the way I’ve been dying to.

“ Fuckkk, yes. ” I press my face into her neck, my shoulders shuddering as a violent rush of ecstasy courses through my veins, lighting my nerve endings on fire. “You were made for this. Made for my cock. Gods, the way you grip me...” A desperate groan builds in the base of my throat, and I know I’ll die if I don’t fill her soon. I’m already holding on by a thread as it is, and I know as soon as I look at her and watch her eyes roll back, knowing it’s because of me, I’ll break.

I pull her off Kaebel’s cock—he snarls, animalistic, but lets me take her and wrap her legs around my waist. My wings materialize over my shoulders in a swirling cloud of red mist, the powerful muscles straining as they unfurl, stretching out to the sides in a showy display of their size. They sweep downward, thrusting us into the air in a single powerful movement, then flutter gently to keep us aloft. I tighten my grip around Dagny’s waist as my hips jerk, pushing my cock deep into her ass, loving the way her walls tighten and quiver around me. A choked moan explodes into the air, echoing off the walls as I continue my unhurried thrusts, savoring the way her body melts in my arms, the way her expression shatters when I fill her.

For a few minutes, Kaehl stands in place, his gaze heating as he watches the trail of cum slide down Dagny's inner thigh, coating her skin and dripping to the floor below.

Such a waste... Kaehl's abdomen shudders with desire as he steps forward, placing his face at the level of Dagny's pelvis. His breathing turns ragged as he leans down, watching the way her hole stretches around my cock, a look of wondrous fascination gleaming in his eyes.

Through the bond, I feel his palms slide up her thighs, shoulders shuddering and breathing uneven as he's overcome by the sounds falling from her lips and the way her skin feels beneath his hands. You've never looked so beautiful, Dagny. So fucking delectable.

Kaehl's chest vibrates with a silent growl as his fingertips dig into her thighs, forcing her shaking limbs apart before he lunges forward, pressing his face deep into her glistening cunt.

"Oh fuck ." Dagny's head falls back against my chest as Kaehl laps at her pussy, pushing his tongue deep inside her dripping hole and swirling it against her walls, desperate to fill himself with her taste.

You're so much sweeter when my cum is dripping out of you. Kaehl gazes up at her through hooded eyes, his tongue dragging slowly up her center and filling the air with her breathy moans. His lips wrap around her clit, the tip of his tongue swirling and teasing the swollen bulb as he sucks gently, driving her to the edge as she's overwhelmed by the powerful stimuli.

Her walls collapse around me, tightening around the head and shaft and dragging me into oblivion with her. My head falls back with a powerful groan as my cock pulses deep inside her, filling her tight hole with my release. It floods out of her, dripping down to her pussy and into Kaehl's waiting mouth as her orgasm tears through her,

filling her eyes with a burning silver light and flooding from her mouth in a scream of ecstasy.

The sound is enough to wake the others. In the next blink, four different colored pairs of eyes stare at us through the shadows, still glossy from the powerful clutches of sleep. One by one, they press to their forearms, listening to the beautiful chorus of moans echoing into the open air, filling it with an electric heat that wakes their inner beasts and urges them to join.

Slowly, I lower Dagny to the ground, my cock still pulsing deep in her ass as the other four crawl toward us, their eyes wide and hungry. As they approach, Kaehl steps back, his mouth glistening with her arousal and skin shuddering with the endless need coursing through his system.

But now he has to share with more than just me.

28

Kaabl

I step back as the other four demons stalk toward Dagny on all fours, their skin shuddering with the weight of their desire, the need to have her, to touch her and hold her and fuck her. My gaze flicks toward Dagny, and a powerful wave of desire fills my chest at the sight of her swollen lips parting with a gasp as Malice thrusts into her from behind—his cock still hard and throbbing despite having filled her moments before.

“Still so fucking tight,” Malice chokes, his chin falling forward onto his sweat-slicked chest as euphoria crests in his veins. “So fucking mine.” His fingertips tighten around her hips as he pumps in and out of her tight hole, using his cum and lubrication as he fucks her the way he’s been craving.

Dagny’s cries pierce the air as Roark moves to the space just in front of Malice, his hand wrapped around his cock and stroking slowly as he watches Malice pump in and out of his mate.

“So fucking hot,” he murmurs, his eyes flickering with shadows as he urges the swollen head of his cock forward, desperate to feel her. “I can’t wait to fill you.”

Malice smirks, sliding one of his hands up between his shoulder blades and forcing her to bend forward. “Just like that. Relax. I got you.” He runs his fingers down her spine, soothing her sensitive flesh and coaxing her back into a place of safety. “Good. Open wide, sweet girl.”

She does as he asks, wrapping her lips around Roark's waiting cock and taking him to the back of her throat. Her eyes water as she attempts to take him deeper, choking around his girth and causing thick strands of saliva to drip down her chin.

Roark groans, his head falling back as he throbs deep within her throat. "Gods, I love watching you choke on my cock. You always try so, so hard to take it all." His hips thrust, causing tears to stream down Dagny's cheeks and a scream to echo deep within her chest. Roark lets out a low chuckle, pulling back slightly and allowing her to take a deep breath in through her nose. "So fucking cute."

Malice thrusts into her, pressing his hips flush against her ass and forcing her forward onto Roark's cock again and again, the motion causing his abdomen to shudder as the sound of his pleasure fills the air in a chorus of choked, throaty moans. Roark's hips jerk erratically, pushing to the back of her throat as his cock throbs with his release, filling her mouth and causing a fresh wave of tears to course down her face.

"Fuck, " Roark rasps, stumbling back a step and pulling his cock free of her lips. "Fuck, I was not expecting that."

In the few moments it takes him to recover, Cyprien slips into the space between Roark and Dagny, kneeling beneath her spread thighs and gazing up at her spread pussy with a ravenous gleam in his yellow eyes. Just as I did, Cyprien pushes his mouth into her pussy, dragging his tongue up her dripping center and over her clit while Malice continues his hurried thrusts.

With an explosive groan, Malice presses his hips flush against Dagny's ass, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as a surge of energy spreads into the air, filling it with electricity. He comes deep inside her while Cyprien licks her clit, teasing swirls that turn to a vicious assault as he brings her closer and closer to the edge.

Malice's release floods out of Dagny's tight hole as his cock continues pulsing deep

inside her, and suddenly, it's too much for her to handle. Her head falls back with a piercing scream, her power rippling into the air in powerful waves as her pleasure crests, filling her entire being with a burning, tingling, earth-shattering bliss.

Her body goes limp as Malice pulls his cock from her ass, but he's not willing to let her rest just yet. Cyprien lies back on the floor while Malice holds her aloft, guiding her body up to Cyprien's waiting mouth. Malice positions her thighs on either side of Cyprien's head and loosens his hold, allowing the full weight of her wet, pulsing center to rest on his face.

A satisfied hum vibrates Cyprien's chest as he pushes his tongue deep into her pussy, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as the taste of her fills his senses. "This fucking pussy," he groans. "I'll never get tired of this high. The feel of you. The taste."

He drags his tongue up her center as Lir comes up from behind, straddling Cyprien's chest as he inches his swollen, throbbing cock toward Dagny's ass. He presses inside her with a choked growl, the veins in his forearms throbbing and skin shuddering as he fills her tight hole.

Lir begins moving in her while Fenryr walks over to her head, stroking his cock slowly as he gazes down at her, his canines elongating and eyes swirling with shadows as he watches her expression twist and shatter.

"Such a beautiful little toy," he whispers, inching the head toward her waiting mouth. "Wrap your lips around me. Keep your eyes up here. I want to watch you while he fucks your ass."

Dagny does as he asks, taking Fenryr's cock to the back of her throat while dutifully keeping her gaze locked on his. Lir pumps in and out of her ass, his claws digging deep into her hips and keeping her frozen in place while the demon below teases her

clit.

Her eyes glaze over as the rush of stimuli overpowers her nervous system. All her fine muscles twinge and shiver, drawing a throaty groan from Lir as her walls convulse around his cock, sending him over the edge. Dagny whimpers around Fenryr's cock as Lir falls forward, sinking his canines into the curve of her shoulder as he comes, adding another load to her dripping hole.

"Eyes on me," Fenryr whispers, his mouth curving into a cruel smirk as he fists Dagny's hair and yanks her head back. "You can come as long as you keep looking at me."

Dagny's eyes cross as Cyprien continues teasing her clit—slow, swirling movements that cause her thighs to tremble and her hips to roll as that fire spreads from her core, blazing across her skin and warming the surrounding air with a feverish heat.

She comes, and energy explodes from her pores in luminous beams of starlight, bathing the room in silver. It bounces off the walls, reflecting in the hungry sheen of Fenryr's eyes as she rides Cyprien's face, her hips jerking in a desperate attempt to draw out the pleasure coursing through her veins.

Lir's claws dig into Dagny's hips as he shifts back, pulling his cock from her tight hole with a choked grunt. His slicked length flops onto Cyprien's chest as he runs his hand up her spine, drawing goose bumps to the surface of her skin and causing her throat to vibrate with a moan.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, the corners of his eyes swirling with shadows as he watches his cum drip out of her hole and slide down her center. "You were made to be filled. To be fucked and pleased by as many cocks as your body can take."

Fenryr pulls his cock from her lips, allowing her to take a much-needed breath.

Sensing the opportunity, Cyprien bucks his hips, unseating Lir and forcing him to fall to the side. Before either of us can react, Cyprien grabs Dagny's hips and lifts her from his face, holding her at arm's distance as he pushes to a sitting position—keeping her all to himself.

Dagny's eyes widen as Cyprien lowers her onto his waiting cock, his head falling back and muscles quivering in bliss as he pushes into her warm, wet center. She places her hands on his chest as her back arches, her lips parting in a desperate moan as her walls stretch around his thick length.

As soon as his cock bottoms out, Cyprien flips Dagny onto her back, kneeling over her with one hand up by her head and the other wrapped like a vise around her waist, helping to keep her lower half elevated while she wraps her thighs around his hips.

A manic gleam enters his eyes as he leans down, nipping at her bottom lip. "I'm going to breed you just like this," he growls, his grip tightening around her waist. "Day after day, I'm going to fill your tight little hole with my seed. And when your belly swells and you're bursting with my litter, I'll fucking fill you more." He nuzzles his jaw against her face, a low-toned whine echoing deep in his chest. "You want me to fill you, don't you? You want to be my good little breeding bunny, don't you?"

Dagny nods deliriously, her eyes rolling to the back of her head as Cyprien pumps in and out of her with slow, purposeful thrusts. "Yes," she whispers, her voice raw and cracked from use. " Yes. "

" Fuckkk , " Cyprien groans, his chin colliding with his chest as he bottoms out, pressing his hips flush against hers. His hips jerk erratically, his abdomen quivering as his cock pulses deep within her, shooting hot ropes of cum to the back of her pussy, filling her womb. "Fuck, you're such a good girl. Take all this fucking cum," he chokes, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as his balls contract with the last of his release.

His chest heaves with ragged breaths as he slips his cock from her pussy, keeping his arm around her waist to keep her pelvis raised. He leans back with a cruel smile, wrapping his free hand around her thigh and using his leverage to push her hips up over her head in a mild contortion.

His eyes skim over her center hungrily, a rush of desire thrumming down the bond as he admires her pretty glazed pussy. “ Still not enough ...”

“I can fix that,” Fenryr whispers, his voice low and gravelly as he crouches next to Cyprien, one hand fisting his cock and the other reaching for Dagny. He yanks her toward him in one powerful movement, wrapping her thighs around her waist as he guides his cock toward her glistening entrance.

Cyprien sits back on his heels, his eyes gleaming with hunger as he watches Fenryr thrust inside his mate. As moans pour from Dagny’s open mouth, Cyprien reaches down, his palm moving along the length of his cock with smooth, unhurried strokes.

Fenryr pumps in and out of her pussy, his palms tightening around her hips as he fucks her senseless, each movement accompanied by an animalistic snarl that overpowers the moans and cries falling from Dagny’s lips.

His eyes flicker between emerald and black as he pushes forward, seating his cock in the deepest part of her as the bulbous knot at the base of his shaft swells, locking him in place. A throaty groan thunders into the air as Fenryr falls forward, his abdomen shuddering and balls tightening as he cums deep inside her, filling her past the point of comfort. Her eyes water as his cock continues pulsing, stretching her out with nowhere else to go but deep into her womb.

“ Mine, ” Fenryr growls, his canines lashing out and piercing his lower lip. “ My mate. ”

“Yours,” she whimpers, her gaze unfocused and her breathing ragged. “Always yours.”

A wave of euphoria rolls through the bond at her utterance. Fenryr releases a wolflike whimper, leaning down and pressing his forehead to Dagny’s as the last of his release shudders free. “Gods, I’m obsessed with you,” he breathes. “Every little fucking piece of you.”

“And then some,” Malice murmurs, appearing at Fenryr’s side, his clawed hand outstretched toward Dagny’s face. “You’ve never looked more magnificent, little one.”

“Hmm.” Her lips tip into a delirious smile as her eyes close, her head lolling to the side and muscles quivering in the aftermath. “That’s nice.”

Malice smirks, brushing his thumb gently across her cheek. “You ready for some sleep?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Okay, little one,” he whispers. He turns to Fenryr with a raised brow, waiting for him to pull out of her. Fenryr pouts, but does so, carefully lowering her hips to the ground so she doesn’t hurt herself and scooting back to make room for me.

I scoop her limp body into my arms, my chest humming with pride at the sight of the flush coloring her cheeks and the glazed look in her silver-ringed eyes. I place a gentle kiss to her forehead and move toward the furs, my muscles quivering with effort as I carefully lower her to the blankets.

I take my place at her side while the other demons crawl over to the bedspread, carefully positioning themselves so they all have equal access to their mate. Our

hands trail over her body, healing her tired muscles and soothing her heated skin—but mostly just reveling in the feel of her, the knowledge that she belongs to us fully. Now, and forever.

“How do you feel?” Lir asks, nuzzling the side of her jaw with his face as a satisfied purr hums in his chest. “Are you hurting?”

“Not at all,” she whispers, her eyes fluttering closed as a wave of contentment thrums through the bond. “I feel... whole. Complete.”

“Then you feel just as we do,” Malice murmurs, sliding his fingers between the gentle peaks of her breasts. “Nothing compares to the knowledge that you are finally, truly, and completely ours. No sweeter sound or taste or feeling. No better high than this, than you.”

Her lips tip into a small smile as she cups Malice’s cheek in her palm, her eyes dancing with a tender emotion. “I’m so happy to be yours. To belong to all of you.”

“Just as we are to belong to you,” Roark says, tightening his grip on her thigh. “There’s nothing we would trade for this, for you.”

Dagny’s eyes glaze over with a faraway look as she stares up at the ceiling, a thought flashing in her silver-ringed gaze. “I only worry...”

“What of?” Cyprien asks, the corners of his eyes creasing with concern as he presses up to get a better look at her expression. “You have all of us now. Nothing will harm you.”

Dagny cuts me a look, worrying her lip between her teeth. “Now that we’re all bonded... isn’t there a chance I’ll be absorbed in place of the heart? What if Slaine finds us before I’m ready, and?—”

“Don’t worry about that, wildfire,” Malice whispers, drawing gentle circles on her stomach in an attempt to soothe her growing anxiety. “He won’t. We have time.”

“But what if?—”

“Even if the worst happens, we will not allow you to be harmed.” He stares unblinking, his expression set in stone. “No matter what, you will live. I will see to that personally.” Malice kisses her sternum, allowing his lips to linger for several long moments. “We shouldn’t be thinking about this right now. We can talk about what this means later, but for now, you need to rest.”

I’m so sorry I worried you. I reach out, taking her free hand between mine and squeezing gently. This is because of what we spoke about the other night. It’s my fault.

“You were just telling me the truth,” she says, her mouth turning into a frown. “I don’t regret what happened—not for a single moment—but I just... I care for you all so much. I want us to have more time together...”

And we will have it, I promise. Whatever it is you want, you will have.

“We’ll figure it out,” Fenryr adds, his dark green eyes swimming with a tender emotion as he stares down at his mate. “ Together. You can’t get rid of us now, little one.”

“Good,” she whispers, a hint of a smile replacing her anxious expression. “I wouldn’t want to, anyway.”

“You say that now,” Cyprien growls, his fingertips tightening around her thigh. “Wait until you’re so sore and used that you’re begging us for a break.”

Lir smacks Cyprien upside the head with a glare. “Are you trying to scare her away? Let her rest, you maniac.”

A chuckle shakes Dagny’s chest as Cyprien lays his head on her pelvis, nuzzling his face against her bare skin with a low-toned whine echoing from his throat. “Fine. I’ll be patient.”

Lir lies back down with a tired sigh, keeping one hand on Dagny’s shoulder as he snuggles deeper into the furs. The rest of us follow suit, forming a protective circle around our mate while ensuring each of us has equal access to her.

Her pretty pink lips stretch with a yawn, and she curls up in the center of the pile, her eyes hooded and muscles quivering slightly from earlier. I stay awake for a time, watching her sleep before succumbing to the dark.

I close my eyes and fall happily into the void, knowing that when I wake, my mate will still be here, still wrapped in my arms. Still mine .

And a seed of hope blooms in my heart for the first time in my life.

29

Dagny

1 week later...

The ice beneath the welwigs is thinner than the rest of the ground, and with each careful step, the ground crackles ominously, threatening to shatter beneath my weight and send me tumbling to the void below—but I don't let that deter me. I have something to prove.

I dig my fingertips into the ice at the base of the trunk, surprised to find how easily it parts beneath my prying touch. Closing my eyes, I push my fingers deeper into the crust, searching by touch alone for the carrot-shaped tuber that grows here, trying desperately not to think about the ground shuddering underfoot, or what would happen if it truly gave way.

I've learned many things about The Far Place this past week, but one of the most horrifying is the knowledge of what lies just beneath the surface of the ice—the interwoven tunnels branching and spreading deep underground, giving home to creatures that are born from nightmares. All of them converge beneath the base of the welwigs for some reason, which is why the ice is so much thinner here and why it's so dangerous to forage for the roots I've been depending on for a food source.

Normally, one of my mates would do this task. But today, I insisted on doing it, needing some fresh air and a few minutes alone to clear my head. Now that my demon half has fully emerged, the frozen temperature of The Far Place actually feels

semi-comfortable, and with my power, I'm fully capable of protecting myself should any creature try to make a meal of me.

At least, that was my reasoning. Now, I'm sorely regretting my decision, especially when these stupid tubers are so damn hard to find— aha!

I lean back on my heels, a grin spreading my lips as I stare at the frost-coated root dangling from my palm. I pocket the morsel and lean forward on my hands, determined to find at least two more before one of my mates comes looking for me in a huff. With treasures in hand, I stand and tiptoe away from the base of the tree like a crook in the night, holding my breath as I brush through the curtain of shimmering, dripping leaves as if the mighty creature will sense I'm stealing something that doesn't belong to me.

As soon as I make it past the circumference of thinning ice, I let out a breath, reveling in the feel of the wind whipping against my face and the sturdiness of the ground beneath my feet. This small victory feels good.

As soon as the thought forms, I shake it away, the overwhelming sense of pride replaced with guilt in the next blink. For a moment, I forgot how treacherous things are, how close my mates and I are to being found by Slaine and slaughtered. Finding a stupid ice root means nothing when it's been days, and I still can't control the kleptak for longer than a few minutes.

I stand frozen in place, staring blankly at the barren landscape as memories storm to the forefront of my mind. It's been nearly a week since I bonded with Kaehl—a week of grueling days and blissful, pleasure-filled nights—and I'd be lying if I said I'd experienced happiness like I have these past few days with all my mates. But even with all that joy, the reality of my failure has been niggling in the back of my mind, reminding me what will happen if I don't figure out how to harness my magic fully—and soon.

“If you can fear, you can also be brave.”

My shoulders slump as a heavy sigh blows past my lips, heating the air and causing a cloud of vapor to swirl around my face. It’s so thick that it covers my line of sight for a split moment, concealing the outline of the demon lowering to the ice a few hundred feet away, his teeth bared and claws outstretched with murderous intent.

As soon as the fog dissipates, I stumble back with a choked scream, my eyes widening on the terrifying, milky-eyed creature sprinting across the ice, its steps eerily silent as it closes the distance on its prey. Panic fills my lungs, making each second stretch to minutes as I search the horizon, willing one of my mates to materialize and save me.

But it’s too late.

The demon lunges, its jaw extended and lips pulled back to reveal the jagged yellow teeth preparing to sink into my throat. It sails through the air in a blur of motion, too fast and vicious and powerful for me to dodge. Only... I no longer need to run.

My blood boils, heating the ice beneath my feet and filling my head with a thunderous roar as the wild magic of The Far Place flows into my veins, coating my vision in a glowing silver film as I draw more and more of that strange power from the earth—taking far more than I should, far more than is necessary.

As soon as the demon makes contact, it’s like two atoms colliding. One minute, the soldier is preparing to sink its claws into my chest, and the next, it’s being blown across the land, forced back by an incredible burst of energy exploding from my open palms. My magic shudders through the air and vibrates the ice beneath my feet, threatening to cleave the ground and tear the skies apart.

Brilliant silver light explodes from my open mouth, silencing my scream and causing

my ears to fill with a thunderous roar as the onslaught of energy tears at the seams holding my mind together. Just before it destroys me, I force the barricade back into place, fighting with everything I have against the violent surge.

I fall to my knees, sucking in a breath that does nothing to cool the fire raging in the back of my throat as the flood of energy swells, bursting through the barrier. The thing living beneath my skin raises its head, woken by the delicious rush of power and desperate for a taste.

I blink, and suddenly I'm in the air, gazing wide-eyed at my hands wrapped around the soldier's throat. His face is swollen and purple, veins bulging and beautifully complementing the bloodied lips attempting to form the words "mercy" and "please."

Against my will, my power surges, rushing from my palms and into the demon's flesh, the wild tendrils of magic pushing past his barriers and delving through his innermost thoughts, memories, and desires. I go to pull back when a wall of power slams into me, locking me in place and flooding my mind with a myriad of devastating images and pictures of things to come.

The screaming. The bodies. The rivers and oceans of red staining the land as far as the eye can see. A thousand screeching, bloodthirsty soldiers soaring over the horizon, called to this spot by a simple mistake. A moment wasted.

I frown, my grip wavering as I try to understand it all—just enough for the demon in my hands to suck in a breath. Before I register what he's doing, an ear-piercing screech echoes through the air, exploding from the demon's throat like it's the last sound he'll ever get to make.

My eyes widen as horror fills my veins, realizing too late exactly what the mistake was. He's calling them. He's telling Slaine where we are.

A rage-filled scream explodes from deep within the pit of my stomach, rivaling the pitch and desperation of the nameless demon and filling the sky with a violent, whipping wind. My vision is cast in silver as I draw more and more power from the air, forcing it all to the tips of my fingers and the bottoms of my palms—every last thread of focus concentrated on severing the head from its shoulders.

My muscles strain, shuddering with the sheer amount of effort as my magic tears through flesh and tendon, separating the vertebrae and sending rivers of dark fluid coursing to the ground in a fascinating display of carnage.

I gaze down at the headless body, blinking slowly as I take in the blood squirting from the hole in the center, staining my hands and forearms with warm, slippery life. I release the remains as the wind dies down, letting them crash to the earth as my wings beat the still morning air, the sound alone reminding me that I'm alive and somehow made it out of that encounter unscathed.

“Oh my gods... bunny? ”

I turn my eyes downward, my lips parting in shock as I take in Cyprien's smiling face, utterly joyful despite the bloody, headless body he's standing over. “Cyprien?”

“That was so fucking badass,” he says, his grin threatening to split his face. “I've never been more aroused than I am right now.”

“You absolute cretin .” Lir appears at his side, smacking him upside the head with his signature scowl. “Can you think of nothing else but the status of your cock?” He turns his head to the sky, his gaze softening as he realizes I'm unharmed. “Dagny... I'm so happy you're okay. When we felt your fear down the bond, we came right away, but it seems we were too late.”

I lower to the ground as Roark, Fenryr, Kaabl, and Malice step into view, their faces

twisted in worry as they race toward me.

“Dagny!” Malice sweeps me up in his arms, coating himself in the blood staining my skin as he presses me flush against his chest. “Gods, I thought... I thought...” He pulls back, his breath trembling as he looks deep into my eyes. “I’ve never been so thankful for your power. You’re magnificent, my wildfire.”

Fenryr circles my back, his arms folding around Malice and me as Roark, Lir, and Cyprien join the embrace, their hands running over my body and touching me in any way they can. I get lost in the moment, the pleasure of being reunited with my mates after such a frightening ordeal—but it’s only for a moment.

“Guys... I have something to tell you,” I whisper, my eyes shuttering as I recall my encounter with the soldier. “That demon... just before I killed him, he?—”

“It’s okay,” Malice murmurs, brushing his hand gently over my forehead. “We know.”

We heard his call, Kaabl explains, his expression hardening into one of anger. Rotten bastard. If we knew they were scouting this far north, we would have never let you go out alone.

“It’s a good thing bunny can take care of herself,” Cyprien says, his eyes swimming with pride. “We’ll have no problem taking out Slaine.”

I shake my head, that hollow pit of dread settling into the pit of my stomach. “You don’t understand... I saw into that demon’s head... I saw the army, and Slaine, and all the bloodshed.” I close my eyes, my throat like sandpaper as I swallow. “None of us makes it out of this alive. Not unless you use me to bring Abaddon back.”

Malice’s arms tense around me, and when I’m finally brave enough to open my eyes,

I find he's been staring, unblinking, a myriad of thoughts swirling behind his eyes. "I will never allow that to happen."

This is exactly what I was fearful of, Kaehl says, his eyes creasing in despair. You cannot sacrifice yourself, Dagny. None of us could live with that option.

"Then what?" I demand. "Countless demons and creatures will lose their lives if I don't. My father's death will be in vain. All the sacrifices you've made will be for nothing. My life is meaningless if Slaine is allowed to continue infecting this world with his evil."

It is never meaningless! Kaehl's eyes flare with rage as his muscles shudder, desperately trying to control the anger the words bring. Your life means everything, little one. More than the stars, than the earth, than this whole universe.

"Then what are we supposed to do?" I whisper. "We have to do something. "

Malice turns his head toward the forest, his eyes piercing through the thick shadows. "First, we go back to the lair and regroup." He sighs, his eyes filling with a deep, unending sadness—but I have no idea why. "And then we figure out if there's a way we can survive this."

30

Malice

“So... one last orgy before we die? Do I have any hands?”

Lir cuts Cyprien a glare, the vein bulging in his forehead and his skin purpling with the sheer amount of rage bubbling to the surface. “Must you always be so insufferably stupid ? We’re not having a fucking orgy.”

“I thought it was a good idea.” Fenryr pouts, smooshing Dagny’s face deeper into his chest as his arms tighten around her shoulders. “Might as well if Slaine is going to kill us all, right?”

Roark scoffs, crossing his arms as he narrows his eyes at Fenryr. “Are you going to give up that easily?”

“Did you not listen to a word Dagny said? They know where we are. They’re coming to kill us, and there’s not a single other spot in The Far Place we can run to.”

Then we don’t run, Kaabl interjects, his voice startling everyone into silence. We fight.

Lir shakes his head solemnly. “I hate to agree with Fenryr, but... none of us are strong enough. And as powerful as Dagny is, she’s only been training for a few weeks. Eventually, they would overpower her.”

Roark turns to me with a desperate whine building in the base of his throat. “Malice, come on. Say something. Tell them that you have this figured out—that we can win. That we can live .”

My mouth pinches together in a thin white line as I stare downward, focusing on a small crack in the ice by my toe.

“ Malice !”

“It’s over,” I whisper, unable to meet their heated stares. When I devised this plan, I knew it was extremely unlikely that Dagny would complete her training before Slaine found us. I knew all along how slim the odds were that I would get to experience some happiness in this wretched life—that there was less than half a percent chance I would have a future with my mate—but I still clung to that thread of hope, let it consume me. I deluded myself so much that I began to see it as fact at some point. I believed I would make it out of this intact, trusted too much in the fates and the stars and the extraordinary sensation of feeling something for the very first time. Now...

“There’s only one thing left to do,” I say, a hollow pang ringing in the space where my heart should be. I look at my mate, and I know at that moment I would do anything— anything —to make sure she lives. I’ll gladly go to my death, happy I had this small amount of time with her. Happy I had a glimpse of the life I could have lived.

“I’m going to show you where Abaddon’s heart is. We’re going to reverse the sundering—once and for all.”

* * *

The violent wind whips against my face, cruel icy tendrils slicing my cheekbones and causing my eyes to water. Each breath I take is labored and painful, but it’s nothing

compared to the agony pulsing down the bond, filling my chest and weighing me down as that pit of dread in my stomach spreads, consuming every part of me and threatening to send me crashing to the ground.

The sensation originates from the beautiful woman flying to my left, her expression matching the surge of pain echoing through the bond. As hard as she tries, she can't keep me out of her head—or rather, she's unable to stop the violent rush of thoughts and emotions that pour out of her, filling my ears and striking fear to the center of my chest.

She's angry that I kept the location of the heart a secret, but she also understands why. Not only is it incredibly dangerous to retrieve it, but digging it up means there will be no more Malice. No more Kaabl, or Cyprien, or Lir. Roark and Fenryr will be absorbed just as easily as the rest, and nothing will change that.

I know why Dagny is angry, and it has nothing to do with me. She's furious at the fates for bringing us together only to tear us apart when things were finally good, and she was finally—finally—happy for once in her life.

I'm not sure which is more powerful, her anger or her sorrow, but it makes no difference. Both cut just as deeply. Every part of me wants to reach out to her, to turn around and go back to the lair and pretend the end isn't approaching, but I know I can't. If I do that, if I abandon this fight, if I refuse to make this sacrifice... my mate will die.

Cut to the left. My voice travels down the bond the seven of us share, directing them deeper into Slaine's territory. Make sure to keep above the cloud line. His scouts will be everywhere the closer we get to the forest.

The others nod in an affirmative, and we continue gliding through the air, heading slightly toward the left and into the heart of Slaine's lands, where the oldest known

welwigs reside—and where I buried Abaddon's heart twenty-one years ago.

A few hours later, we come across the forest—a circular grove dotting the barren landscape no larger than a mile in diameter, densely packed with hundreds of the ancient trees. I gesture to the small clearing in the center of the forest, nearly hidden from view by the clusters of branches and dripping leaves forming the tightly packed canopy. We float slowly toward the ground, passing through the small space between the trees one by one and keeping watch for Slaine's soldiers.

As soon as we land on the ice, I'm overcome by a rush of wild, pulsing energy. It whips against my skin, thrumming through the air and the ground beneath my feet, the swirling tendrils reaching, searching. It's not a pleasant feeling, and I can't help but think the welwigs are unhappy with Dagny's presence. Perhaps it's because she has access to their largest, most ancient stores of magic. Perhaps they're worried she'll sap it dry. Perhaps they dislike the fact that she exists at all.

"Follow me," I murmur, tugging Dagny deeper into the forest. The others follow suit, their eyes scanning the shadows for threats as we move toward the center—where the heart is.

It also happens to be right next to an arachnyx horde, but as long as we stay utterly silent, we'll be able to avoid detection?—

"Ow! My fucking toe!"

I whip around, my mouth falling in disbelief as I take in Cyprien's pinched expression, mouth still partially opened from his outburst.

Are you fucking kidding me? I scream into his mind. I told you to be quiet! One thing—one—and you can't muster the barest morsel of willpower to shut your hole for five minutes! I gesture around the barren landscape, my face purpling from the

amount of rage I'm holding inside. What in the fuck could you have stubbed it on?

Cyprien frowns, reaching down to rub his sore foot. I don't know. I just know I did.

My gods. I bring a hand to the bridge of my nose, exhaling a shallow breath as I try to calm myself. Watch where you step from now on. You're lucky you didn't alert one of those horrible creatures to our loca ? —

Shut the fuck up! Fenryr interrupts, bringing a finger to his lips as his eyes scan the shadows. Be quiet for a second. I think I heard something.

We form a protective circle around Dagny, our muscles twinging and primed to strike down anything that would dare have ill intent toward our mate. And then, from deep within the shadowed forest comes that rhythmic, low-toned clicking—piercing through the stillness and filling my veins with adrenaline.

Fenryr whips his head to the side, his mouth wide and eyes filled with a terror I've never seen before. “ Cover Dagny no ? — ”

He doesn't get to finish. Before the last word passes his lips, a giant white ball of movement slams into his side, knocking him off his feet and sending his body cartwheeling through the air with a piercing scream. My muscles coil, preparing to lunge after Fenryr when another sound makes its way to my ears, clearing my mind of anything else and freezing me to the spot.

Dagny's horrified gasp shudders through the clearing as my head whips toward her, finding her eyes wide and face paling as she gazes at something standing just past the tree line.

I shift my gaze to the side, and a bolt of horror spreads through my veins at the sight of the massive white spider demon crawling out from the shadows. All eight of the

spider's milky white eyes hone in on Dagny as it rears up on its four front legs, the clicking sound replaced with a low-toned hiss as the creature inspects her small frame, debating whether the fight will be worth it.

That horrific clicking breaks the air once more, vibrating beneath my skin and slipping between the cracks in my ribs, then stopping my heart as a dozen more arachnyx materialize from the shadowed forest. The horde surrounds us in the next blink, their mandibles tapping together and filling the air with a chorus of gut-churning chittering sounds as they prepare to strike.

“Oh gods,” Dagny whispers, her voice hoarse as she takes in the horrifying creatures. “Holy fuck... we’re going to die... we’re going to fucking die...”

“Shh.” Malice brings a finger to his lips, his eyes scanning the horde of arachnyx, carefully assessing each twitch and slight movement. “It’s okay, little one... everything is okay...”

“I fucking hate spiders,” she whispers, sounding close to tears.

“I know,” Malice says, shifting his eyes to her briefly. “But you have to be brave. You have to calm down .”

Dagny takes a deep breath, her eyes sweeping around the circle wildly. “Okay... I’m calm.”

“You don’t look calm,” he murmurs, flicking his gaze to the arachnyx closest to him. “But you know what? That doesn’t matter... I’m not fucking calm right now.” We all step back, tightening our protective circle as the creatures inch closer, their jaws clicking and dripping with a viscous, clear liquid.

“Malice?”

“Yes, my dear sweet mate?”

“What am I supposed to do?” she whispers, her voice hoarse, holding all the fear her expression conveys.

Malice turns to her, taking his eyes off the arachnyx and giving it the perfect opportunity to pounce. Just as it lowers, preparing to strike, Malice grabs Dagny’s shoulders, looking deep into her eyes with a small smirk tugging at his mouth.

“Show me what you’re really capable of.”

31

Fenryr

I blink, and my vision is coated with a swirling emerald film, a wave of energy cresting in my veins as the beast lurking beneath my skin rears its head, waking to the sounds of its mate in danger. My muscles shudder over lengthening bone and bulging joints, causing my skin to shiver and stretch as it accommodates my transformation.

I stand shoulder to shoulder with Cyprien and Roark, eyeing down the largest of the arachnyx just in front of us, blending in beautifully with the surrounding landscape. Its thorax lowers to the ground as those horrible mandibles clack together, filling the air with the creature's anticipation.

Malice whispers something to Dagny, and I cut my gaze to the left—my stomach flipping as I take in the creature just over his shoulder, lowered and ready to pounce. I open my mouth to warn him of the impending doom, but it's too late. The arachnyx lunges, sailing through the air in slow motion, its mouth wide and fangs dripping as it closes in on its prey.

A sudden, explosive surge of power shocks the ground, tilting the world on its axis and filling the air with a charged energy, thickening the atmosphere and threatening to cleave the sky apart. The spider is blown backward across the land, colliding with a tree trunk at the far edge of the clearing with so much force that it causes the wood to break and splinter.

In the next heartbeat, the space is covered in an eerie stillness, the magic thrumming

from Dagny's veins thickening the air with swirling tendrils of power that consume all air and sound in the small clearing.

I stare unblinking at Dagny's frame, scared to move, to breathe in case it shatters her focus and corrupts the vein of magic she's managed to tap into. Her palms are outstretched toward the horde, her brow pinched and sweat beading across her upper lip as she forces her magic into the chittering, snapping beasts. Surprisingly, none of the creatures are moving—all of their focus is trained on Dagny, awaiting her orders.

"Go!" she chokes, her face turning purple as she concentrates on holding them all in place. "I can't... much longer..."

Before the creatures can break free of her hold, the six of us lunge into action, flying across the distance with claws outstretched and canines sharpened—all of our focus on ending the lives of the creatures that dare endanger our mate.

With a bellow, I jump onto the arachnyx's back, my arms held high and abdomen quivering as I prepare to deliver a killing blow. My fists come down on the back of its skull with all the force I can muster, cleaving its bulbous head in two and sending the great creature to the ice, utterly lifeless. I move on to the next while the other demons make short work of the rest of the horde, filling the clearing with a symphony of snarls and growls and the snapping of jaws.

As soon as the last arachnyx falls, the light fades from Dagny's eyes, and she crumples, her knees giving out a second before her body slumps to the ground in a limp heap.

The six of us rush toward her, racing to be the first to touch her, to make sure she's okay. I pull her into my lap as the others crowd around us, their eyes wide and searching as I run my palm over Dagny's cheek, desperate to wake her.

“It’s okay, little one,” I whisper, pushing healing magic into her pale skin. “You did so, so well. I’m so proud of you.”

Her eyes flutter open, a soft groan falling from her chapped lips as she wakes. She looks up, and my breath gets caught in my throat at the sight of the beautiful ring of silver around her iris, pulsing with the fantastical magic thrumming through her system.

I can’t believe how powerful she is. To be able to control a horde of arachnyx with only a few weeks’ training is utterly remarkable. At that moment, I realize Malice was right—that this beautiful little light in my arms is the strongest creature in The Far Place. More powerful than Slaine and Abaddon combined, able to tilt the world on its axis if she willed it.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, placing a delicate kiss to the center of her brow, my bond mark flaring to life on her hip. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

“I don’t... think so.” She blinks slowly, her eyes returning to the natural warm brown with each one. “I think I’m okay.” She reaches up and takes Fenryr’s face in her hand as the rest of the demons crowd around her, their voices muddled as they all exclaim their praises.

Dagny shakes her head, her skin paling as she tries to push out of my grip. “We have to go. We... the heart. We have to find it before Slaine?—”

“Why don’t you rest for a minute, bunny?” Cyprien asks, a low whine building in the base of his chest. “You used so much power...”

“I can’t,” she deadpans, pushing out of my arms and standing on shaking legs. Pulling her shoulders back, she takes a deep breath in through her nose, then stalks off toward the tree line, past the countless bodies and traipsing over pools of dark

blood. Just like the goddess she really is.

“Well?” she calls, turning her head over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

Grinning, we follow her, Malice rushing to take the lead and guide us deeper into the forest. To take us to the heart.

32

Dagny

The ground crunches underfoot as the six of us weave through the dripping branches, the tinkling of the crystal leaves the only sound other than our footfalls to break the charged silence hanging in the still air.

My gaze focuses on the bob and shudder of Malice's back muscles as he leads us into the heart of the forest, needing something to tether me and keep me standing as black dots crowd my vision. Every muscle in my body twinges and cramps uncomfortably, though it's hardly noticeable past the throbbing ache in my joints. My bones feel like they've been dipped in fire, and every step adds gasoline to the blaze, causing agony to course through my system.

With each shallow breath, the air whooshes between the spaces in my ribs, rattling my chest and coating my lungs in a thin layer of frost. And it burns, but it's the only thing keeping me conscious, allowing me to push forward one more step, one more foot. I've never felt this weak, but something inside me is forcing me onward, filling me with a sense of urgency that can't be ignored.

Ten minutes of steady travel pass, and I wonder if Malice truly remembers where he buried the heart, or if he's leading us on some wild goose chase through the woods. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for him to pull a stunt like—

“ Stop. ”

Malice holds his hand up, his back muscles quivering as he stands eerily still, staring blankly off to the side.

“Is it here?” Cyprien asks, his voice barely a whisper.

Malice nods, his eyes glossing as he continues gazing into the shadows. Slowly, he raises his arm, gesturing to that spot with a long, clawed finger. “It’s over there.”

“Where?” Fenryr demands, huffing an irritated sigh. “We can’t see shit.”

“You can’t see it?” Malice whispers, his voice cracking heavily. “You can’t hear it?”

“I can’t hear anything other than Roark’s heavy breathing,” Cyprien grumbles, taking a step in the direction Malice is pointing. “How about you just tell me when I’m getting warmer and colder? We’ll find it, eventually.”

“No.” Malice whips his head to Cyprien with a snarl, stopping him from taking another step. “It’s mine. It’s beating—screaming—for me.”

Cyprien sighs, rolling his eyes. “So dramatic. Okay, go and get it then.”

Malice blinks, the corners of his good eye flickering with dark shadows. “Are you ready, then?”

“Ready for...?”

“The end,” he murmurs, his gaze flicking to Dagny’s for the briefest moment. “Once I retrieve the heart... all of us will cease to be.”

Cyprien whimpers, stumbling a step back as he looks at Malice with wide eyes. “I didn’t know it would be right away...”

“We were never supposed to live for long,” Malice mutters, his mouth pinching into a thin white line as he gazes into the dark once more. “If Varys hadn’t forgotten to put the heart back in his haste and panic... we likely would have only lived for a few moments before being threaded back into a singular being. So yes, it will be right away. ”

“It’s okay, Cyprien,” Lir says, his voice soft and coaxing as he attempts to place a hand on his shoulder. Cyprien jerks away with a snarl, his eyes gleaming with a rare sheen of sadness.

“I don’t... I’m not ready to leave her,” he whispers, his expression crumbling as he gazes at his mate. “I thought we would have a little more time.”

“Then you deluded yourself.” Malice’s jaw sets as he glares at Cyprien with disdain. “Of course, I should have expected it from such a whiny little worm .”

“There’s no need to be so cruel to him,” Lir growls, his eyes narrowing on Malice’s profile. “Just because you can’t express your sadness in a healthy way doesn’t mean you get to torment him.”

“It’s not my fault he can’t accept reality!” Malice turns on Lir with a snarl, a curtain of rage falling over his expression as he breaks. “ I had to accept it, and no one felt sorry for me! No one cried for me, no one comforted me, no one fucking cared. And you expect me to stand here and coddle him when this is a reality we’ve all known for years.”

He turns his attention toward Kaehl. “What, you have nothing to say? You don’t want to do a little dance? A twirl? No? Nothing?” Malice tips his head back as a hollow laugh echoes into the air. “That’s hilariously ironic. You of all people should be taking pleasure in this moment. Why, this is what you’ve wanted all along, isn’t it, dear Kaehl?”

It is. His gaze hardens. Until I met Dagny. My mind changed that day as well, though it took me some time to admit it. This is just as hard on me as it is on you all.

Malice scoffs, shaking his head softly. “Yes, well... we’re wasting precious time.” His eyes rise, meeting mine head-on. “You all should say your goodbyes.”

And you?

“I... I can’t,” he whispers. “If I touch her, if I hear her say my name, I won’t...” He blinks, and his mask crumbles, revealing all the pain and anguish hidden beneath his carefully crafted disguise. “I won’t be able to let her go.” He turns, tears springing to his eyes as he chokes, “I’m sorry.”

I watch Malice disappear past the tree line, my heart clenching as the darkness consumes him, taking him away from me forever.

My remaining five mates crowd around me, their voices muddled and eyes watery as their hushed whispers roll over my skin, caressing me and attempting to soothe the terrible ache spreading from the center of my chest, to make me believe everything will be okay. But I know the truth. I know deep down, it never will be again.

They pull away much too soon, and though everything inside me is screaming to call this off—to demand we find some other way—I know that will only make it harder for them. I’m not the only one who has to let go, and if I put it off too long, their sacrifice will be for nothing.

“You should go,” I whisper, staring hard at a crack in the ice next to my foot. “It’s time.”

“Dagny...” Cyprien whines, but still allows his hands to drop to his sides. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“There is nothing else.” I lift my head with a small smile, but it holds no joy. “Malice was right. We all knew this was the end, deep down. There’s... nothing to be spoken that we haven’t said to each other already.”

Kaeb1 nods, his eyes swirling with an emotion I can’t seem to place. She’s right, Cyprien. We have... we have to go.

Fenryr turns his head, staring at the spot Malice used to occupy. “He’s probably holding the heart as we speak... just waiting...”

Roark huffs a deep sigh, squeezing my hand one last time before letting it drop. He stares down at his palm, his expression crumbling as he whispers, “I’ll miss you, little doe.”

“As will I.” Tears spring to my eyes as I gaze at each of my mates, my heart fracturing. “I’ll miss all of you. So, so fucking much.”

Lir sniffs, turning his head so I don’t see the tears streaming down his cheeks. “Goodbye, little one,” he says, letting his hands drop from my shoulders as he turns and stalks away, disappearing into the dark just like Malice.

The others follow one by one, leaving me alone in the center of the clearing with tearstained cheeks and a heart made of glass. I stand in place for a few minutes, trying to breathe past the burning ache in my lungs, wiping away the constant flood of tears coursing from my eyes.

They can’t be gone. I refuse to believe it. I can’t.

But no matter how long I wait or how hard I will it, they don’t return.

A small crunch pierces through the silence, and my heart jumps to my throat as I

whip my head over my shoulder, expecting to see Malice's signature smirk gleaming through the shadows, telling me he was wrong and that he figured out a way we can all stay together.

But the reality couldn't be worse.

Two milky orbs peek out from the side of the welwig trunk at the far edge of the clearing, the pupils narrowing to serpentine slits as it scents the fear rolling off my skin. The corners of its eyes crinkle in a smile as it steps out from behind the tree, and my shock turns to horror as I take in the demon's lipless smile, revealing an unmistakable row of cracked yellow teeth. Zairn.

I open my mouth to scream—to alert the others—but before I get the chance, a calloused palm claps over my mouth, silencing my cry. My eyes widen in shock as a muscular gray forearm curls around my throat, cutting off my air and rendering my body immobile. I blink, and I'm being dragged backward across the forest floor and into the shadows—where untold horrors await me.

Black dots line my vision, and the fog of terror parts, allowing me to think clearly for a single moment. Allowing me to remember I don't need my voice to call my mates.

Help me! My scream shudders down the bond, powerful and desperate enough to alert all six to my impending doom. Please, someone! Anyone!

The dark spots consume my sight, blotting out the glistening canopy and the clouded sky above as a high-pitched ringing fills my ears. My muscles shudder and collapse, causing my body to go limp in my captor's arms as one last spike of adrenaline courses through my system, attempting to keep me conscious.

I try to reach for my magic, but it's like I'm drowning underwater—and no matter how much I try, I can't break the surface to grasp it. At this moment, I'm truly

helpless. Right now, I'm not certain I will make it out of this alive.

But worst of all, I know there's no one coming to help me.

33

Malice

“Poor Malice . It must be so terrible to discover you’re not the only creature in this world who can plan ahead.”

My lip curls back in a snarl as I gaze up at Slaine’s haughty expression, a wave of murderous rage cresting in my veins that rolls off my skin in heated waves, thickening the air with a swirling red vapor that reflects the fury in my eyes.

The other five soul pieces are spread around the clearing, each of them restrained similarly to me. There are at least three soldiers to every demon, holding them to the ground and keeping them from making a sound—and I know I will soon lose the right to speak as well. So I better make the most of it.

“Go fuck yourself and die,” I say, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground at his feet.

Slaine’s smirk widens as he raises a hand in the air, bringing it down in a devastating blow to my temple that has my brain rattling and stars sparking behind my eyes. A warm stream of blood pours from the fresh gash on my head, coating the side of my neck in dark blue fluid and staining my armor.

I blink against the fog coating my vision, trying to discern what Slaine is saying but unable to hear past the violent ringing in my ears.

“.... should have known. You’ve always been a traitorous brat.”

“What was that?” I ask, trying to speak past my swollen, throbbing tongue. “You’ve always been an inadequate, spineless worm?” I raise my head with a taunting grin of my own, laughing despite the pain the action brings. “I’m glad to hear you finally admit it. Acceptance is the first step toward personal growth.”

Slaine’s mouth presses into a thin white line as he clenches his fist at his side, the hatred swirling in his milky eyes powerful enough to set the forest alight. “Even in the face of certain death, you find the energy to be the most irksome demon in this realm. It’s truly astounding.”

“I aim to impress.”

Instead of the anger I expect, Slaine’s mouth tips in a small smile, and he gestures toward someone—or some thing —hiding in the shadows over his shoulder. “Come out, Zairn. There’s no need to keep the lovebirds apart any longer.”

Dread hardens in the pit of my stomach as Zairn steps out of the dark, but it’s not the sight of his lipless snarl that has me so terrified—it’s the beautiful woman he has clutched in his arms.

“ Dagny !”

Her name enters the air in a thunderous roar, vibrating through the sky and shaking the ground beneath my knees with the weight of desperation and despair it holds. I fight against the two soldiers holding me in place, helpless to break free of their hold but needing to try anyway. “Dagny! What have you done to her!”

My vision tunnels as I take in her closed eyes and pale lips, the way her body drapes limply over Zairn’s forearms, and I think the worst. No. No, she can’t be dead. She

can't be.

“NO!” I roar, lunging to the side and attempting to sink my teeth into the soldier on my left, but he shifts out of the way just in time, and my jaws clamp down on nothing but air. A frustrated scream builds in the base of my chest as the sound of Slaine's laughter makes its way to my ears, exploding from my open mouth in a thunderous roar that rivals the pain and anger boiling beneath my skin.

“You think you're so clever, but you're just predictable, ” Slaine says, his mouth widening in a simpering sneer. “I always knew you would turn on me. As soon as I saw the way you looked at that one—” He gestures toward Dagny. “I knew it was over. I realized you would go back on our deal, and that I needed to have a backup plan in place.”

He gazes toward my mate, and his eyes flash with a desire that has my blood boiling. “I don't think you or I really believed the extraordinary power she possessed. I think you were just as shocked as I was when she tore down the castle like it was made of paper.” A gentle chuckle shakes his chest, but it doesn't match the demented gleam in his smile. “Remarkable, isn't she? I understand now why you went to such lengths to keep her for yourself.”

His head turns back toward me, his smile never wavering. “You didn't plan for her to destroy the palace, did you? You thought she would just make a nice little distraction so you all could flee... You didn't mean for me to witness the full extent of her power—you couldn't have. It wouldn't make any sense.”

“Does it matter?” I growl, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground. “It happened.”

“Oh, it matters a great deal, Malice.” His eyes gleam. “If your precious mate hadn't destroyed my fucking castle, I likely wouldn't have used every last one of my

resources to track you lot down. Not right away, at least. You would have had more time and likely could have beaten me.” His lip juts out in a mock pout as he crouches in front of me, his misty eyes swirling with amusement. “Poor, poor Malice. You were so close. So close,” he whispers, his smile threatening to split his face in two. “But you were just a little too slow. A little too distracted. And now, the object of your affection has become your death sentence.”

Slaine stands, staring down his hooked nose with a sneer. “I knew you couldn’t resist the opportunity to play white knight and save the girl.” He gestures toward Dagny with a cold laugh. “And I knew, eventually, you would lead me right to Abaddon’s heart, and I could end all of you once and for all—no contingencies this time.”

Slaine turns his back on me and walks over to Zairn. Pleasure rolls off his shoulders in heated waves as Zairn places Dagny into his arms, and he wastes no time pulling her limp body into his chest, burying his face in her neck and taking a deep inhale of her scent. The demon king stands there for several excruciating minutes, admiring the gentle twitch of her eyelids and the luminous energy coursing just beneath the surface of her skin. “So much power,” he whispers, his voice shuddering with awe. “I never expected her to be so useful. What she did to my castle was impressive in and of itself, but then the arachnyx horde... how she was able to control them... I’ve never witnessed such strength.” He lifts his head, his eyes finding mine across the distance. “She’ll make a great little soldier for me—when she’s not lying on her back.”

Rage flares in my chest, so violent and powerful that it threatens to shatter my rib cage, to tear open my skin and cleave the ground beneath my knees. But it’s not my power that surges through the air—it’s hers.

The ice quakes, rumbling and splitting underfoot as it crumbles beneath the raw, swirling magic flooding from Dagny’s veins. The blow causes Slaine to teeter off balance, and he’s so focused on keeping himself upright, he doesn’t notice Dagny’s eyes flying open, beaming with an ethereal silver light.

Slaine loosens his grip on Dagny the slightest bit, and she uses the opportunity to free her arm, snapping it out to the side and using every bit of momentum to send her fist sailing to the side of Slaine's head. He sees her attack coming out of the corner of his eye, and with one swift movement, snatches her wrist midair, stopping it just before it makes contact—but it doesn't matter.

While he's distracted, Dagny rears back, then swings her head forward with a demonic screech that has the hair at the back of my neck rising. Her forehead connects with Slaine's nose with a sickening crack, and he stumbles back, allowing Dagny's body to fall to the ground as an anguished scream pours from his throat.

“ My fucking nose! She broke my fucking nose!” He reaches up, pinching his nostrils in an attempt to stave off the flow of dark fluid coursing down his face, but it does no good. “ Fuck! ”

Throwing his hand to his side, he whirls around, spewing droplets of blood across the clearing as he turns his murderous gaze onto Dagny. “ You... I'm going to fucking kill you. ”

He stalks toward her slumped form, his palms curling around her shoulders and lifting her from the ground before she has time to call on her magic again. “You fucking little brat. I'll make you pay for this,” he hisses, nodding for one of his soldiers to come over and hold her.

As soon as his hands are free, Slaine rears back, his lip curled in a vicious snarl as he sends his fist straight into Dagny's jaw. The blow conveys all the rage running through his system, powerful enough to send her body flying across the clearing and into the nearest welwig trunk. The back of her head smashes into the bark with a horrifying crack, sending wood splintering through the air as she slumps to the ice in a limp heap. Right on top of where the heart is buried.

“ Dagny! ” I scream, the joints in my shoulders popping out of place as I fight against the soldiers, desperate to get to my mate. “ Dagny!”

“Dagny! Dagnyyyy! Oh gods, not Dagny!” Slaine mocks, clapping his palms to his cheeks with a gasp. “This is terrible!”

All at once, his expression morphs to one of cool indifference, his hands dropping to his sides as he gives up the act. His cruel white eyes flick toward Dagny, inspecting the awkward angle of her broken limbs. “Poor little dear. I suppose she wasn’t as sturdy as I thought... oh well.” He shrugs, turning his back to me as he stalks toward Dagny, his shoulders shuddering in anticipation as he closes the distance between him and his prey.

Dagny raises her head the slightest bit, her eyes flickering between brown and silver as she fights to remain conscious. She braces a hand against the cracked ice, attempting to push to a stand as Slaine’s laugh echoes through the air, mocking her effort.

He stops a few inches away from her shuddering body, his eyes wide and glinting with a cruel light as he watches her crash back to the ground. “Maybe you’re not as useful as I thought,” he murmurs, bringing a finger to his lips. “Maybe you are just a weak little human. Maybe I should have just killed you the moment I saw you, instead of going through all this effort to use you.”

Dagny narrows her eyes on his hateful expression, her skin glowing with a weak silver light as she attempts to draw more magic from the earth. “I am not weak, ” she snarls, her voice raw but forceful. “ You are. At least when I fight, I have the courage to face my enemy head-on. You... You’re a coward. A disgusting coward who can only win when he cheats and lies and backstabs. You’re no king,” she spits. “You’re hardly a man. And I would rather die than be used by a spineless worm like you.”

Slaine's jaw tightens, and though he doesn't show it, I know her words struck a nerve. "I'm tired of this game. I'm tired of listening to you draw breath. Zairn?"

"With pleasure," he simpers, shuffling over to Dagny with a large, curved blade held tightly in his palm. He hands it to Slaine, who weighs the weapon before ultimately tossing it to the ground with a huff. "No. I want to do it with my hands. I want to feel the life drain out of this wretched whore."

"As you wish," Zairn mutters, retreating to the shadows where his soul-crazed pet is waiting, snarling and snapping with anticipation.

I watch, helpless, as Slaine widens his stance, curling and uncurling his fist as he stares down at Dagny with a bloodthirsty sheen in his smile. "You're about to get your wish, little human. I'm going to carve your heart from your chest, and then I'm going to watch you die. And when I'm done, I'll kill off your mates one by one, until you're all just a pile of rotting corpses for the arachnyxes to feed on."

He raises his arm high above his head, his claws elongating and sharpening to fine points as he curls his fingers inward, preparing to deliver a blow directly to the center of Dagny's chest. In a last-ditch effort, Dagny attempts to blast Slaine back with a wave of her power, but all she manages to conjure is a small gust of wind, enough to rustle the ends of his hair and nothing more.

"How sad," he whispers, his grin spreading into a manic smile. "How very, very sad." He turns his head over his shoulder, shooting me a taunting wink as he prepares to deliver the killing blow. "Say goodbye, Malice and friends."

Years ago, I heard a story about one of the creatures that lives in the human realm—one with a survival instinct so strong, it would chew its own limbs off to get free of a trap. Even though the poor animal would inevitably die from its injuries, it didn't care—all that mattered were those few moments of life that followed, the brief

solace of freedom. I remember how shocked I was at the time, how I couldn't quite wrap my mind around it. To be so singularly minded in one aspect, to willingly defy the fates in such a way, to damn the consequences for a few more minutes of survival... It was astonishing. Miraculous.

I look up, and my eyes find Dagny's across the distance, that simple glance filling my veins with waves of charged electricity and adding kindling to the fire blazing across my skin.

And suddenly, I understand.

A thunderous roar explodes in the base of my stomach, billowing up my throat and erupting from my open mouth as I press forward, fighting through the searing, all-consuming agony spreading from my shoulder blades. My claws extend, piercing deep into the ice for added leverage as I lunge one last time, muscle and tendon shredding as I yank against the powerful force, the pain filling my ears with an intense ringing and causing my vision to tunnel, then disappear entirely. A cacophony of squelches, pops, and splatters rings out through the silence, causing my stomach to flip and my vision to shatter as agony spreads through my body, consuming me and clearing my mind of any thought other than that growing, devastating flame.

And then, my wings—my beautiful, wonderful, powerful wings—are ripped from my body.

It's a pain I could have never imagined, an agony so excruciating, it ripples to the tips of my fingers and toes, bathing every inch of my body in boiling acid and searing the flesh from my bones. But it doesn't matter.

Before darkness consumes me, I lunge across the distance, watching Slaine's fist come down on Dagny in slow motion. Just before he makes contact, I slip through the space between them, curling my body around Dagny's and shielding her from the

devastating attack.

A squelch breaks the air, followed by Dagny's horrified gasp, and she gazes up with wide eyes, her lips moving with no sound coming out.

Gods, she's so beautiful. So utterly, indescribably magnificent...

The blood drains from her face as she reaches up, cupping her palms around my face with her lips still forming those wordless sounds.

"Wildfire..." The rest of my sentence is cut off by the rattling cough that explodes from my throat, filling my mouth with a warm, metallic liquid that flows past my lips and dribbles down my chin.

"Malice," Dagny chokes, her eyes focused on the space where my heart should be. "Your chest..."

I blink slowly, not understanding why she sounds so afraid. I tip my chin downward, surprised to find a gaping, fist-sized hole that wasn't there a minute ago. "Huh..." I shrug, picking my head back up with a small chuckle that causes more blood to flow down my chin. "It's not as bad as it looks..."

Another weak cough rattles between my ribs, and blood splatters across Dagny's face, coating her pretty skin and getting in her eyes. "Oh shit... my bad..."

I go to say something else, but before I can get one more word out, Slaine wraps his hands around my shoulders and yanks me off Dagny, an irritated growl rumbling deep in his throat.

He throws me to the ground and crouches by my head, his eyes narrowed in a hateful glare. "I was going to kill you after her, but I suppose it makes no difference if you're

first.”

I gaze deep into Slaine’s eyes, amusement blooming in the pit of my stomach. And then, suddenly, I can’t hold it in any longer.

Slaine jerks back, his mouth pulling into a deep frown as the sounds of my laughter peel through the air. “The fuck is so funny? You’re going to die, demon. Do you not realize that?”

I place my hand on my stomach, my eyes squinting closed as more laughter howls from my open mouth.

“The fuck are you so happy about?”

With a chuckle still rumbling in my chest, I open my eyes, staring deep into Slaine’s soul as I raise a trembling fist, uncurling my fingers one by one—revealing the small, golden, still beating heart in the center of my palm.

“ This is.”

Dagny

I don't know how he managed to retrieve it, or when, but the beating, golden artifact sitting in the center of Malice's palm is unmistakably a heart. Abaddon's heart. My mouth opens in a silent scream as Malice draws the organ to the hole in his chest, depositing the pulsing heart deep within his shattered rib cage, sealing his fate.

Before Slaine can react, a violent light explodes from the center of Malice's chest, the force of it enough to blow Slaine backward and send his body crashing into a trunk at the far end of the clearing. All of the soldiers who were holding my other mates are vaporized on the spot—evaporating into black puffs of vapor in the next heartbeat—their souls torn apart by the incredible surge of energy. In the wake of the carnage and chaos, the demon king slumps to the ground, his eyes rolling and limbs splayed at awkward angles—but I only give him my attention for a moment before my gaze is drawn back to Malice and that strange light radiating from his chest.

Malice's back arches, his mouth open wide in a silent scream as raw magic pulses through the air, filling the forest with charged beams of energy that travel to the furthest corners of the land, shaking the earth and staining the canopy above with a dazzling sheen of gold. Another cry of pain draws my attention to the side, and my stomach flips as I take in the sight of my five other mates writhing on the ground, their faces twisted in agony. That same brilliant golden light is beaming from their pores, heating their skin past boiling point and vaporizing the surrounding air.

A heavy blanket of panic settles over my mind as I push onto my hands and knees,

crawling toward Malice as the ground tilts and shudders, threatening to swallow me whole. With each painful movement—every excruciating second it takes me to close the distance—Malice’s outline fades into the surrounding air, the threads of his soul unwinding and causing him to disappear as if he’d never been in the first place.

“Malice!” I choke, collapsing on the ice a few inches from his body. “Malice, wait!”

Unable to move anymore, I turn my head, searching the ground for my five other mates—but they’re gone. “Kaebl? Cyprien? Lir?” Hot, salty tears stream down my face and into my open mouth as I scream for my mates, unable to believe they’re truly gone. “Fenryr! Roark! Come back! You can’t... don’t leave me. Not yet ,” I whisper, my heart fracturing into a million tiny pieces. “ Please... ”

“ Dag...ny...”

I whip my head toward Malice, all the air leaving my lungs as I take in his fading smirk. “ Malice...”

“Come... here... I want to... tell you something.”

With the last of my strength, I pull my body across the ice, placing my ear just above Malice’s mouth to listen. His palm connects with my chest, pushing me back so he can look into my eyes—and I’m struck by just how sad he looks.

“What is it?” I whisper, trying to cup his cheek in my palm only for it to connect with air. A frustrated scream echoes up my throat, but I choke it down, needing to hear what Malice has to say. Because this is the last time I’ll get to hear him speak. “What did you want to tell me?”

“I just...” He blinks, the molten red glow of his iris fading along with the rest of him. Too soon. It’s too soon.

“It’s not,” he murmurs, a sad little smirk tugging at his mouth. “This was meant to be, little one. It only... only took so long because I was too stubborn to admit it. Too selfish.” He shakes his head, his eyes glinting with a desperate sheen as he stares deep into my soul. “I regret everything, Dagny. All my actions, my cruelty and cunningness. If I only knew that you existed and were a possibility, I would have been good. I would have been so good, my darling wildfire. I would have waited for you and struggled every single day to become the man you deserve.” Malice smiles, but it holds no happiness. “I’m sorry I could not be that for you. I’m sorry I’m not anything other than what I am. I’m sorry I couldn’t say goodbye. I’m sorry for being me. I’m sorry for being rotten. I’m sorry... sorry that I tainted you with my love. Because I love you , Dagny. I love you more than air, more than life. More, so much more than some stupid fucking notion of power. I love you. I love you, and I always have, and I always— always —will.”

Malice lays his head back against the ice, and the smile that graces his face is sincere—the first one since I first laid eyes on him. And I’m not sure why, but the sight causes tears to well in my eyes, makes my chest ache, and fills my bones with lead.

I love you too, Malice. I love you. Please don’t go.

A laugh shakes his chest. “Didn’t I tell you... the truth... will get you killed in this place... I mean... just look at me...” He takes a ragged breath, his eyes finding mine. “Still... I’m so... so very thankful I got to hear it... to know that for once in my life, I was wanted... that I was... that I was loved... and by someone so... so utterly spectacular...”

His eyes close, a whisper of “Thank you” falling from his lips with his last breath, and the demon I knew as Malice disappears entirely. Leaving me alone.

At that moment of great loss, a scream of agony explodes from my throat, shooting

into the vast chasm of The Far Place. I don't expect anyone to listen, or to care—but despite that, they do . And my power— my power— ruptures the very fabric of the realm.

35

Abaddon

Light.

It swirls all around me in a tornado of raw, electric energy, seeping beneath my skin and breathing life to the nerve endings and pathways in my mind that have been sleeping for decades. The magic spreads, shuddering through the open air and staining the clouds in brilliant hues of shimmering amber. Lightning strikes the center of my chest, shocking my heart into motion, and I can't ignore the pull any longer.

I wake.

A thunderous whoosh breaks the silence as my wings snap out, spreading proudly and soaking up the warmth of the silver sun. My shoulder muscles quiver as they sweep downward in a powerful arc, propelling my body high above the cloudline and into the upper atmosphere.

Shimmering light beams from my skin, pulsing from my open mouth and coating my vision in a film of gold as I continue rising—not knowing where I'm going or why, just that I need to fly, to soar, to feel the whipping wind against my skin.

As the atmosphere thins and the roar in my ears turns to a whine, I stall my ascent, closing my eyes and reveling in the stillness and silence. My wings beat the air, keeping me aloft and allowing me to breathe, to clear my mind—to think.

But before I get the chance, a piercing cry breaks the hush, drawing my attention toward the horizon and shattering the moment of tranquility.

Several miles in the distance, dark spots swarm the skies, blocking out the light of the sun with the sheer breadth and size of the massive force—thousands of screaming, bloodthirsty soldiers and soul-crazed demons flying toward me at full speed.

While I know I should care about them, I can't find it within me to do so. I'm far too preoccupied with something else, something that's been niggling in the back of my mind since I awoke. Memories.

Images and flashing pictures flood my mind—twenty-one years of thoughts and feelings and precious moments I missed, moments taken from me. Stolen from me.

The bond tugs in my chest, pulling my attention to the ground. A dark swirling mist rises above the canopy, filled with enough pain and misery to cleave the skies and tilt the world on its head.

Mate.

The air around me stills, charged with the magnetic energy humming from the center of my chest, urging me to investigate despite the approaching horde.

I follow that invisible tether, passing through the canopy to the shadowed forest below. The pads of my feet touch down on the ground, but it's not the familiar chill of ice that greets me. I gaze downward, shocked to find myself standing in a still-warm pool of blood, spreading out across the clearing in a slippery halo.

I gaze around the clearing, trying to discern where the life source is flowing from. My gaze cuts to the space over my shoulder, drawn by that charged cloud of swirling energy that first captured my attention in the sky, and I find it.

My lips part in shock as I take in Zairn—Slaine’s torture master—lying on the ground, his back arched and mouth wide as an agonized scream tears from his throat. But more astonishing is the sight of the small female demon straddling his chest, her lips peeled back in a horrific snarl as she shoves her thumbnails deep into Zairn’s eye sockets.

A demonic shriek pierces the air, burrowing beneath my skin and rippling my spine with the amount of rage and power contained within. The female’s forearms quiver, her skin beaming with the light of the silver sun as she uses all her strength to rip Zairn’s head from his shoulders. Blood, flesh, and tendons splatter across the ice in a fantastic display of wrath and carnage, coating the ice and staining her arms in slippery, dark fluid.

Chest heaving, she looks to the side, her beautiful wings draped over her shoulders like a majestic feathered cape, partially covering her face from view. The tips of her plumage rustle gently in the wind whipping through the forest, forged by the wild tendrils of magic swirling from her outline, beaming from the center of her silver-ringed eyes.

Mate.

The woman stares unblinking, tossing Zairn’s head to the side with an expression made of stone. His skull rolls across the clearing, shuddering to a stop directly next to the headless body of Zairn’s soul-crazed demon “pet.” So that’s where the first puddle came from.

Before I get the chance to speak, a rattling cough breaks out to my left, drawing my attention to the twining branches directly above my head.

“Slaine?”

The false demon king gazes downward, his blood-slicked hands curling around the welwig branch impaling the center of his chest. “ Abaddon... ” Slaine’s blood-coated mouth spreads into an eerie smile, his milky eyes gleaming with a look of triumph despite his current predicament. “You’re too late,” Slaine chokes, each vicious word causing blood to spew from his mouth and land at my feet. “I’ve called them... all of them... you won’t... won’t be able to stop them.” He tips his head back, a maniacal laugh exploding from his blood-filled mouth. “No one can stop them all. Not... not even her .”

I turn my attention back to my mate, my heart hammering wildly against its cage, desperate to be free, to leap into her hands and be close to her forever. But I can’t. I never will be.

My steps are slow and purposeful as I walk toward her, the sounds of Slaine’s demented laughter fading to a dull whine the closer I get. My mate falls to her knees, all of her strength leaving her, returning to the source and sapping all the fight from her veins.

Her chin tips upward as she watches me approach, the silver light slowly fading in her eyes, the luminous glow of her skin dulling—but she’s never looked more magnificent.

Her muscles give out just as I make it to her, and I wrap my arms around her, stopping her from slumping to the ground. I crouch, tightening my arms around her and coating my skin in the blood staining her limbs, needing to be closer to her, to memorize the way she feels, the way she smells before it’s all taken away again.

I pull back slightly, brushing her hair back off her forehead and gazing deep into her eyes, a surge of pleasure traveling down the bond and blossoming in my chest, heating my blood with tingling waves of electricity.

“ Abaddon ,” she whispers, reaching up to cup my cheek, her eyes going in and out of focus. “I’m... I’m sorry...I’m sorry I couldn’t do more...”

“Shh.” I shake my head, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth as I lean down, pressing my forehead to hers. “No. There’s nothing to apologize for. You did so, so well, my heart. You saved me. ”

I turn my head over my shoulder, my eyes narrowing on Slaine with a murderous glare. “Allow me to return the favor.”

I place my mate gently on the ground, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead before turning and stalking back toward Slaine. My wings beat the air, raising me to Slaine’s level and keeping me aloft as I reach out, my palms curling around my throat and tightening.

“ You... You who betrayed me, who killed my soldiers, destroyed my kingdom, and committed unspeakable atrocities... For all of those things, you deserve to die. But my mate... you hurt my mate. There is nothing I could do to you that would justify the pain you’ve caused her. Nothing that could fill the never-ending chasm of rage you’ve created inside me.”

I grab Slaine’s shoulders, yanking his torso off the limb as a chorus of squelching and sucking noises fills the air. Slaine’s agonized cries pierce the air, but they’re hardly noticeable compared to the thunderous roar of the approaching horde.

“I’m sure your soldiers are missing you. Let’s go greet them, shall we?”

Pleasure ripples through my veins at the sight of his tortured expression, and a small smile tips my lips as I launch into the sky, my wings snapping out and sweeping the air in long, powerful strokes as I propel us up past the cloud line.

“What are you doing?” Slaine screams, his head whipping side to side wildly. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Kill me or put me down!”

“No.” I continue flying higher, stopping only when we’re at the level of the horde. My wings beat the air, keeping us aloft as I turn Slaine around in my arms, forcing him to look on toward the approaching army.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he seethes, watching with wide eyes as the bloodthirsty horde nears by the second.

“I’m going to make you watch while I take every last thing you have,” I whisper, my claws digging deep into the flesh of his shoulders, causing him to cry out. “I’m going to destroy them. All of them. The last thing you see, the last thought in your mind, will be of your failure.”

“Idiot!” Slaine cries, struggling frantically in my grip. “You can’t use that much power! You’ll be ripped apart, too!”

“I know,” I say, a smile tipping my mouth. “But it’s worth it. It’s for her.”

Power surges through my veins, filling my body with wild, pulsing waves of energy that pool in the tips of my fingers and toes, exploding from my pores in a fantastic, blinding golden light.

My head falls back in a silent scream that threatens to cleave the skies as I force every last ounce of my magic out, letting it fill the air, guiding it toward the horde of soldiers, promising it tears and pain and bloodshed. It tears through the skies with a thunderous roar, consuming sight and sound and matter as it devastates every living being in its path.

That same power pulsing out of me ricochets back, seeping between the spaces in my

soul and sucking the flesh from my bones. It rips at the threads of my soul, weaves icy tendrils into my mind, and tears it apart piece by piece, shattering my very being—broken apart by the same wild energy that created me.

In spite of the pain and agony, I keep pushing, forcing every last ounce of magic I possess into the surrounding atmosphere, weaving a deadly path of destruction through the skies. It flares and screams and scorches everything it touches with the heat of the sun, filling the air with a cacophony of anguished shrieks and howls of death.

When it's all over, a thick cloud of ash is all that remains of Slaine's army—thousands of soldiers and soul-crazed demons reduced to a swirling plume of soot in the blink of an eye. It settles to the top of the canopy, covering the shimmering white leaves in a thick layer of dust and raining down to the forest floor below.

I gaze downward, a small smile tipping my lips to discover the false king has been reduced to the same basic matter as the rest of his army, his soul returned to the source.

I let my arms fall to my sides, tilting my head back to the heavens as wildfire spreads beneath my skin, bathing every part of my soul in white-hot agony. I'm scared to look down, to see the exposed muscle and shattered bone, to realize the extent of my injuries.

My wings seize as my body gives out, sending my crumpled and battered form crashing to the ground below. Pain flares out of every orifice as I make contact, causing my vision to tunnel as swirling shadows encroach from all sides, threatening to pull me into the void.

With a ragged breath, I turn my head, watching as my mate crawls to me across the

ice, her fingertips bloodied and fingernails cracked as she desperately pulls her body toward me.

Just as she makes it to the center of the clearing, a single soldier rushes out from the depths of the shadows, his brow pinched in concentration, and something small and golden clutched in his palm.

He moves too quickly for my mate to notice and too quickly for me to react. Rai lunges across the distance, his lips peeled back in a snarl and expression twisted with rage.

“This is for Slaine, you bastard!” he screams, wrapping the golden wire around my throat and pulling hard .

Black dots line my vision as ancient, evil magic burrows beneath my skin, cutting off my oxygen and sending me back to that endless abyss I woke from. With my last ounce of power, I send my fist sailing into Rai’s chest, knocking him back across the clearing and sending his skull smashing into one of the welwig trunks.

A disgusting crack fills the air as his head splits, and Rai slumps to the ground—unconscious or dead, it doesn’t make a difference. Because no matter his fate, it ceases to change mine. And that golden thread is still tightening, curling around my body and working to split me in half.

The last thing I hear is my mate’s scream, filling the skies with rage and pain and sorrow as her magic reaches for me, attempting to pull me back from the abyss.

But it’s too late.

36

Dagny

An ominous, swirling energy emanates from the golden wire, thickening the air and staining the clearing with a blinding beam of golden light. It circles his body, curling around his head, throat, chest, belly, pelvis, and legs—separating him into six pieces. The magic cuts through his skin, separating flesh from muscle and tendon from bone as it carves deeper into his flesh, severing his body right before my eyes.

Abaddon gazes into my eyes, and a flash of red consumes the golden iris as he takes in the pain twisting my expression. His lips part, his voice echoing softly into the space between us—only, it's not Abaddon's voice I hear. It's Malice's.

“My heart. My mate. There's no reason to look so sad.” A feline smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, and though he tries to reach up, to hold me, he's unable. A sigh billows from his parted lips, but the joy in his eyes remains as he whispers, “It's okay, Dagny.”

“It's not.” I shake my head vehemently. “It's... it's not. Nothing is okay.”

“But it is,” he answers, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile. “The few moments I was allowed to spend with you... They mean more to me than life. I can go willingly to my grave, knowing I had them and got to meet you, even if it was only for a short time.” His eyes drift closed as the golden wire sinks deeper into his bone, tearing the threads of his soul apart. “Thank you,” he whispers, his voice dying along with the light in his eyes. “Thank you... thank you... thank... you.”

There's an explosion of light, a surge of energy that shoots through the air and threatens to cleave the ground. Abaddon's body sunders—and when I blink, I'm staring down at six evenly divided sections—no golden wire, no grand theatrics, nothing.

There's no blood, no carnage, or anything spectacularly gory about the sight, but it's the most horrifying thing I have ever laid eyes on. To see my mate, the one being I love most in this world, chopped into pieces... There are no words to describe the anguish it brings, the utter despair pulsing throughout my body, threatening to tear open my chest and send my heart shooting out of my throat.

I throw my head back with a scream originating from the base of my stomach, filled with so much pain that it rattles the silver branches of the welwigs, filling the air with a melodic tinkling as their leaves rustle in the hurricane swirling around me.

I curl my body over the remains of the great demon king, desperate to save him from his fate, shielding him from the elements whipping through the space and threatening to whisk his pieces away. Tears stream down my face as I press my palms to his frozen chest, pushing healing magic beneath his skin in a frantic attempt to revive him, knowing it will do no good.

This can't be all there is, my heart cries. There must be something else. Something more. Something to make it worth anything at all. But no matter how much I wish it to be, how much I scream and cry and plead with the fates to bring him back, they refuse.

As the last of my magic is sapped from my veins and the storm begins to die, I slump to the ground beside him, my throat raw and my chest heaving with violent, rattling sobs.

This can't be it. It was right there—right there—and then it wasn't. My future, my

hope, my love—all taken in a single moment.

I tip my head to the skies, the whipping wind freezing the tears on my cheeks as they fall, singeing my skin with its cruel icy fingers and reminding me of what I had and what I lost.

A high-pitched mewl draws my attention to the side, and when I turn my head, I'm shocked to find Nya's glowing red orbs blinking across the distance. Her fluffy black tail swishes back and forth along the ice, causing a fine layer of ash to billow into the air around her.

Honey materializes from the shadows next, followed by Comet, Bo, and Echo. Syn slithers across the ground and stops at Nya's feet, rising with a gentle hiss as her long, inky tongue flicks out, sampling the misery and despair hanging heavy in the air. I wait for them to step closer, to come and soothe me like they have so many times before—but they just stand at the periphery of the clearing, watching silently. Waiting for something.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, my voice cracking with each strained word. “Why are you just standing there?”

The little yellow rabbit who started this entire fucked-up tragedy shuffles forward, the tips of his fuzzy ears dragging in the thin layer of soot covering the ice. He moves about a foot, then stops, tilting his head to the side as he inspects me from across the distance.

“Bo,” I plead. “It's okay. You can come here.”

Bo's lips twitch, but he refuses to move any closer, just sits there watching me with those big, beady yellow eyes. Nya lets out a piercing meow, calling Bo back to the group. He blinks, then turns, hopping to the space between Honey's burly paws and

nuzzling against her chest for comfort.

As the familiars turn and begin walking away, pain throbs in the six separate bond marks spread across my body. It starts with a tingling ache in the center of each of the marks, growing into a searing agony that spreads like wildfire across my skin, eating through muscle and burrowing to the center of my bones. A sob claws its way up my throat as I watch Nya turn and skulk into the shadows, disappearing without so much as a glance back, without warning.

With every step she takes, the bond marks peppering my body begin to fade, the brilliant hues dimming and returning to the color of the surrounding skin. I don't need to ask to know what it means. The bond is dying.

“Wait!” I scream, my fingernails breaking as I claw across the ice, desperate to reach them before they disappear for good. “Wait! Don't leave! Please ! Please come back! Don't leave me here alone!”

But none of them listen—none of them care. The tether holding us together has ceased to be, and there's nothing for them to stay for. Nothing to fight for.

I press my forehead to the ground as great sobs wrack my chest, flooding from me as fast and violent as the tears from my eyes. It's over. All over. They're all gone. All but me.

My hands curl into fists, smashing against the ground and breaking my skin apart from the broken shards of ice that line the surface. It's that brief shock of pain that allows my mind to quiet, allows me to focus.

For a single moment, the fog of panic clears—and I remember. It seems so long ago now, but I can still recall each of his words in startling clarity and remember the story whispered in that darkened cell, when I thought they were the last ones I would ever

hear. And I realize they're the key to it all.

Twenty-one years ago, a demon I never knew was in this same position, tasked with a problem just as great. Varys was able to bring the pieces of Abaddon to life, and if I believe in what I've heard—if I believe in the power living inside me—then I should be able to do the same.

But first, I need to take out the heart.

Dagny

I place my palms to Abaddon's chest as I raise my head, my eyes glowing with desperation as I search the shadowed forest beyond, willing the animals to materialize. If I'm going to bring them back, I need a tether—six, to be exact. The bond marks are all but gone, and if I don't act fast, their souls will be lost forever.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I close my eyes and focus on drawing energy from the earth, letting it flow through my veins and fill my body with wild, electrified tendrils of magic. When it feels like the power is about to burst through my skin, I carve a small opening, allowing it to seep out of me bit by bit, molding the thread of magic to the dimensions of my choosing, forcing the wild energy to bend to my will.

Fine tendrils of silver thread spread through the air, shooting across the land and opening up the skies as it searches for the six creatures I need to complete the bond.

Nya is the first to materialize, followed by Honey, Comet, Echo, Bo, and finally, Syn—slithering out from the shadows with distrust shining in her wide gold eyes.

Just like with the horde or arachnyx, I force several separate tendrils of magic into the air, directing the strands beneath their skin and into the corners of their souls, threading my magic between the pathways in their nervous system.

My power surges, ordering the animals closer without a single word spoken. The six of them comply, rushing over in varying degrees of speed and method, but each

moving with the same level of urgency. They crowd around Abaddon's corpse in a half circle, muscles taut and gazing upward with empty silver eyes, awaiting their next command.

"Wait there," I murmur, turning my focus to the severed chest lying in front of me. Varys forgot to put Abaddon's heart back in the chest the last time, which gave life to the six pieces. So I should...

Without thinking, I plunge my hand into the base of his sternum, squelching through muscle and tendon as I shove my hand up under his rib cage, searching for the pulsing golden organ.

I rip the heart out with a massive grunt, sitting back on my heels as I admire the shiny object. Just like earlier, the heart continues to beat—albeit weakly—but it gives me a single thread of hope to cling onto.

I place the heart gently on the ice next to my feet, watching it for a few moments to ensure it's still pulsing before turning my attention back to the familiars. They're sitting in the same spot, unblinking and utterly still—like six little statues.

Without thinking, knowing I don't have much more time, I force my magic out of my veins, driving it through the air and into the six creatures surrounding Abaddon's corpse.

My power threads through the spaces in their souls, weaving each jagged edge together and bonding their beings together for all eternity. With each careful stitch, a fraction of my own soul is woven into the creases, offering up a fraction of my power—my magic—to the demons I love so much.

When it's all over, I sit back, chest heaving and eyes watering, too scared to look for fear it didn't work. I keep my eyes on my trembling fingers, listening for a breath, a

groan—anything to let me know I was successful, and my mates are back with me.

But when I finally raise my head, that's not the case. Abbadon's pieces are still spread out on the ice, just as cold and lifeless as before I completed the soul bond.

A frustrated scream claws its way up my throat, but before it can escape, an explosion of energy thunders from the severed body, sending me flying backward across the clearing and filling the air with a blinding golden light—one I don't get to witness for long.

My body collides with a welwig trunk at the far edge of the space, sending wood splintering into the air as the back of my head smashes through the bark, the force of the impact carving a deep crater into the wood and causing my vision to fracture.

I slump to the ground in a limp heap, blinking slowly and attempting to breathe past the iron fist squeezing the air from my lungs. There's a powerful ringing in my ears, deafening my surroundings and causing my head to pound as pain splinters from the base of my skull.

I reach back, prodding the wound with a wince, coming away with my fingers coated in a slick dark red substance. Fuck... not good...

Dagny !

I rub my fingertips together, staring hard and trying to drown out that voice calling my name. It sounds so much like Kaehl—too much like my mate. I know it's not real, and that I'm hallucinating my mate's voice, but each time I hear it, it causes that dreaded hope to bloom in my chest, always followed by a bolt of pain to the heart when I remember he's dead.

Dagny!

“Stop it,” I whisper, shutting my eyes tight. “ Please, I can’t bear it. It hurts too much.”

And here I thought you’d be happy to see us.

My lips part in a shuddering gasp as I raise my head, unable to believe the sight in front of me. “K-Kaabl... Malice... Cyprien... you’re?—”

“We are,” Lir whispers, stepping out from behind Kaabl’s spread wings. “All of us.”

My gaze flicks to the left, tears streaming hot and fast down my face as I see Fenryr and Roark approaching, their bodies bruised and scraped, but whole. Living.

Despite the world tilting around me, despite my shattered and broken bones, I find the strength to lunge across the distance, a joy-filled cry piercing the air as I jump headfirst into the waiting arms of my mates.

They wrap their arms around me, shielding me from the whipping wind and the horrors just beyond. It’s so warm and comfortable and right, I can’t help but sob.

“It’s okay, wildfire,” Malice whispers, brushing away my tears with the pad of his thumb as he tilts my face up to meet him. “We’re here. You’re safe. You don’t have to cry anymore.”

“I... know,” I choke, trying to breathe past my broken cries. “But I... you were gone. You were all gone and never coming back and?—”

“Shh,” Cyprien soothes, rubbing his palm gently up and down my spine. “I know it doesn’t seem real right now. I know you think you’ll blink, and everything will return to the way it was. But that’s not true, bunny. We’re here. Here to stay.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, wiping the back of my hand across my eyes. “This is so stupid... I don’t know why I’m crying.”

You’re crying because it matters. Kaebl reaches down, grabbing my wrist and placing it to the center of his chest. My heart. My Dagny. My beautiful, ineffable mate. It’s okay to break. It’s okay to cry. And when you’re through, we’ll all still be here, waiting to put the pieces back together.

“Always,” Fenryr promises, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck. “And we’ll love every jagged part of you. Protect them and keep them close, no matter how deep they cut. No matter how hard it is.”

“Because you belong to us,” Roark adds, his gravelly voice rolling over my skin and piercing the center of my heart. “All of us. Just as you have saved us, nurtured us, cared for us... we will always do the same for you.”

“We love you,” Lir murmurs, taking my hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze. “From the very first moment we locked eyes, our souls were irrevocably, inexplicably linked. And we never, never, ever wish to be apart from you.”

Malice leans forward, pressing his forehead against mine with a rare, genuine smile. “I hope that’s okay with you.”

I nod, that seed of hope blooming into a magnificent flower, standing tall and proud against the harrowing storm. And for the very first time in my life, I believe everything will be okay. As long as I have my mates, as long as I have their love, I can get through anything. And it will always—always—be worth it.

“Nothing has ever sounded better.”

38

Malice

1 year later...

“I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“You can try, but you’ll have to get through her first.” Cyprien crouches behind Dagny’s spread wings, hiding his insufferable smirk from view. “Good luck, kitty cat.”

I wipe the remnants of the ice from my cheek, my skin stinging from the assault. “Wildfire? Kindly step to the side. I’d hate for you to get blood on your new armor.”

Dagny rolls her eyes, though it doesn’t detract from the small grin pulling at her lips. “It was a snowball, Malice. You’ll survive.”

“My pride will not.”

She laughs, the full-bodied and melodic sound filling the air with an enchanting song that rolls over my skin and imbues my chest with a humming warmth. And suddenly, I am not so angry anymore.

“Come here, you melodramatic killing machine,” she says, holding her arms out wide, inviting me into her embrace. I lunge forward, crushing my face into her chest as my arms slide around her waist, holding her flush against my body.

A rumbling purr builds in the base of my throat as she feeds her hands into my hair, teasing the long red strands and scraping her fingernails against my scalp in loving, gentle strokes. She tugs my head back softly, and I tilt my chin up to meet her beautiful silver-ringed gaze.

Dagny cups her hand around my jaw and leans in, pressing her lips to the spot that was struck with the snowball. Heated sparks of electricity flare to life, spreading through my veins like wildfire and breathing life into every one of my nerve endings.

“Better?” she whispers, gazing up at me through dark, fluttering lashes.

“ Perfect. Everything is, now that I have you.” I lean down, crushing my mouth against hers in a passionate embrace, loving the way her skin shudders and gives way beneath my touch. Loving the way she burns for me.

I pull back, mesmerized by the sight of her swollen pink lips. Wanting more. Needing more—all of her. “Dagny...”

Smack!

My grip on Dagny slips as I stumble back, forehead stinging and vision hazy due to the impact of the second snowball—and all my forgotten rage rushes back tenfold. “ Cyprien! ”

Cyprien’s laughter peals through the air, adding fuel to the fire raging in the pit of my stomach, spreading throughout my veins. “Oh my gods... your... your face.” The yellow-eyed demon clutches his stomach, his face twisted in glee. “So funny. I think... I think I almost pissed myself.”

“What a revolting thing to admit,” Lir murmurs, his nose crinkling in disgust.

“I said almost. ”

“That hardly makes it better.”

Dagny laughs again, the sound causing all of us to halt our bickering and turn our attention fully to our mate. We stand there for several moments, not breathing or blinking, just reveling in the look of pure joy beaming from her smile.

“Gods, I love that sound,” Roark murmurs, his throat bobbing gently as he watches his mate from where he’s perched on the outcropping ledge. “So fucking beautiful.”

“So fucking ours, ” Fenryr adds, lunging forward and wrapping his arms around Dagny’s middle. She lets out a little squeal as he hauls her away from Cyprien and me, retreating toward the rock wall at our backs. Once he’s there, he pushes his face into the crook of her neck, kissing and biting at the tender flesh as the air is filled with her breathy giggles.

“ Fen, we’re gonna miss the lights again,” she murmurs, shoving weakly at his chest.

“They’ll be better if you have a cock inside you,” he says, his emerald eyes shining with a devious light.

“That’s what you said last time, and look how well that went.” Dagny giggles, wriggling free of Fenryr’s hold. “Plus, I have to make sure Malice and Cyprien don’t kill each other.”

“What better way to come together and make up than by pleasuring our mate?” Roark asks, his eyes twinkling with a mischievous light. “Seems like a win-win situation.”

“Exactly! See, Roark gets it!”

Dagny's chest shakes with a silent chuckle as her eyes roll to the skies. "Stubborn demon."

"Just obsessed with you," Fenryr replies, wiggling his brows as a wicked smirk spreads across his face. "Completely and utterly consumed."

Dagny's eyes heat as she leans in and presses a gentle, loving kiss against Fenryr's waiting lips. But before he can trap her in his grip again, Dagny whips around and scurries back to the ledge, her mouth working upward in a teasing grin as Fenryr looks on with an expression set in shock.

"Such a tease," I murmur, moving to the tip of the outcropping to join her. "You're going to drive the poor thing mad."

"He'll survive for an hour," she says, her eyes glinting with a seductive light. "I'll make it worth the wait once we get home."

My mouth curves into a smile as I think of the secret underground dwelling we've managed to create in the past year. With the help of five other demons and my wonderful mate, we've truly managed to turn the crudely carved lair into a beautiful home. It's cozy, warm, free from the elements, and most importantly, safe. It's all I've ever wanted and more. A space to call ours, a place my mate and the five other soul pieces can live without fear, bloodshed, death, or the constant threat of battle. A place where we can build something rather than destroy.

I weave my fingers with Dagny's, squeezing her hand tight as I stare out at the vast, tranquil sea. "You know, when you say things like that it makes me want to rip your clothes off and fuck you right here in the snow and ice."

The side of her mouth tips in a smirk, but she doesn't take her eyes off the horizon. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“Hmm. I think you do. I think you know exactly how intoxicating you are. How tempting...”

She breathes a small laugh, flicking her eyes to the side and catching mine with a heated expression. Before either of us can act on the charged energy swirling between us, the sound of wings beating the air punctuates the silence, breaking the spell and drawing our attention to the edge of the outcropping.

When I look, I’m met with the sight of Kaabl lowering onto the ledge near Roark, his expression made of stone, and his heated golden gaze locked on his mate. I thought I might find you here. I’m glad I was right.

“Kaabl!” Dagny’s eyes light with excitement as she races toward Kaabl, throwing her arms around his middle with such force, it nearly causes them to topple backward off the cliff.

Kaabl’s chest shakes with a silent chuckle as his wings snap out, brushing the air in a sweeping downward stroke to propel them back onto the ledge. Easy, little one. You’re stronger than you think.

“I was just so excited to see you,” she whispers, pushing her face into the center of Kaabl’s chest with a giggle. “I couldn’t help it.”

Hmm. In that case, I hope to always be greeted with as much eagerness. A brush with death is worth it to see that smile on your face. His arms curl around Dagny’s shoulders and back, pressing her flush against his torso with the force of his embrace.

A delighted purr rumbles in her throat as she nuzzles deeper into his hold. Meanwhile, Kaabl stares down at her with a small, rare smile, a look of unending adoration swirling in his golden eyes. Pulsing waves of electricity move down the bond as he leans in, pressing his lips to her forehead and nose before capturing her

mouth in a passionate kiss.

“I missed you,” she whispers, reaching up to cup his face in her palm. “How was it?”

The human realm is ever the same. I did manage to find you a few of those red things you love.

“Apples?”

Kaehl nods, his smile widening at the look of joy in Dagny’s eyes. They’re waiting for you at home.

“You’re the best.” Dagny places an exaggerated kiss to the hollow of his cheek, and Kaehl’s eyes flash with pink for the briefest moment. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

Yes. But it sounds sweeter each time you do. He leans down, nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck, his chest vibrating with a silent groan. I will never tire of it.

“Well, I love you,” she whispers, closing her eyes as a wave of bliss travels down the bond. “So, so much.”

“I love you more!” Cyprien whines, scurrying over and plopping down at Dagny’s feet. His arms wrap around her legs like a vise, and he uses his leverage to bury his face in the back of her thighs. “Give me attention!”

A laugh explodes from Dagny’s mouth, and she places her hand on Cyprien’s head, twisting her fingertips into his short blond hair. “What’s the matter, Cyppy?”

“You haven’t said you love me in the past fifteen minutes .”

She chuckles under her breath, sweeping her hand down the back of his head and neck in a soothing gesture. “I love you, Cyppy. I love all of you.” She turns her gaze toward Roark, Lir, Fenryr, and then me—her eyes swimming with a tender warmth. “I love our life together, and what we’ve built.”

I can’t help but smile as I take in the light beaming from her carefree smile. It’s hard to believe that just a year ago, we were fighting for our lives, under the constant fear that every coming day would be our last.

Now, we live peacefully in the underground lair I started building twenty-two years ago—the same one that has blossomed into a beautiful home. We live peacefully, surviving off the land and the occasional journey to the human realm to restock the food Dagny loves so much. We haven’t felt the need to rebuild Abaddon’s castle yet, and I’m not sure if we ever will. Maybe one day, if our goddess of a mate ever gets bored with our quiet little life and decides she wants to rule this world. But until then, we will all cherish every single moment. We’ll bask in the tranquil mornings, revel in the calm of the night, and be happy—thriving—as long as our mate is by our side.

My eyes trail down her frame, stopping to admire the gentle swell of her hips, stomach, and thighs before finding their way back to her smile. That smile.

“I love you, wildfire,” I murmur.

“More than air. More than life, ” Lir adds, his eyes filling with the same emotion filling my veins.

“More than anything. ” Roark moves toward Dagny, placing his hand on the small of her back as his gaze burns into her profile. “Our beautiful, ineffable mate.”

“ Ours, ” Fenryr whispers, crawling over to join Cyprien at Dagny’s feet, staring up at her with a look of wonder. “It’s still too good to believe... even all this time later.”

“Yet it’s real,” she says, reaching down to cup Fenryr’s cheek. “It will always be real.”

The corners of her eyes crinkle as he nuzzles into her touch, a low whimper echoing from the base of his chest.

“Look,” Cyprien whispers, tapping Dagny’s leg to draw her attention. “ The lights. ”

Dagny’s gasp fills the air as we turn our attention to the horizon, finding the skies bursting with vibrant color. The light shifts and dances across the skyline, staining the atmosphere with brilliant hues of merging, shimmering pigment.

On cue, the penkins littering the coastline below tilt their heads back, opening their mouths wide as their haunting sonnet fills the air, rolling over my skin and raising the hair at the back of my neck.

As they sing, we place our hands to our hearts, honoring Abaddon, his loss, and his sacrifice that led to our triumph over Slaine and his army. Without him, there would be nothing. Without his death, we would not have been given the gift of life.

When the lights fade and the penkins bellow their last dreary note, Dagny turns to me, her eyes welling with unshed tears. Before they can fall, the six of us surround her, wanting to ease her pain, needing to stop the throbbing ache traveling down the bond. We hold her, soothing her with gentle caresses and loving whispers—and eventually, that beautiful light returns to her eyes. The one that’s filled with hope and love, despite all she’s lost.

She looks at me, and I forget how to breathe. But the next words out of her mouth are all I need to survive. “ I’m ready to go home. ”

I cup her cheek, my head singing, slamming wildly against its cage. “Okay,” I

whisper. “Let’s go home.”

As the seven of us launch into the skies, my mate turns to give me a tender smile, one that fills my chest with a tingling warmth and breathes life into my cold, malicious heart—and I’m struck with the most wonderful realization.

For the first time in my life, I have someone to love. Someone who has seen the darkest parts of my soul, the fatal flaws of my being, and has decided to love me back. There is no sweeter taste, no finer sensation, no awareness or purpose or gift that could compare to the knowledge that this extraordinary being—this wonderful, beautiful woman—is mine.

For life. For always. Forever.

Ours.

The end.

2 years later...

“Don’t be so greedy, Mor.”

I retract my hand from the kleptak and place it back on Bo’s head, causing a cacophony of low-toned chitters to break the air as Mor makes her dissatisfaction known. She tries nudging my palm off Bo and onto her head again, but I shove her away lightly, continuing to pet her with my other—free—hand. “You can’t hog all my attention, Mor.”

The creature chirps, laying its head on the ice next to my thigh with a rattling sigh. It’s been two years since I learned to control the kleptak, and the same amount of time that Mor has been in the wild. But somewhere along the way, the creature developed a fondness for me, and now whenever I come out to the welwig forest to sit and think, she pays me a visit. We have a strange kind of bond, one I don’t believe anyone has experienced with the mysterious beast.

How different my life has become. Things I never could have dreamed of are my reality, and it doesn’t quite feel real.

I gaze out past the curtain of drooping crystalline leaves, staring into the shadowed forest just beyond. So much has changed in the past few years, and I’ve grown so much. I’ve surpassed my wildest expectations of what my power can do, and I’ve yet to find the limit of my magic. There’s always more to discover, more to learn.

Malice says I could rule The Far Place if I ever wanted to. But for now, I’m happy with my quiet life. I’m happy spending every day carefree and in the arms of my

mates, and I don't know if I'll ever feel the urge to rebuild the palace and invite struggle back into our lives. Everything is as it should be for now, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

The kleptak lets out an irritated chitter, drawing my attention back toward the creature at my side. Her head is turned to her hind legs, muscles taut and snarling at the little black cat using its back leg as a scratching post.

"Nya!" I yank the little cat into my lap, nestling her into the space next to Bo as I give Mor an apologetic smile. The kleptak continues chirruping, rising to a stand and shifting away despite my moving Nya away. Comet huffs, stamping the ground and lowering his head, clearly startled at the creature's sudden movement.

Having had enough socialization for one afternoon—or perhaps not wanting to share my attention with six other clingy animals—Mor turns her head to face me in a somber goodbye, and she stalks off into the darkened forest beyond.

As soon as the creature is out of view, Honey nuzzles her snout against my shoulder with a satisfied chuff. Echo places his head on my knee, his emerald eyes narrowed and watching the shadows warily, clearly worried the kleptak will make a reappearance. I giggle, running my palm along Syn's glossy back in a soothing motion.

"It's okay," I whisper to the familiars. "She's gone for now."

We sit in silence for several minutes, listening to the gentle creak of the branches overhead and reveling in the quiet stillness hanging heavy in the air.

That is, until a rustle sounds in the distance.

My spine snaps upright as I turn my head side to side, the hair on the back of my neck rising as I search the shadows for the origin of that noise. It couldn't be Mor... could

it?

I push to a stand, using the trunk of the welwig at my back for balance. I wait for the familiars to crowd around me, to protect me from the danger lurking just outside—but instead of that, all six of them scurry into the forest, leaving me to fend for myself.

Before I move to investigate, a pair of powerful arms wraps around my middle, sweeping me off my feet and dragging me up past the canopy into the open sky. I lean my head back with a full-bellied laugh, the sound lost to the violent wind whipping around my face, stinging my cheeks and bringing tears to my eyes.

As we soar higher into the atmosphere, I look over my shoulder to find Kaebl staring down at me, his canines lengthening and golden eyes swirling with hunger.

I found you. His grip tightens, and a small whimper pours from my lips as his claws pierce my skin. You left bed, his wicked voice whispers into my mind. We weren't done with you, little one. Not even close

“I was just getting some air,” I whisper, my core pulsing with a heat only my mate can elicit. “I was...”

“Thinking you'd get a little break?” Cyprien glides into view, his powerful wings beating the air and keeping him aloft as he closes the distance between us. “You can't be done already .”

Heat travels up my neck as I worry my lip, images of this morning flashing through my mind like a slideshow. My eyes shift to the side, anxiety pricking the back of my neck at the look of hunger in Cyprien's glowing yellow eyes.

It's springtime in The Far Place, and though the change of season doesn't seem to affect the climate, it's clearly impacted my mates' appetite. I'm still so sore from last

night's escapades, and when I woke up this morning and realized my mates were sound asleep, I admit I did sneak away to have a little break from their constant, ravenous hunger.

I can hear your thoughts, little one. Kaebl's arm tightens around my abdomen as he slides his other hand down, his claws shredding through my bodysuit and letting it fall to the canopy below. You can't ever get away from us, . You belong to us, just as we do you.

His hips jerk, rubbing the length of his hardening cock against my ass. His chest shakes with a silent groan as he thrusts a second time, pressing the head of his cock against my tight hole. A whimper echoes in the base of my throat at that feeling of tightness, but it's overshadowed by the thrumming wave of pleasure coursing through my veins, filling my head with a high-pitched ringing and causing my vision to fade.

Do you want me to fuck your ass, mate?

I nod wordlessly, arching my back in an attempt to feel him there, stretching me. Kaebl's abdomen shudders as he pushes his cock inside me, slowly working his thick length to the deepest part of me.

Cyprien swoops in, his powerful wings keeping him aloft as he positions himself at my front, the growing length between his thighs twitching toward my center. Cyprien palms my breast, teasing my nipple with his thumb and forefinger while the other snaps up to my neck, circling it with his palm and applying pressure to my pulse points.

"Your face twitches in the cutest way when you're getting fucked," Cyprien murmurs, leaning forward and brushing his lips against the tip of my nose. "I can't fucking get enough of it. Of you."

Cyprien's cock twitches forward, dragging the cum-beaded head against my center

and causing me to cry out in bliss. His mouth works into a manic smile as he thrusts forward, pushing his cock to the deepest part of me as stars spark behind my eyes.

His yellow eyes light with fire as he fucks me hard and fast, moving in tandem with Kaebl. Each powerful thrust spreads pleasure through my veins, heats my skin, and sends a tingling warmth to the tips of my fingers and toes as I'm overcome with stimuli.

With one last shuddering thrust, Kaebl slams his hips flush against my ass, his abdomen quivering with a silent cry as his release tears free, filling my ass with ropes of hot cum. Kaebl's release drips down my thighs as Fenryr and Roark fly into view, their eyes wide and hungry and focused on the thin line of cum trailing down my legs.

"Fuck, I can't wait to breed you, my pretty little bunny." Cyprien's hips jerk with hurried, erratic thrusts, his eyes staring deep into mine like he wants to consume my soul. "You're going to look so beautiful when you're bursting with my litter."

He pumps once, twice more and slams his cock to the back of my walls, his release pulsing from his cock as a throaty groan explodes into the air. As soon as Cyprien slips out, Fenryr pushes him out of the way, allowing Kaebl to hold me aloft as his cock strains toward my dripping pussy, the bulbous projections at the base of his cock swelling with anticipation.

He thrusts inside me, pressing the knot past my entrance, locking his cock inside me. One jerk of his hips is all it takes, and Fenryr falls over the edge, his release tearing free with a thunderous roar that shudders through the sky and rolls over my skin with heated waves of electricity. His cock pulses deep inside me, filling me with his seed as the base swells, locking us together in our passionate embrace.

Kaebl releases me as Fenryr's arm circles around my back, holding me aloft while the other trails down my spine. His thumb finds my tight hole, and with a mischievous

grin, he pushes it inside, hooking it against my walls as he begins thrusting gently inside me once more.

Fenryr tucks his wings, and we fall to the earth while he fucks me. The fall, the whipping of the wind, the closeness of death, the feel of my mate deep inside me—it's all too much. Just before we reach the ground, my walls convulse, and I fall into oblivion, lost to the overwhelming stimuli and the sheer rush of it all. Fenryr stops our descent just before we touch the ground, and with one last thrust, he releases another load into my pussy, joining me in my unending pleasure.

“Fuck, this pussy,” he groans, thrusting gently, his hands tightening around my hips. “I can't fucking get enough. It'll never be enough.” Fenryr leans down, sinking his teeth into my shoulder as a growl rumbles in his chest.

“So fucking hot,” Roark says, lowering to the ground next to Lir and Malice. “I can't wait to fill you again, my sweet, beautiful doe.”

Roark straddles Fenryr's thighs, palming his massive cock and inching it toward my tight hole as Lir presses his cock against my lips, spreading salty precum along my lower lip. “Open,” he commands, his voice gruff and hushed. “Be a good girl and take our cum.”

I part my lips as Lir fists my hair on the back of my head, using the added leverage to thrust to the back of my throat. At the same time, Roark pushes his cock into my ass, filling me past the point of comfort and toeing the line between pleasure and pain.

My eyes fill with tears as all three of them begin moving in me, stretching me and filling me with so much blissful pleasure, I'm not sure what to do.

Lir's cock muffles my scream as I come, my walls convulsing and eyes rolling back as wave after wave of euphoria rolls through my veins, bursting through my pores in a fantastic show of starlight.

My three mates come in the next thrust, filling me with their release and drenching my holes as a cacophony of groans fills the air, punctuating the silence with powerful sounds of bliss. As soon as they slip out, Malice pulls me off Fenryr, wrapping my legs around his hips as he holds my limp body aloft.

“I love when you get this way,” he murmurs, pressing the head of his cock inside my dripping pussy. “So easy to fuck. Such a good little toy.” He thrusts his full length inside, causing my eyes to pop and a whimper to fall from my quivering lips.”Our beautiful mate.”

As Malice fucks me, Kaehl crouches at his feet, his palms gripping my ass and spreading it as he lunges forward, pushing his tongue deep into my tight hole. Malice comes at the same time I do, the sounds of our pleasure mingling in the air in a beautiful symphony. And when we’re done, and our bodies have ceased shuddering, Malice lowers me to the ice, pressing loving, tender kisses across my collarbone.

My mates crowd around me, positioning themselves so not a single part of me is exposed to the elements, wrapping me up in their collective embrace—shielding me and loving me and protecting me from anything that may come.

Cyprien places his hand on my stomach, gazing at the spot with a look of tenderness. I know exactly what he’s thinking—he’s hoping this time it worked, that this time my belly really will swell with their child. Perhaps it will, or maybe it will take another ten years for the stars to align. No matter what, I know it will work out. That when we’re ready, when it’s right, we’ll be able to grow our happy little family. But until then, I’m just going to enjoy these moments with my mates, living life to the fullest.

As I lie there, basking in the wonderful sensation only my mates can give, reveling in the power and strength of their love and adoration, I realize something. For the first time in my life, I’m complete.

And all because of a little yellow rabbit.