



Demons of Lore (Fated Mates of Foxfire Academy #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Slaying demons isn't easy, especially when it turns out the biggest and the baddest are out hunting me—but not all my enemies are demonkind.

With my newest Fated joining our ranks, our secrets are out in the open...or so I thought. Enko, Seven, Kairos, and Rhys have vowed to protect me at all costs, even if it means shrouding me from the truth. And a new secret threatens to break us apart before the war against demons begins...

Our enemies are gathering their legions and now we must become stronger than ever to save the world from evil.

Book two of the paranormal/urban fantasy reverse harem trilogy with dark romance, enemies to lovers, forced proximity, and found family: Demons of Lore (Fated Mates of Foxfire Academy #2)

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Rhys

My attention zeroed in on Dove as the medicine lulled her to an unconscious state. The battle had done a number on her, bruises blossoming like morbid flowers. All I wanted was those big milk chocolate eyes gazing up at me again, to tuck the loose strands of white hair behind her ear.

To know that she's okay.

Weeks ago, her blood tests had come in matching her with us and I had rushed back to Foxfire Academy, the top demon-slaying school in the country. When I bumped into her in the shrine, it was like the goddess herself teaching me a lesson for not believing. Like it was Fate.

I wanted her instantly, how beautiful she was, how delicious she smelled. And I knew she was mine, my Fated.

Her tragic past had been reduced to only a few paragraphs in her file—which I read at least a hundred times, feasting upon the words obsessively to become acquainted with my Fated. But once I saw her, I wondered how she had been able to survive after everything that had happened to her. So fragile and young, her strength hidden behind her soft features and sharp tongue.

I had thought she was just a bratty academy student, not a hardened blade forged by the fires of her turbulent past. Keeping myself away once I was near was the hardest part, but it was for her own safety. If people knew how powerful she was, how her very presence commanded us...

I had called her into my office that day only to stare at her for an hour. A painting of perfection that I couldn't take my eyes off of. To curb my infatuation, I ordered her to bow so she wouldn't see my possessed state. Her alluring scent made it hard to control myself around her. But that made it all the more exciting.

I forced my eyes away from her, onto the three men who shared my Fated.

First on Seven, who I considered my brother, though we shared no blood, his scowl more prominent than normal, his red eyes fixated on Dove. Tattoos covered every visible inch of his skin except his face. Sometimes I wondered what he was covering up. His deep pink scar stretched across one cheek to his temple and close to his eye, a visible reminder of what he had been through. His black hair was darker than the Shadow. Demon blood remained splattered on his wrinkled white shirt causing acidic holes. He hadn't changed since the battle.

Enko, the big one that struggled with anger issues. He wore a green academy jersey, his brown hair messy from the stress since Dove was hurt. His brown eyes remained on the slow rise and fall of her chest, as though that was the one thing keeping him from another rampage. The last thing I needed was having to tidy up his mess again.

And then there was Kairos, the one who glared at me like I was the enemy. Maybe I was. His blue eyes were a clouded storm, his glares struck like flicks of lightning. His golden hair somehow had remained styled during the battle and the night of no sleep. His dark gray suit made him look like he was already running his father's business, though he was only twenty-four.

The four of us surrounded her bed like a pack of demons while she slept like an angel. Now I knew about the deep injury she had hidden from us. Through the quiet of the room, every sound echoed, Enko's heavy breath, Kairos' footfalls as he paced, and the lack of Seven's constant quips and jabs at everyone for everything.

Unable to bear it any longer, I broke the weighted silence. “I should start working on her. While she’s medicated and her wound is still open.”

I stepped forward, pulling the thin sheet down. Her bare skin ignited something in me, and I wasn’t the only one. Enko, Kairos, and Seven rushed between to stop me. Kairos tugged the sheet back into place, while Seven and Enko blocked my view of her, pushing me away from the bed.

“My little fox never agreed to you seeing her naked.”

Enko grabbed my wrist, holding tightly. His strength could easily snap my bones, even though I had more tails than him.

“I’m a medic. I was trained to handle these situations maturely,”

I said, desperate to pull that sheet back down and see her fully. To caress her skin, kiss her—

“Yeah? That’s why you have that crazed look in your eyes? Because you’re so mature?”

Seven snapped.

“She needs to be healed,”

I argued, that feral instinct taking over my rationality as I tried to step forward, but Enko’s arm barred my way.

“Not by you.”

I growled like a feral teenager unable to control the pull of the foxfire. “I am the

strongest Life kitsune alive!”

“The most pompous one too,”

Kairos chuckled, his arms crossed over his chest, his perfectly shining loafers tapping against the clean white tile floor.

The three of them had no respect for my position as the Archfox. Now that Dove knew my importance, I would have to reign the three idiots back into place. “I can order the three of you out of here in a heartbeat. She is my Fated mate and I have every right to bond with her!”

They laughed at my comments, Seven saying, “Not when she’s sleeping, you don’t. We have every obligation to protect her. And how is kicking us out going to help your stilted relationship with Dove? She doesn’t know anything about you. If she wakes, she will feel most comfortable with us here.”

Seven, honoring our brotherhood, tried to help.

“Not that you would understand that, having spent the last several weeks treating her like a rebellious student,”

Kairos said as his eyes zapped me again.

I inhaled deeply a few times, hoping to calm myself down, but all I could smell was her sweet fruity scent, like a drug fogging my brain with crazed lust. Finally, I shoved the instincts down. “Then blindfold me. I need to heal her.”

Enko and Seven looked to Kairos, who stared at Dove for a long moment before nodding. “He’s right, the injury is on her back. He doesn’t need to see anything more than that. And we’ll be here to keep an eye on him the entire time. In case he loses

control,”

Kairos said finally.

Me? Lose control? Did he have any idea who he was speaking to? Of all of us, I was the least likely to lose control. I had been forced to grow up before he even had his first tail.

I shoved the angry thoughts back down as she came back into my sight. I had to stop myself from smiling as my eyes grazed her. Her white hair framed her round face, her dark pink lips parted slightly with a breath, her breasts rose and fell under the sheets. Kairos and Enko gently turned her onto her side, revealing her back and the severity of her wound.

My lust quelled and my jaw dropped as I saw the damage under the fresh slash from the Tier V archdemon’s blade. How had she even been walking? She would have been in pain the entire time—a year ago—since the burning of her temple, long before her newest injury. Why hadn’t she told me?

And I made her bow for almost an hour.

No wonder the others had been so mad at me. I should have been focusing on her needs, not on my own hubris and desire. Guilt crept up on me as I stepped forward, sitting in the chair at her side and letting my fingers rest on the freshly opened wound.

“I’ll need sterile water and cloth,”

I ordered, my brain reverting to my time spent as a medic, determined to get Dove out of pain as quickly as possible.

My eyes closed, and without even trying, the pulse of magic surged to my fingertips and into Dove. The green-tinged light flowed into the opening.

She moaned in her medicine-induced sleep and my eyes snapped open as I took her pain into myself, unraveling the tightened knots of char wrapping around her nerves and muscles.

Enko rushed to the other side of the bed, kneeling to face her, stroking her hair, cupping her cheek. “Is she in pain?”

I nodded, not wanting words to distract from the work of my magic. I’d seen the gigantic man’s temper before, but now he appeared only as a scared puppy, worried for his Fated. Our Fated.

“The removal of hellfire char requires a skilled practitioner. Even the slightest mistake can leave the patient paralyzed for life,”

the Life kitsune who worked for the university said. She set the cloth and sterile water on the table beside me. “It’s why Dove refused the treatment for so long.”

“He might paralyze her?”

Kairos stepped forward, hands outstretched toward me as he readied himself to pull me away.

Seven blocked the controlling Storm kitsune, for once acting like he should. “Rhys wants what’s best for her, just like all of us, Kairos.”

I worked for many long hours, the others finally relaxing in the chairs around the room while I pushed myself late into the night. The yearning to get her out of pain kept my mind sharp and my hands steady. My own weariness was nothing in

comparison to her prolonged agony.

Dove moaned again as I cleaned away another trail of black goo secreting from her wound. I turned to drop the dirty cloth into the bucket at my side, my head going dizzy after hours of work.

When she reentered my sight, her brown eyes stared up at me, moving over my face in a hazy allurement. She winced in pain at each movement as she twisted around to see me. “Am I dreaming?”

“You’re in the medical wing. Your meds have worn off. I’ll grab the healer,”

I told her, grabbing a wet rag to wipe off my hands.

Her eyes moved down to my white shirt and sleeves which were dotted with blood and char. Confusion registered on her face, then shame. She pulled the sheet up urgently, “I’m so sorry, your Holiness. I didn’t mean to cause you any trouble.”

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The Archfox had his sleeves rolled up past his elbows. Enko slept kneeling on the hard floor next to the bed, his head resting next to my stomach. Kairos had passed out in an armchair and Seven sprawled over the couch like a lazy cat taking up the best spot in the place.

“Does it hurt?” the Archfox asked.

I shook my head, ignoring the pain that had woken me. Memories flashed back to me as I awakened from the deep sleepy stupor. The thin sheet offered little protection as I pulled it over myself, my face on fire. Had he seen me? My scars were fully exposed to him and I could see the pity leaking from his expression like a rain cloud.

“You are my...” My voice trailed off, and the Archfox gave me an encouraging smile, nodding. “I’m your...”

Fated, he whispered in my head.

My eyes snapped open fully. “Your Holiness—”

“Rhys,” he corrected.

“Huh?”

“You can call me Rhys, .” He leaned forward, tucking my hair behind my ear, his lips leaning down and touching my forehead. An amber aroma wafted from him and made

me want to jump his bones. “I’ve wanted to do that since I met you,” he whispered against my skin, holding his soft warm lips against me for a long moment.

My heart thumped wildly. The machines all around me started to beep loudly with alarms, causing Enko, Kairos, and Seven to jostle awake as the healer rushed in. The Archfox backed away, creating an unwanted distance between us.

“What’s going on?” Kairos demanded as he jumped up, taking the Archfox’s place and checking the beeping machine as if he knew how to work it, blocking the Archfox from my view.

The healer shooed him out of the way, pressing the button to stop the alarm as she glanced over at me, then moved to exit the room.

“Wait! What happened? Is she okay?” Enko asked desperately.

The three of them crowded around my bed. Enko’s hand gripped mine, Seven pretended to be bored, but his eyes were a little too alert for having just woken. And Kairos glared at the Archfox.

The healer smiled. “Yes, she’s doing very well. She should be discharged within a day. The Archfox has done a tremendous amount of work already.”

Kairos gestured frantically at the machine hooked up to me, hiding his fear behind authority. “Then what was that all about? All the alarms going off.”

The healer cleared her throat awkwardly, assessing the situation and waiting for the fall of the Archfox’s nod before responding. “I imagine she’s just excited about meeting her new Fated mate.”

I blushed, reaching for the sheet and pulling it over my head in embarrassment.

“Oh,” I heard Kairos say before the door gently clicked shut behind the healer.

“I need to work with her more, but I need to rest and replenish my magic.” The Archfox paused. “?”

I slowly lowered the sheet to find them all still staring.

“You should recover with your Fated, the foxfire bonds will keep you more comfortable until I’m ready to keep going. I’ll call Seven as soon as that time comes.”

The Archfox—Rhys—backed away, his eyes lingering on me.

“Great! See you then,” Kairos said a little too enthusiastically. I gave him a frantic gaze to silently inform him of my need for my newest Fated male.

Rhys watched me for another long moment, something forlorn about him, before turning to leave.

“Wait,” I said with a raspy panic before he could go, letting his eyes fall back onto me. “If I’m supposed to be around my Fated mates, shouldn’t you be with me too?”

He frowned, glancing at the others. While Seven held some understanding, Enko and Kairos did not.

“Are we supposed to stuff another bed in that dorm?” Kairos suggested incredulously.

But I want him there, I thought, knowing the others could hear it.

Rhys kept his focus on me. “It’s not appropriate for me to sleep around students, let

alone share a dorm. I can already imagine the rumors.”

My stomach fell, but I forced myself to keep my face emotionless. “Right.”

“And having another Fated will only draw more attention to you,” he continued, looking to the guys for support. “I’m sure you want to spend time with your mates that are closer to your own age.”

My blush deepened, remembering our first exchange of words. Guilt rose like bile in my throat. How my insult must have affected him over the past weeks.

Seven shook his head with a snort, unaware of the words I had exchanged with Rhys, a wry smirk forming, “You’re not that much older than us. I’m starting to think she can just claim any male she finds even remotely attractive.”

“Seven!” I chastised, my eyes gliding over to Rhys to see his response to the comment and giving a small shake of my head in denial. “I didn’t mean...when I said that...” Words eluded me.

Rhys winced and forced a smile at me. “I’ll see you soon, .”

A knock came at the door and the healer poked her head in, “Some visitors are here to see her. If you’ll allow it, Your Holiness.”

Kairos passed me a t-shirt—his, based on the smell of electric rain—and I slipped into it, even though it was gray. The Archfox glanced at me and waited for my nod before giving permission to the healer, his sights on me, lingering until he followed the healer from the room.

Brynn and Sana entered the room as he exited, eyes wide as they saw me. Sana’s red hair was shorter, her unruly curls cut down after being held captive by the Tier V

archdemon, Zalgore, reminding me that hellfire had reigned on the battlefield. She wore her white robes of all Holy Foxes. Brynn's large glasses magnified her eyeballs welling with concern, but she kept a distance from me.

"! It's so good to see you awake," Sana said, rushing forward to the bedside. She didn't hesitate to kneel between Kairos and Seven after bowing to each of my mates.

"Why was the Archfox in here?" Brynn asked as she scooted closer, her eyes on my three remaining Fated males as though they might randomly attack her.

"He's my—"

"Life kitsune. He's healing her," Kairos said quickly, giving me a look as his voice entered my head. It's already odd enough that you have three mates, but at least it's not unheard of. People can't know you're Fated to the Archfox yet. It will only put you in more danger.

I opened my mouth to protest, but his voice invaded my mind before I could speak. Later. And keep quiet that you can transmit thoughts to us. Usually only Mind kitsune are capable of that.

I turned my attention back to my friends, knowing Kairos' controlling orders came from a place of caring for me. But I hated lying to them.

"Sana, I'm so sorry. It's my fault they went after you." A tear leaked from my eye as the two sat at the edge of my bed.

Sana shook her head furiously, a stern expression overtaking her face. "Never apologize for the evils spawned by demons, . And it's my duty as a Holy Fox to help you in any way that I can."

“The archdemon is still out there,” I said, mostly to test myself. Stilling that fear within me.

He’d beaten me, like swatting a fly. My hard work over the past year hadn’t made me very strong, and certainly not strong enough to fight a Tier V archdemon. Seeing his power made me wonder how I could ever be strong enough to beat him.

Enko’s hand reached on top of mine, his giant palm covering mine and flooding his warmth into me. Consoling me as he felt my fear despite how hard I tried to hide it. “Then we’ll fight him together, little fox. The goddess has surrounded you with an arsenal.”

“Mostly me, but yeah,” Seven drawled with a yawn as he stretched. “I’m going to get some breakfast, Fated, since your picky ass refuses to eat hospital food. Try not to get yourself into any trouble while I’m gone.”

A smile stretched across my face, happy to see my grumpy dark mate was back to the occasional insult with me. Seven’s fear was not something I had ever expected to see.

Kairos touched Enko’s shoulder, cuing my giant Fated to follow him out of the room. Like velcro, he finally tore himself away, leaving me alone with Sana and Brynn to catch up.

Brynn immediately softened as the men left us alone. “Everyone is saying you are some special kind of kitsune.”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel special.”

“A Disciple,” Sana told Brynn.

“A Heavenly Fox sent down by the goddess herself to return the demons into

balance.” Brynn spoke as though she was repeating the line from a book.

Sana nodded furiously. “A very powerful kitsune with unknown powers.” Sana’s eyes echoed with a yearning she may never fill. “I hope the goddess blesses me with a gift.” She shook her head as though she hadn’t meant to say it out loud. “Have you seen the leaderboard, ? You’re top of your class.”

My hand stretched out to hers, resting on top of hers. “You are blessed, Sana. I’m so grateful for your friendship.”

“A Holy Fox isn’t much of a friend to a weapon-user. But I will always serve you.”

Brynn’s eyes rolled, “Do you hear yourself, Sana? You are our friend. And it’s not like I’m some kind of powerful kitsune, either. What am I to do? Throw my laptop at a demon?”

Brynn didn’t understand. That Holy Foxes were reminded constantly of their shortcomings and their duty to others. I had grown up with it. But it was like my Fated mates were healing that trauma, the unseen scars left from feeling useless.

We continued to catch up and soon Seven returned with a box of food for me. Inside was eggs, pancakes with syrup, and bacon—piles of bacon. “Oh, Seven, I could kiss you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said dismissively, glancing at my friends. He didn’t like everyone knowing he had a soft side and wasn’t just a scary dark and dangerous kitsune.

I licked the plate clean and both Sana and Brynn looked shocked at the speed of my consumption. The healer returned with a syringe a few minutes later, holding out the syringe of medicine like a threat. “She needs to rest now, girls.”

The woman inserted it into my IV and beckoned my friends from the room as my body succumbed back to dreamless sleep.

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Dove

Kairos signed me out from the medical wing the following day, paying a bill for a ridiculously large amount of money for my private room. During my recovery, I hadn't even thought about what the cost was, and now I wondered how I would ever be able to pay him back.

Seven noticed my expression and nudged my shoulder, his whisper hitting my ear. "It's pennies to him, Fated. He won't allow for you to have anything but the best."

Kairos and Enko glanced at me as Seven said the words, a keen reminder that both had heard him. Kitsune had supernatural powers, which increased with each tail earned from killing demons. And my Fated mates had many. While the magical powers of our element increased, so did super-strength, super-speed, and—privacy notwithstanding—super-hearing.

The healer sidestepped around the desk at the edge of the sterile white medical wing and retrieved a wheelchair, mentioning that any movement threatened to reopen my wounds that she had freshly bandaged. She was a stringent woman, I'd figured that out over the past few days.

When I refused the wheelchair, Enko's arms wrapped around me, purring in my ear, "Good, I wanted to carry you anyway. I need to be close to you right now, little fox."

I didn't fight him as he gently lifted me from the bed, cradling me against his chest, his arms adjusting around my injured back gingerly. The healer looked at us tentatively, too afraid to interject even though she wanted to force me into the

wheelchair.

Kairos led the way and Seven brought up the rear, probably to shoot silent threats at anyone who dared look my way. My dark, dangerous mate.

As we walked through the school, we passed a myriad of students, all shuffling to the wall as we passed. Normally, I would have been embarrassed by all the attention, but between the meds and my own near death experience, I didn't care about the gossipers of the academy spreading rumors about me and my Fated mates. Not after everything that they had done for me, even after only knowing me for a few weeks. It felt like we had already known each other for a lifetime.

When we arrived at the dorm, Enko gently placed me on my bed, depositing a kiss before releasing me completely. Seven watched from near the door, his arms crossed and a scowl causing lines to form on his forehead. But as soon as I moved to relax, I let out a gasp of pain and he zoomed to my side.

"Rhys said he'll be by later to heal you. You're excused from classes until you're back to full health, Fated,"

Seven said.

"I'm going to fall behind if I miss any more classes,"

I groaned, trying to sit up against the pillows. "Did you get my homework for the time I missed at least?"

Kairos rushed forward to stop me, "No, Dove. You need to rest. You heard the healer. Stop moving."

Seven cracked a smirk. "After all you've been through, you're worried you'll fall

behind? You're top of your class on kills. You know more about demons than most third-years. You even forged a decent blade. I'd say you're made to slay demons, Fated."

A rare compliment from my dark mate. He must have been worried about me, despite that charming smirk trying to prove me otherwise. The scar that ran across his face twitched with the forced expression.

"I've been resting for days,"

I argued, slumping back into the pillows as I saw the handle of my katana on the bedside table. The archdemon Zalgore's swing shattered the blade. The thin scar on my palm remained from its forging, the memory of my first weapon—and my first failure—destined to be ingrained within my skin for a long while yet.

"You won't need to leave bed for your next bit of training anyway,"

Kairos purred suggestively, prowling forward as he spoke, causing my face to burn all shades of red.

How can he be thinking about mating right now? After we were just attacked by a demon army...

Seven, Kairos, and Enko's faces contorted as the thought rang out clearly across our linked minds.

Seven laughed robustly. "Whatever you wish, Fated—"

"Seven,"

Kairos began with a warning tone, his eyes focusing on Enko's clenched fists and

heavy breathing. “I wasn’t talking about sex, Dove. I’m talking about training your mind to control those delicious little thoughts of yours. As much fun as they are.”

“Why?”

“Because of me.”

Enko spun around, shaking his head as he strode away from the bed.

Kairos shook his head. “No, Enko. Because the Lord of Nightmares knows how valuable she is to us. He would do anything to break us apart. Just like before.”

The Lord of Nightmares, a Mind kitsune who ran the nearby city of Lethe like a mob boss. I had first met him as Damon, but he was a rogue kitsune who hurt Enko with his Mind powers. While he employed some of the more harmless demons, he also guarded the eternal Hellgate hidden within the city, ensuring the more dangerous monsters didn’t have free range. The Hellgate’s very existence at close proximity required Foxfire Academy to train its students to the highest standards.

“Enko, it’s not your fault—”

I began, but the damage had been done. His eyes sparked with guilt as he dragged his gaze away from me, turning his back to me, his head shaking, and his fists preparing to pummel something...or someone.

Kairos gripped Enko’s shoulder. “We decided together. We made the best choice for all of us. Especially for Dove.”

I huffed in annoyance, causing pain to shoot up my back. The three turned back to me as they sensed my discomfort. As our bonds strengthened and grew, so did the link between our minds.

“Can you three stop doing that? Talking about me like I’m not here? Like I’m not capable of making my own decisions?”

I pleaded, shooing away Kairos’ hand as he tried to readjust my pillow for the third time.

Seven chuckled from the dark corner of the room he had retreated to. “Better get used to it, Fated. Kairos will do what he thinks is best. Can’t wait to see him snatch Rhys’ power out from under him. That will be a nice change for once.”

“We should get to class,”

Kairos began, ignoring Seven completely.

Seven shook his head. “You know she’ll try to sneak out and get herself killed. That or go to the library.”

Seven spat the word like venom. “We can’t leave her alone.”

The door opened and the Archfox stepped in, a disapproving scowl meant for Seven plastering his face. “Thank you for that brilliant commentary, Seven. So...astute. And she won’t be alone.”

The Archfox approached the bed, slipping what appeared to be a master key into his pocket.

“How long have you been listening, brother?”

Seven snapped.

“Long enough,”

the Archfox said disapprovingly. “I think you’ve all said plenty. Dove isn’t ready to hear all of this. Especially not about the Lord of Nightmares.”

My eyes almost rolled out of my head. “You said we would talk later. We’re all here, so tell me why people can’t know I’m Fated to you, your Holiness? Why do I need to learn to shield my mind from the Lord of Nightmares?”

The Archfox watched me for a long moment, his hand reaching forward slowly as though I may flinch away. He pushed a strand of white hair behind my ear, leaning forward and pressing his lips to my forehead just as he had done the day before. His hand cupped my cheek as he spoke, a soothing calm emanating from his fingertips. “Because he’s our enemy, Dove. Just like the demons. You don’t know what he’s tried to do. What he’s done.”

I looked into his speckled green gold eyes. “What has he done?”

The loud reveille sounded from the speakers outside, signaling the last wake up call before training.

Rhys whirled around to the others, an obvious authority laying each word. “You three have missed enough training. Get to class. I’ll stay with Dove.”

Kairos hesitated, striding over to the bed. He grabbed my phone from the bedside table and pressed it into my palm as he glared at the Archfox, an unheard threat lingering behind his stormy blue eyes. “We’re just one call away.”

Enko’s feet remained planted firmly next to my bed, his body twitched as though he fought with himself internally, like a rope tethered us together. His lips skimmed across mine and he only retreated when Kairos cleared his throat.

Seven, Enko, and Kairos left the dorm, leaving me alone with the Archfox. My heart

fluttered immediately.

My time alone with the powerful kitsune had been limited, and our interactions had not been a healthy breeding ground for our new relationship.

“He doesn’t trust me,”

the Archfox said, frowning at the closed door. When he spotted my confused expression, he clarified, “Kairos.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know his secrets,”

he said as he jiggled the buttons at his wrists and pushed his sleeves up past his elbows. He raised his gaze to mine with a smile. “And no, I won’t tell you what they are.”

“I thought we’re all on the same team,”

I murmured.

“Take off your shirt,”

he ordered bluntly. The Archfox didn’t see my blush as he occupied himself with organizing an assortment of medical supplies on the bedside table.

As I pulled at the fabric, a sharp pain shot through my back and I cried out.

“Hold on, there’s some blood sticking,”

the Archfox said, grabbing a bottle of clear liquid. The sterile water dribbled out onto my shirt where the pain had come from. His fingers grazed my skin as he worked, drenching it with more water. I inhaled slowly as the warm fingers touched my back and then the cold cloth pressed down. He waited a moment before slowly peeling it away fully, bit by bit. “Are you in any pain?”

“A little,”

I said, gesturing to the orange prescription bottle on the end table. “They have me pretty hopped up on pain meds.”

“There.”

He lifted my shirt fully away from the wound.

I flinched away, letting the shirt fall back down. “Wait! Your Holiness.”

“Rhys,”

he corrected as he let out an exasperated sigh. “The others told me you were sensitive about us seeing your back, Dove. But you have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be embarrassed about. You will always be beautiful to us. Besides, I’ve already seen it.”

My head shook. “It’s not that. I barely know you. You’re the most powerful kitsune in the world. Why didn’t you tell me we were Fated? Why didn’t the others tell me?”

Rhys frowned, his eyebrows scrunching as though the thought pained him. “I told them to keep it from you after we met. It wasn’t the initial plan. Seven was pretty pissed off about it.”

“I shouldn’t have said what I said when we first met, you’re not old—”

The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “You did nothing wrong, Dove. This situation is odd for all of us. But we have had time to adjust to the idea. It’s not surprising you will need time too.”

“Rhys,”

I said with determination, crossing my arms as I doddered around on the bed to face him. “I didn’t need time. I was just embarrassed to find you so attractive when I knew I had the others. I didn’t know we were Fated.”

The Archfox slowly set the white cloth he was holding on top of the others on the bedside table, staring at his hands, mesmerized in some thought that he kept hidden from me. I probed at his mind, trying to find something in the empty expanse of his mindspace.

“Why can you all hear everything I think and I can’t hear a thing from you?”

I demanded with frustration.

Rhys smiled, finally meeting my perpetual stare. “Because we’re trained against Mind kitsune. Just as you will be. The Lord of Nightmares will do everything in his power to take you from us. He’ll want your power for himself.”

Damon—the Lord of Nightmares—had been nice enough upon our first meeting, saving me from a potential sexual assault by Vince, fourth top student on demon kills at Foxfire Academy. When I met him a second time, he attacked Enko’s mind, causing the fearless giant to cripple over in pain as I had screamed for him to stop.

“My power?”

“Dove, I told you before, anyone with so many mates is powerful. You are a Disciple—a very powerful kitsune. With only one tail, you’ve been able to fend off what most third-year students struggle to do. The demons will want you dead, and the Lord of the Nightmares will want to use you to gain more power for himself. He is a Mind kitsune, and has done all he can to earn your trust. But you must not trust him.”

“After seeing how he hurt my Enko, I’ll do whatever you guys think I need to fight him.”

The Archfox smiled, a discomfort hiding behind his eyes. “Your Enko? I’m glad to see you have bonded so closely with the others already.”

“So what does this ‘Mind training’ entail?”

I asked, trying to change the topic as I sensed his jealousy.

“Turn around, we can talk while I work on healing your back.”

I slowly turned, lifting my shirt off and covering my front half with the sheet. The breath of cold air licked my skin as I exposed my back to him.

“You should lie down, Dove. This will be very painful. I’m checking for pieces of char that are lodged much deeper and you’re not on a drip of IV medicine for your pain. I know you’re strong and I hate that you’re going to be in pain. But I can’t have you asleep for this part. I need to identify any spots I missed.”

I rested my head on the pillow and a cool tingle touched my back, wiggling into the wound. I sucked in a breath as the pain hit me. The urge to speak evaporated as I struggled to keep my tears in.

“The pain is a good sign, Dove. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but it means your nerve

endings are still able to recover,”

Rhys said.

The magic surged deeper, and this time I couldn't stop my cry of pain, the tears leaking from my eyes without my consent as I tried to blink them away.

“Breathe, Dove,”

he ordered. “You need to breathe.”

His hand stroked my hair but little white stars sparkled across my vision. I heard his voice but it was like an echo against the thumping of my heart. “You can do this. I know you can. It hurts, but you're strong. I'm sorry, Dove. This has to be done without pain medicine.”

I took a shaky breath, squeezing my eyelids shut and shoving the pain down like I had done for the last year since I had first acquired the injury. My words came out in a cruel growl, more for myself than for him. “I'm fine. Keep going.”

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Enko

Kairos, Seven, and I walked at a faster pace than normal as we rushed back to the dorm after physical training. A twang of pain itched at the threads of our Fated bond to Dove. Pain. And the closer we got, the worse the torment became.

As the door opened just a crack, her whimpers met my ears. I barreled past Kairos and Seven, knocking them out of the way like bowling pins.

Rhys had not moved from his position that morning with Dove's bare back now exposed to him. Her sobs rang out, a big wet circle on the pillow beneath her, collecting her tears.

“What the fuck have you been doing to her?”

Kairos demanded.

I knew I shouldn't have left him alone with her.

My rage prevented me from speaking, each breath came out as a growl. Her back was covered with blood and char, a towel sopping up the excess. The only thing that held me back from attacking the Archfox was his magical strings shooting from his fingertips into Dove's back. Once she was released from his magical hold, however...

As the green magic retreated back into him, the Archfox glanced our direction. He leaned forward, kissing the side of Dove's head. “We'll stop there for the day.”

Before I could attack, Seven beat me to it, slamming the Archfox into the dresser and scattering the medical stockpile to the floor.

“Did you not recognize her tears, brother? Hear her cries?”

“Why the fuck isn’t she medicated?”

Kairos demanded, stomping to the bedside.

I charged forward, ready to kill.

“Stop,”

came Dove’s weak whisper. “Let him go, Seven.”

“The process is painful, if she’s on pain meds, I can’t feel where the damage is,”

the Archfox said as he bristled free from Seven’s hold and scrubbed the bloody evidence from his hands. He grabbed a fresh cloth as he reached for Dove. “Stay still, let me get this cleaned up a bit.”

He patted the cloth against her back, cleaning away the mess of blood and char and expertly bandaging it. Dove flinched as he moved over certain parts and I rushed to the other side of the bed, kneeling down and holding her hand. “I’ve got you, little fox.”

She clung to my hand tightly, taking a long slow breath, nodding as she met my eyes.

“Take your pain medicine now. We’ll have to do one more session to make sure I got it all,”

the Archfox announced as he moved toward the door, ready to avoid paying his penance for his crimes against our Fated. Seven and Kairos took his place by the bed, touching her shoulder gingerly and adjusting her sheets around her. “You three should stay with her. I’ll excuse your absences for your academic classes today.”

“I want you to stay with us,”

Dove whispered. Her voice was so quiet, so grated, like every word hurt her to speak. It filled me with more rage. I wanted to beat the crap out of someone, but Dove’s need for me kept me in place. As the rage built, I knew I’d need even more exercise today to blow off the steam.

“I’m sorry, Dove. I have things to do—”

“You just spent the last two hours torturing her, Rhys. Maybe you should stay and earn some good faith back,”

Seven growled as his hand stroked her bare shoulder with his thumb.

“Fine,”

the Archfox responded as though it were a tedious inconvenience to be around my little fox. He was one wrong word away from my fist meeting his face.

But Dove visibly relaxed at the word.

Kairos grabbed the pill bottle and filled a glass with water, kneeling on the floor next to me and holding the items out to Dove. “Here, take this.”

The three of us helped her to sit up, Seven taking the most care at her back, Kairos cupping the back of her head. She deposited the pill into her mouth and grasped the

glass of water to swig it down. With her gulp, we lowered her back down.

“Let’s begin that mind training,”

she demanded, scrunching her eyebrows and tightening her little hands into fists, tugging the offered shirt over her head—Seven’s, black. The color made her feel the most comfortable.

“Dove, you’ve been through enough today, you need to relax,”

the Archfox said sternly, as if that asshole had any room for leverage.

“No, I’m done relaxing. I’ve been bedridden for days now and I’m bored.”

Dove’s eyes stretched open, her hand covering her mouth as she stifled another cry. Her mind rang out to us, Something to get my mind off the pain, “Your Holiness—”

“Rhys,”

the Archfox corrected with a grumpy frown that rivaled Seven’s. “And don’t apologize. But we’re not going to put you through any further training today.”

Dove’s gaze narrowed, her lips pursed. “I need a distraction. It’s my body that needs rest, not my brain. Let’s start the mind shield training.”

With that one simple request, she broke the grandiose man. I’d known him since before he had become the Archfox, and he’d always had an overambitious silver-tongue. Never taking orders from anyone, always getting his way.

Not anymore. Not with Dove.

“Okay.”

He cleared his throat, scanning each of us. “But you need to take it easy. Kairos, get her something to eat. Enko, get her onto a fresh bed. Seven, change her sheets.”

Nobody moved. Seven and I looked at Kairos, waiting for his orders.

“Enko, move her. Seven, order some lunch for us, the steakhouse she likes and put it on my tab. I’ll get the linens.”

Dove watched us curiously as we sparked into motion. I gave her hand a small squeeze before letting go and wrapping one arm under her leg and the other under her arms. A shaky breath escaped her as she closed her eyes. I lifted her gently, placing her onto Kairos’ bed—the closest one. The Archfox appeared, adjusting the pillows behind Dove as I placed her.

The Archfox glared at Kairos. “You don’t need to have a power-trip, Kairos. I’m just doing what’s best for our Fated.”

I shook my head, letting a laugh loose, it sounded like a growl. “It’s pretty clear who should be in charge here, and it’s neither of you.”

“I’m the Archfox, obviously I’m in charge.”

The Archfox opened the linen cabinet and passed the sheets to Kairos before sitting at the end of the bed.

“Goddess, not another discussion on where we stand in the hierarchy,”

Seven groaned as he began to push Dove’s bed against Kairos’ bed. The two small twin mattresses formed a larger bed for all of us to convene.

“You’ve only spent hours with her. I’m better equipped to take charge,”

Kairos argued as he finished, barely moving his fingers in time before Seven smashed them in between the beds.

Seven rounded the beds and pushed my bed to meet up with the others, forming a large king size bed in the room, leaving only Seven’s twin mattress off in the corner. He gently moved Dove back to the center and curled next to her on Kairos’ bed.

“No, Dove is,”

I explained as I crawled into my bed next to her, placing my nose against her hair as I tried to absorb her scent from the mere hours apart.

“Are you sure you want to do training today? You know you can just watch TV and eat junk food, right?”

Kairos stood, watching the three of us get comfortable and Rhys get increasingly more uncomfortable.

Dove nodded, enjoying the new arrangement of the room, the beds smashed together to stay close to her.

“Ready?”

Seven asked. “Hiding thoughts is half about not thinking them, and half about feeling when someone is listening. With a Mind kitsune, it won’t be exactly the same as with us. We have a connection from our Fated bond. The Lord of Nightmares views the mindspace as his playground. Free to come and go as he chooses, but you will feel his presence there, the same way you feel ours.”

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Dove

Like this, do you feel my presence in your mind? Seven asked as he sprawled beside me, his elbow crooked as he kept his head elevated.

I did feel it, a gentle nudge against my thoughts.

I nodded slowly, my eyes trailing over his scar, over his exquisite jawline and mesmerized by the tattoos creeping up his neck. Wanting him to take his shirt off so I could explore them in their full glory.

Flashes of him and me against that wall, his fingers sliding between my legs. Of when he and Kairos tasted me and brought me to the edge over and over. Fantasies of my Fated mates each taking me, sometimes alone, sometimes together, their cocks between my legs, driving into my pulsing—

“Whoa,”

Seven said, snapping back to a sitting position and clearing his throat.

And then I felt a series of nudges within my head and realized Seven wasn't the only one in there. The four men all stared with lusty desire swathing over them. Enko's teeth and knuckles clenched tightly, holding himself deadly still at my side, his breaths coming out loudly as he struggled to maintain control. Kairos ran his tongue over his lips, his hand covering the bulge in his pants. And the Archfox...

“Whoa, indeed,”

Rhys said, clearing his throat uncomfortably and stuffing his hands in his pockets as he spun around. “At least one of you should have informed me you had mated. I didn’t realize how close you all had gotten—”

My face heated like it had caught fire, shaking my head and trying to push myself up to explain to the Archfox.

“We haven’t,”

Kairos snapped angrily as he approached me, hand stretching over Enko and pressing my shoulder back against the pillows. “Don’t be embarrassed, Dove.”

“We can give you more than fantasies, Fated,”

Seven said as he prowled close to me on the other bed.

“How much of that really happened?”

Rhys asked as he faced me again. “Show me with your mind.”

He cleared his throat, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “It will be good for your training.”

“For her training?”

Seven joked mockingly.

The Archfox snapped his gaze to Seven. “Quiet.”

Seven’s eyes rolled, his smirk holding back his laugh. “She needs to learn blocking, not transmitting.”

As if to save my own embarrassment, a knock came at the door. The Archfox answered, still keeping his distance from me as the others surrounded me on the makeshift king size bed, Kairos sitting on the end and grasping my feet.

“Delivery for—”

The man at the door sputtered, dropping into a bow. “Your Holiness, sorry to disturb you, this is the dorm number listed on the order.”

“Thank you,”

the Archfox said as he took the two gigantic brown bags from the man. He somehow managed to maintain his calm, though I felt the unintentional vibration of his mind shield slipping. Embarrassment.

Was he embarrassed to be seen around me? The insecurity rose within me, so quickly I couldn’t suppress it before the Archfox noticed. He shut the door and gazed at me with apologetic eyes.

Before him and I could speak, my three other mates were on the case.

“Dammit, Rhys,”

Seven began. “You need to get over yourself. How many times do I have to explain she would be safer if people knew she was under your protection?”

The Archfox set the bags on the table next to the small kitchenette. “I should go. It’s not appropriate for me to be hanging out in a dormitory with students—”

“Then maybe we need another solution because you making Dove feel bad makes me want to shift and rip your fucking throat out,”

Enko growled as Kairos nodded in agreement.

I wanted to curl into a ball and die of embarrassment now. How would I ever grow my bond to the Archfox with these three constantly butting in?

“See what you’re doing? Feel her embarrassment at being Fated to such a prat?”

Enko snapped.

I shook my head, reaching for Enko’s arm as he stood up. “No. Stop,” I begged.

The Archfox’s shoulders relaxed as he met my eyes. “Well...the damage is done now, so I may as well eat. But tomorrow, I need to get back to work, and you three need to get to classes.”

“The four of us,”

I corrected.

“Dove, you need to heal.”

I frowned. “I’ve been dealing with pain for a long time, Your Holiness. I think I know my body better than you do.”

Kairos let out an exasperated sigh. “Call him Rhys, Dove. His ego is inflated enough as it is.”

Enko grabbed plates from the kitchenette and began to load up two of them. The smell wafted in my direction and my stomach growled almost as loudly as Enko did when he was mad.

“Don’t make me order you to stay in, Dove,”

Rhys said as he eyed Enko warily. “Are you going to be able to eat both those plates?”

Seven laughed. “Oh, you’re in for a surprise.”

Enko brought a plate over to me and passed over a fork and knife. The steak was perfectly seared, slathered in butter and garlic. I plucked off the green stuff before I devoured the meat. I dug into the mashed potatoes like some kind of ravenous beast.

I was so infatuated with the meal that by the time I had finished, my Fated males, with the exception of Enko who was grabbing another plate, were all staring at me in awe.

“Want more, Dove?”

Enko asked from across the room.

“More? Is she some kind of black hole? How did she eat all that already?”

Rhys joked.

I pouted. “I haven’t had a decent meal in days.”

“I got you breakfast,”

Seven grumbled.

“Eat your vegetables, Dove,”

Kairos said as he eyed the asparagus left untouched on my plate.

I stabbed a spear as I glared playfully at Kairos. My time with plain foods really had made me enjoy the food a little too much.

After eating, the sleepiness returned with a vengeance and Rhys suggested that I sleep shifted into my fox form to help speed up the healing process. “That’s an order if you plan to go to classes tomorrow.”

“Seven, get out of my bed,”

Kairos demanded, but my dark mate was already pulling the blankets up over himself as he rested next to me. “What the hell? I thought you liked to sleep in the Shadow Vale.”

Seven’s arm reached over me, yawning. “Jealous? You can sleep here tomorrow. Besides, it’s not like I need to go to any special place to go into the Shadow. I can manage just fine right here.”

“It’s my bed,”

Kairos responded irritably as the Archfox watched curiously.

“I should go,”

the Archfox said.

“You’re not staying?”

I asked in a panic.

He frowned. “I can’t stay here forever, Dove. I promise I’ll see you soon. Besides, where would I sleep?”

“You?”

Kairos’ eyes bulged. “Where am I supposed to sleep? Tell your brother to get out of my bed. I told you we needed a bigger dorm weeks ago.”

Rhys laughed. “You all seem quite content in the space, I wouldn’t take that away from you. Especially not now that Seven is finally being social.”

Seven scowled defensively. “I’m helping my Fated heal, Rhys.”

“Shifting will help her heal.”

Rhys paused. “Dove.”

I was prepared to grumble about it, but the drowsiness beat out any arguments and I slipped into fox form and then fast asleep.

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Dove

Fire and ash rained down on a shadowy silhouette. It felt familiar, but I recognized none of it. He turned, eyes gripping mine as though we were meant to stare at each other.

Something grabbed my arm, bright red fingers with long black claws, great black eyes—

I shot awoke, pain spreading through my back.

Radioactive green eyes glowed from the corner of the room, and my fear and paranoia erupted like a volcano. I was paralyzed, unable to move as the demon watched me. My heart thundered against my chest from my nightmare.

Shadow being, Tier I.

But, goddess, it felt as scary as a Tier V. I nudged my arm against Seven roughly and his eyes shot open. He frowned as though he were about to chastise me until he saw my fear. His gaze followed mine and he sprung to his feet buck naked and raced across the room with his super-speed.

The demon disappeared as it ran from Seven, its radiant eyes blinking into the darkness of the Shadow. Seven followed it in the Shadow Vale, leaving me alone with the sleeping Kairos and Enko. Complete silence except their slow steady breathing. Kairos had taken Seven's bed, and the short distance felt like miles in my fear and I scooted closer to Enko on the makeshift bed.

I watched the corner of the room, unable to move as I continued to relive the fear of the creeper watching me, unable to fully catch my breath.

Seven reappeared and I nearly jumped out of my own skin, letting out a small gasp as he raced over the bed, holding a dagger with black demon blood dripping across the floor.

“I got him, Fated,”

he said. “It was a Shadow being.”

I nodded, eyes still wide, peering around him at the place where it had stood.

Seven crawled into my bed, wrapping his arms around me. “I’d never let anything hurt you, Dove.”

His use of my name stirred something in me and I finally met his ruby eyes.

“Why?”

was the only word that I could get out. Somehow, he understood.

“Were you having a nightmare? It was attracted by your fear. They can only be killed in the Shadow Vale. They’re not like corporeal demons. They can’t hurt you, not physically, at least.”

I nodded, gulping at the lump in my throat as he soothed me. “You’re okay, Fated.”

His voice caused Enko and Kairos to stir, but Seven didn’t notice.

“They feed off your fear, the more they’ve fed, the brighter their eyes glow and the

longer they can stay out of the Shadow Vale.”

Seven smirked for a second. “You gave him a lot of power.”

“What’s going on?”

Kairos asked sleepily as he stretched from the lone bed across the dorm.

Seven ignored the question. “You won’t find many descriptions of them in your books. Shadow beings are rarely seen; they don’t like to be. I’m surprised he didn’t scuttle back to the Shadow Vale the moment you opened your eyes, Fated. He was probably just curious or hungry.”

He paused. “Or your fear was greater than normal.”

The fear must have chased my nightmare away because I couldn’t remember it now. Seven seemed so comfortable with the demon, and he held me tighter.

“You’re not afraid of them?”

I finally mumbled.

Seven laughed. “No, they’re mostly harmless. There’s a lot of them in the Shadow Vale. And fear only gives them power.”

Enko moved closer, and Kairos stood up from Seven’s bed, still sleepy and confused. “Can I have my bed back now, Seven?”

“A Shadow being?”

Enko yawned. “What kind of stupid demon would come into a room with powerful

kitsune sleeping?”

Their fearlessness gave me strength and I took a deep breath, relaxing into Seven. It was still the witching hour, just after three. Enko relaxed back into bed after making sure everything was okay.

But when Seven began to move back toward his own bed, I gripped him tighter. “Will you sleep with me?”

He raised his eyebrows dubiously and smirked. “The demon is dead. And I’m much scarier than that demon, Fated.”

I think he got a kick out of how scary he thought he was, but he wasn’t scary to me. He gave me comfort. Seven nudged against me and lifted the blankets as he snuggled in close to me, one arm squirming under my pillow under my neck, and the other a dead weight over my chest as his breathing slowed and he returned to sleep instantly.

I checked the corner once more as I nuzzled close to him. It took a long time for my racing heart to calm and sleep took me.

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Dove

“Orders from the Archfox and Elder Peter,”

came an unfamiliar voice at the door.

My eyes snapped open, finding a lanky student on the other side, one that worked in the office of the Elder. He peered around Kairos into the room and I felt the distinct lack of privacy as he viewed the unusual setup of combining beds. Seven snuggled against me beneath the blankets and I became acutely aware that I was naked beneath. Enko’s body pressed against my other side, bringing an odd sense of heat and chill from both of them.

And this pervert is just looking at us in our most private moments.

Kairos snatched the note from the messenger’s hand. “Keep your eyes off my Fated, Charles. Or I’ll set Enko on you.”

The man jumped back in fear, bowing his head. “My sincerest apologies, Kairos.”

Kairos slammed the door in his face, rolling his eyes.

“Fated, how we sleep isn’t anyone’s business other than our own. And he’s just jealous anyway,”

Seven purred as he awoke, pressing his hips forward pleasantly and causing an ache of emptiness within me as his hardness pinned against me. My eyes snapped open in

shock.

Enko awoke, nostrils flaring and nearly jumping out of the bed away from me. He wore his gym shorts to bed, but no shirt. “I’m going for a run.”

Kairos grabbed his arm before he could make it out the door. “Not today, Enko.”

His eyes flicked down to the note. “The Council of Elders requested for all of us to meet with them. Apparently, they want to check in on the Disciple. Get dressed, all of you.”

It was only then that I realized Kairos was already fully dressed in his dress clothes. He was always so well put together and sexy. It made me want to mess up his hair.

“Do it,”

Seven hissed with laughter. He threw the blankets off and showed me exactly what the rigidity crammed against me had been.

Kairos threw his hands up, “Seven! What the hell! Put some clothes on. No one wants to see that.”

Seven smirked. “Oh, I think someone does.”

My eyes snapped up to his, shaking my head away from the glorious sight that I wanted more than anything. He winked at me.

Enko growled, “We’re not supposed to be sleeping with her naked, Seven. You know that. And just because Dove wants your dick doesn’t mean I want to sleep naked with you.”

Seven shrugged. “I shifted into fox form with her. I forgot,”

he lied, winking at me again.

We had been Fated mates for long enough that I was beginning to wonder when we would actually mate for the first time. And how was it supposed to work when I had four different male mates? Would we do it all together? Would they take me separately—

“Dove,”

Kairos reprimanded. “Please don’t make us all horny when we have to go to see the Council of Elders right now.”

“Sorry,”

I mused, unable to stop my smile. “I keep forgetting you guys can hear everything now.”

We got ready, and though I was feeling more comfortable with my body around them, I demanded, “Seven, get me some clothes.”

His glare made my heart flutter. It showed how much he cared.

But then he complied, grabbing a pair of black pants, a black shirt, black socks, black bra... “These ones, Fated?”

he said, lifting a pair of lacy black panties from the drawer, dangling them for all to see.

“Seven, must you always be a pest?”

Kairos said, grabbing the black pile of clothes and passing them over to me.

I quickly dressed beneath the covers while Seven threatened with his eyes to make another comment. “Don’t worry, Fated. When we get back I can take you out of them again—”

“Seven, I swear to the goddess, if you keep this up I’ll pummel you,”

Enko growled, practically feral.

Seven shrugged innocently. “I didn’t say anything too bad that time, Enko.”

Everyone rolled their eyes except for Seven, who was exceedingly playful that morning. I figured I’d be the only one who could actually keep him in check.

As we headed out, me looking like a demon in black, and the rest in normal clothes, Seven’s Land Rover beeped in the parking lot as we approached it.

“Shotgun!”

I called, easily winning out against Kairos as we entered the vehicle.

“Both of you are feisty this morning,”

Kairos grumbled as he took the back seat with Enko. Then bumped Seven’s arm from the backseat to get his attention. “Is Rhys meeting us there?”

“I’m not my brother’s keeper, Kairos. Text him if you care so much.”

When we arrived at the destination, an old temple building on the outskirts of Lethe. It had gray stone columns instead of the usual white.

“Dove, keep quiet, ask us in our heads whatever you wish, but these are not the people to share any secrets with, as trustworthy as they think they are,”

Kairos said before we exited the vehicle.

I nodded, saluting my bossy mate. “Yes, sir.”

“Careful, Fated, he might get his own head caught up his ass with you calling him ‘sir.’”

Outside the vehicle Rhys waved, immediately opening the passenger door for me.

“Glad you guys finally arrived. The Council is waiting. Let’s go.”

Rhys held a serious expression, and I wondered how much my brain had let slip of what had transpired between us during the short morning.

Seven nudged me. “Everything if you keep thinking about it.”

“Wait,”

Kairos began, turning toward me and holding my shoulders. “Dove, whatever they ask, you only need to say what you want.”

His seriousness made me nervous, but I nodded. I hadn’t been within the temple life for over a year, but I knew what the Elders expected of me, especially if they knew my past.

Rhys held the door as we entered the temple-like building, and once inside, a Holy Fox, a monk in pure white robes, bowed and gestured for us to follow. I knew immediately the severity of the meeting only by the actions of the monk. I hastily

followed the white robe, something from my childhood taking over. My Fated mates rushed after me, not that it was hard with their super-speed.

The Holy Fox bowed as they opened the chamber doors. A spotlight shone down on the center of the room, and the Elders hid within the cover of the shadows.

The five of us entered, standing within the light, squinting at the dark figures across from us. The dimness irritated me in a way that wouldn't have when I was less experienced, and I felt my body expand in fury.

A white glow emitted, covering the room and exposing the Council Elders from their place of safety. They stood around us in an arch wearing red robes with white belts.

Not the typical white robes with red belts of the Elders. No, these were much higher ranking. These Elders had been carefully selected by the others, deeming that the goddess herself blessed these Elders with a higher authority.

“Disciple, withdraw your light,”

a female voice ordered.

I immediately turned and found the speaker, glaring at her, “I have no control of what the goddess gifted me, Elder.”

“No control?”

a male Elder said.

“Perhaps the goddess wants you to be seen,”

Seven snipped. That silenced the Elders. And I knew what it meant. Seven was the

most dangerous kitsune they'd ever seen. Nobody dared question him. If he wanted, he could take the position of the Archfox in a heartbeat.

“Why did you call us, Elders?”

Kairos asked to break the silence.

“Is the Disciple healed?”

someone asked.

Kairos growled, “Light up this room or we'll leave it. You're making my Fated uncomfortable.”

Instantly, one of the Elder's scurried across the room and the lights illuminated brighter. “Granted, Kairos, five tails.”

I could now see them clearly in their red robes and white belts. So clearly, looking so human and weak. My own light dispelled, no longer threatened by the elderly Elders.

Seven laughed at the thought as it slipped over to him. “Which of you has tails at all? Why do you think you deserve the authority to command us?”

“Seven,”

Kairos whispered.

“You know I'm right—”

“Archfox, Commander of the Nine Orders of the Goddess, eight tails, step forward,”

said one of the Elders.

Rhys stepped into the brightest of the light without question. “Why did you call us here? Stop wasting our time. You know I have more important things to deal with than the politics of the Elders.”

“I called the meeting to ensure the Disciple’s safety.”

A man at the center cleared his throat, “How is the training of the Disciple progressing?”

“It would be better if you hadn’t pulled her away from classes today, Allen,”

Rhys commented with a keen air of disappointment. “Dove is a prodigy. She’s only been enrolled at Foxfire Academy for four weeks and she has over a dozen kills, at least one Tier III. A succubus, I believe.”

The gray and white haired heads nodded in approval, looking at each other, whispering. “Will she be ready in time?”

“Ready for what?”

I demanded. I hated that this meeting was about me and they spoke about me like I wasn’t even in the room.

“Dove, one tail, you speak when spoken to,”

Elder Allen boasted, the only Elder with any color to his hair. The comfort of using our names made me realize they had spent a long time studying our student files.

Enko growled, the fury of the vibrations causing a hint of fear to shudder through the

Elders. “You will not order my Fated mate around. Weren’t you the ones who denied her application last month? If it weren’t for the blood tests, she would have slipped through our fingers.”

A feminine Elder gazed at him with bored eyes, but I could sense her fear through her words. “Enko, six tails, the goddess has a hand in all things. She ensured the Disciple was accepted. And that she found her Fated mates.”

Rhys’ eyes rolled, a whisper of his annoyance coming through our mind link. “Is that all? Because I’d prefer if my Fated mate attended classes today. She still has much to learn.”

Elder Allen shook his head. “Almost. How has mating gone? Has the Disciple gone into heat?”

They were hoping that being a Disciple was genetic and that I would produce an heir. In case I was killed in the war against demons.

As expected, Enko let loose a roar, but Seven was already across the room, hand gripping the man’s throat. “Your daring may have gotten you into the Council, but you will not disrespect my Fated. As you’ve already been warned.”

The man choked, heaving for breath and trying to speak. The other Elders appeared panicked, but looked unsure how to handle the problem. “Seven, seven tails, please release him.”

“I don’t follow your orders.”

He snapped his glare back to Elder Allen. “Plead for her forgiveness.”

When Seven released the man, his wide eyes were filled with annoyance. “Apologies,

Disciple.”

Seven snickered, smirking, “No, on your fucking knees, Allen. Beg for her forgiveness.”

“It’s okay, Seven—”

“No, it’s not, Dove,”

Rhys snapped. “If they had their way, they’d use you. Force you to mate until you have a child and then force you to fight until your death. The goddess gave you protectors, and that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

Elder Allen dropped to his knees, hobbling forward and bowing until his forehead touched the tiles. “I beg your forgiveness, Disciple Dove, one tail.”

Seven cackled, getting a kick from the power.

Another Elder stepped forward, “Do you forget who is in charge here? The Council of Elders is in place to ensure our victory in this war.”

“None of you has even fought a battle, yet you act as though you can order us around. I am the Commander in this army, chosen by this very Council as the Archfox to lead our kind. Not you,”

Rhys snapped. “Now, you have been updated on Dove’s progress. You will not waste any more of our time. Your duty is to monitor the Hellgate for any abnormalities. If you call us again for no reason, I’ll be forced to call a vote for a new Council. Perhaps sitting pretty in your mansions has made you forget your purpose here.”

And with that, Rhys stomped out of the room and we all followed him, but my eyes

lingered on the pissed off group of Elders watching us leave. Elder Allen's lip worse, showing his teeth in a threat.

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Dove

When we got back to the school, Kairos, Enko, and Seven escorted me toward the gym. In my recovery time, we had moved indoors. The chill of the encroaching winter hung outside like smoke.

We passed by the leaderboard, where my Fated males still safely guarded the top. A large board near the entrance of Foxfire Academy listed the students in the order of who had the most demon kills.

“Wow, how’d you do it, Dove?”

someone called, waving. I didn’t recognize them, but respect drenched the faces of my surrounding students. Someone even bowed to me. To me! A few more people complimented me before I understood their meaning, inspecting the leaderboard.

Seven: 1035

Enko: 713

Kairos: 66

During the battle, many of the first years had upped their kill counts, but mine was over double the next best first-year.

Dove: 17

“Her mates must have weakened the demons for her, obviously,”

a scoffing giggle came from the crowd. Mel appeared, wearing a sports bra and a pair of sweats. She liked to show off her perfect, unscarred skin.

We moved past her into the gymnasium, where Mr. Varma’s whistle echoed off the vaulted ceilings and padded walls. Brynn gave a small wave as she approached and nervously tucked herself at my side, side-eyeing my men.

“You’re healed already?”

Her shy smile took over her face. “I’m glad, watching Sana polish weapons has become tedious. Is that all Holy Foxes do?”

“Pretty much. But it’s a big promotion from scrubbing the white floors,”

I told her, which was how I had spent the majority of my life, still a novice when my temple was attacked and burned by demons.

“Listen up! After the recent attacks, the Archfox has suggested I teach you more about battle formations. When in a battle, you are expected to be under the command of those higher ranking than you. When you graduate, you will earn your own rank and be assigned to a unit!”

He spat out orders to adjust us around, the third-years bossed everyone else around into positions, but nobody told me what to do. Even the oldest and most experienced students kept a safe distance from me, only shouting at Brynn to align with their needs. Kairos, Enko, and Seven quickly remedied that, beginning to give me orders like they were my personal drill sergeants instead of my Fated mates.

The pain in my back had reduced significantly, but I still couldn’t jog around like the

other students. And for the next two hours, that's all we did. Rows, columns, lines, sets. Learning the names of battle formations used in our army and positioning ourselves accordingly.

After a shower, Brynn walked with me, and because they clearly sensed her discomfort and my need for friendship, my three Fated mates brought up the rear as we headed toward the dining hall.

My ravenous need for food consumed me and I was thankful as my Fated males used their rank to cut in front of one of the lines and get us food. I carried the plate of spaghetti and meatballs to the closest table and sat. Brynn sat across from me, while Enko and Kairos sat on one side, and Seven on the other.

I spun the noodles into my fork, stabbing a meatball on the end to hold the noodles in place, dragging it through the marinara sauce—

“Dove Hawthorn to the Archfox's office,”

came the announcement over the intercom.

I looked at my full plate sadly, stuffing a bite into my mouth. To keep up appearances, we had to treat the Archfox with full respect in front of the other students.

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “He's healing my back, that's all. I'll see you later.”

Seven, Kairos, and Enko stood, but I shook my head, allowing them to eat and leaving Brynn to fend for herself among them as I left the dining hall.

When I neared the office, my heart sped up until it was hammering. I was excited to see him again.

The secretary glanced up with disapproval. “What trouble have you gotten into now?”

She lifted the phone and blocked the door, whispering into the receiver. She didn’t know the Archfox was my Fated, and she still considered me an enemy after my impudence the prior month. A moment later, she returned to her seat. “He’ll see you now. But you should know that second offenses almost always end in expulsion.”

I opened the door, seeing the Archfox eclipsing the golden rays of the sun behind him. I closed the door behind me. He stood, his face remaining still as his eyes roamed over me.

“What do you need?”

I asked as I nervously approached him.

Rhys cleared his throat, “I just wanted to check your back, make sure the healing is going okay. Since you decided to go against my advice and attend physical training today.”

I shrugged, stepping forward. He approached me, stopping a foot in front of me and stared down at me. My mind and heart were racing, wondering what he would do.

His hands reached forward to my shoulder, gently nudging me to turn around. His hands touched the hems of my shirt as he raised it, lifting it and holding it up. He pulled at the taped bandage, and I flinched.

“Sorry,”

he muttered as he continued pulling ruthlessly.

A rush of cool healing magic tingled against my skin, finding its way into the deep pain and numbing it slightly.

“Are you sure that you’re ready to go back to class, Dove? It’s no trouble if you need me to excuse you for a few more days. I can feel that you’re still in pain.”

I scowled. “Yes. For the millionth time, I’m going.”

Despite the long hours spent together for healing, silence permeated every minute together. Was he not comfortable around me?

Rhys’ thumb trailed over my back, his fingers stretched across my back, even places where there was no injury. “That’s it. I shouldn’t have to remove any more char. But if you have any residual pain, let me know.”

“I will,”

I agreed, remaining there awkwardly clutching my books to my chest. He reached forward, his hand wrapping around the back of my head and pulling me closer to kiss my forehead.

Despite having completed our purpose, we remained in each other’s presence. I wondered if he missed me as much as I missed him. If he knew how spending the nights away from him affected me.

The serious kitsune frowned. “Keep working on shielding your mind, Dove.”

I frowned. “It’s harder with my Fated. I have a direct link to you. It won’t be the same with the Lord of Nightmares.”

Rhys’ lips creased lower. “I ordered some lunch for us. If you’ll join me.”

I nodded as he pushed a button on his desk and the secretary entered, holding two boxes from a local diner and setting them on his desk. I sat across from him when she left, stomach grumbling as I opened it and began to eat.

We ate in silence until a bell rang, signaling that academic classes were about to begin.

“I’ll see you tonight at the Lantern ceremony,”

Rhys said, standing up and guiding me to the door. His arm blocked my exit and he wrapped his arms around me in a hug.

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Dove

Twilight dimmed, Seven and Kairos walked on either side of me. The stadium lights dazzled over the frosted grass as we took our seats in the front. Enko's Skirmish practice ran late and he waved to us as he jogged up the steps, still wearing his uniform. He leaned over a disgruntled Seven and kissed my cheek before sitting on Seven's other side.

It was my first Lantern ceremony and, due to the recent battle, the largest to ever be held at Foxfire Academy.

The Archfox strode to the center of the stadium, where a white podium and microphone waited in the spotlight. His eyes went directly to us and then scanned over the rest of the crowd as the students quieted. Elder Peter trotted behind him, unable to quite keep up with my Fated's long strides.

The row of white robes stood behind Rhys and Elder Peter, and I found Sana in the middle, her expression somber and reserved, as was expected of all Holy Foxes during such a ceremony.

"The souls of our friends, our family members, our fellow students, and our kitsune brothers and sisters wait here tonight for us to honor them for their great sacrifice in the recent battle,"

Rhys began. "We all knew when we took this career path that it would not be easy. That we kitsune are the greatest force standing between the demons and the innocents of this world. We are that wall. And while we sometimes lose our brethren, we

continue to stand strong.

“The unexpected attacks from our enemy tells us what is coming. That this war will not get easier. We must become stronger. Our protections around the Hellgate in Lethe have been reinforced ninefold.

“We value the protection of our students, but none of you chose this path to be safe. You chose to be warriors. Soldiers in the coming war. And tonight we will honor all those we’ve lost, and tomorrow, we will get up and train again.”

The students muttered among themselves, some shooting glares back at me. I froze and tucked myself closer to Kairos.

“What about the Disciple?”

Enko growled at the gossipers, and Kairos wrapped his arm tighter around me as if he could protect me from rumors.

Rhys raised his hands, prompting the whispers to quiet. “Yes, we have a Disciple, but Dove Hawthorn cannot fight this battle alone. She is a young kitsune, only gaining her first tail within the last few weeks.”

More whispers, these ones about what my duty was, about what the goddess intended for me.

“The goddess sending us powerful kitsune shows that she means for us to win this war,”

Rhys continued, but it did not silence the whispers growing louder. “Quiet! The Council of Elders selected me to be the Commander of this army, not a bunch of smart-mouthed students!”

That silenced everyone but Seven, who chuckled and muttered under his breath. “Some control, brother.”

“Now we are here to honor our fallen brethren, not make war plans as a collective. Your job as students is to follow orders, not give them. Please retrieve your lanterns and make your way to the lake.”

Kairos passed out a stack of paper lanterns to us as we began to make our way back out of the stadium to the field in front of the lake.

The night was calm and the lake was still. Much too early for demons to be wandering around—not that many would risk it with so many kitsune out and about, even if we were only students.

The Archfox kept his distance from us, not even glancing back at me as he led the group of students to the lake. The distance between us caused a sharp pain to my heart.

Is he ashamed of me? I meant to keep the thought to myself, but each of my Fated males heard. Rhys’ back stiffened, but he still didn’t turn.

“It’s not like that, Fated,”

Seven whispered. “We’re keeping you safe.”

I’d love to be at your side, Dove. But we don’t need to give the demons any more leverage against us. It’s bad enough that everyone knows you’re a Disciple since your transformation during the battle, Rhys’ voice whispered in my head.

The students and newly appointed guards of the academy gathered around the edge of the lake. On a normal night, we might even see a Kelpie, Tier III. The allure and

beauty of those terrifying horse creatures had lured plenty of humans to their death. But not tonight.

“We shall light our lanterns, and set free the souls of those we have lost,”

Elder Peter said, while the Archfox stood next to him, his fist clenched tightly around his lantern.

The Holy Foxes held sacred candles lit by the Forgefire, dispersing among us. Sana came in front of me, bowing as she outstretched both hands, allowing us to light our lanterns.

The white glow of the flame was hotter than normal fire. The Forgefire was said to have been lit by the goddess over a thousand years ago, and it was the duty of the Elders to keep that sacred flame burning through all eternity. Without it, we could never forge our magical weapons.

“You don’t need to bow to us, Sana,”

Enko snickered, not quite aware of how much the gigantic man scared her.

“She does,”

I whispered as I lit my lantern. “Not showing respect to higher ranking kitsune will result in punishment.”

At best, a weekend polishing the floors. At worst, many hours kneeling before the goddess and praying for her forgiveness.

After all our lanterns were lit, Sana moved on to the next group of students beside us.

I stepped forward, closer to the lake, feeling the paper lantern rise from my hands as it gathered heat from the flame and a soul entered into it. I let it rise, watching as it went, taking a soul from the nearby battlefield with it. Though I had not personally lost anyone, many of the other surrounding students had. Any weakening of our army weakened all of us.

Our lanterns rose into the sky and the flickering flames reflected over the lake. More and more released, until the lanterns sparkled and smoldered like stars. The lanterns carried over the large lake until all were released and all disappeared.

The entire crowd remained in near complete silence, except for those in mourning. Their cries hurt my heart as I prayed to the goddess to never have to go through that pain myself.

After the long silence, the Archfox cleared his throat. He needed no microphone now as he spoke in a calm and steady voice. “May the goddess hold them close, comfort them, and when ready, return them to us.”

After a moment of silence, the Archfox continued, “With the war looming ever closer, the Council of Elders has ordered me to promote some students before graduation. The position of Major, fourth-in-command, Enko Pierce.”

The students applauded—me louder than anyone—as my giant mate stepped forward, bowing before the Archfox as Elder Peter handed him a silver pin.

Enko stood next to the Archfox, facing the student body. “I accept.”

“For our Lieutenant, Kairos Stryker, third-in-command,”

Rhys called out.

Kairos stepped forward, bowing and accepting his pin before standing beside Enko.
“I accept.”

“And with the unfortunate loss of General Brock, I must now announce my second-in-command. Though he may be young in years, the Council of Elders has determined him to be the strongest kitsune to take the position.”

The students chattered excitedly, but one stark look from the Archfox and they silenced again before the Archfox spoke a name.

“Cassian Seven, General.”

Seven

“You could have fucking warned me, brother,”

I snapped, shaking my head as my fingers grasped around the heavy metal pin given to me to denote my new rank. I shoved it into my back pocket carelessly while the other two wore theirs proudly on their chests. “And did you have to tell everyone my first name?”

Rhys shrugged. “To make it official, no. But to officially piss you off, yes.”

Insufferable asshole.

The students had long past filtered back to the academy, but Dove lingered, causing the rest of us to follow suit. Rhys slung his arm around Dove’s shoulders now that it was only us five staring out at the lake and I couldn’t help but want to take possession. If only it weren’t for her damn doe eyes staring up at him in appreciation for him doing the bare minimum.

“We should get back to the dorm,”

Kairos suggested, probably feeling a haze of his own jealousy.

Dove frowned. “Can’t we stay a bit longer? It’s beautiful out tonight.”

Even though she was shivering, she didn’t want to be apart from Rhys yet. I couldn’t do much for her in that regard, but Enko sidled up next to her and passed along some

of his warmth instantly. Kairos tugged off his jacket and slung it over her shoulders. I was only wearing my t-shirt. The cold never bothered me. It was always freezing in the Shadow.

But, goddess, I wanted to do something for her.

Rhys' brow furrowed and he nodded, still adjusting to being around the rest of us and Dove. "It would be beneficial for all of us to go hunting together. Getting to know each other's patterns."

"Tonight?"

Dove said with excitement. I didn't think anyone could match my own thrill at killing demons, but the goddess had found my perfect Fated mate.

"You don't have a new weapon yet, Dove,"

Kairos muttered.

She whipped out her dagger that Kairos had made for her as a gift, unsheathing it and giving a few half-hearted stabs to the air. "Then what's this? And I have my throwing knives."

"If she's with all of us, what could possibly happen? Do you really want to be the one to curtail her excitement?"

Enko warned him.

"I can handle myself,"

she argued with a grumble, sheathing the dagger and crossing her arms to scowl at us

all.

One silent look and I knew none of us planned to let her run off by herself ever again. But we weren't about to risk her wrath by telling her that.

We were all still competing for her attention. But what was I supposed to do? None of her other Fated had an ugly six inch scar across their faces. They had their flaws, but none so prominent as mine. And they were all being attentive, begging like dogs for her recognition. Well, maybe not Rhys. But Dove was clearly making the effort to enhance their relationship tonight.

What the fuck was I supposed to do to impress her?

“Are we going? It'll be really fun to hunt with all of you,”

she asked.

I couldn't get enough of her. Fuck, she even had me sleeping in that sardine-packed dorm instead of in the Shadow Vale now. Like a love-struck idiot, I panicked at her words.

I rushed forward, swiping her away from Enko and Rhys and into my arms. Enko growled, but only for a moment, because Dove giggled and wrapped her arms around me. Her lips reached up to mine. And like a greedy fool I bent down and took them. Tasting her and nipping at her. Exploring her with my tongue, lips, and hands. I brushed them gently down her back, gripping her ass and she moaned into me.

I pulled back, only taking a moment to glare possessively at the others as I lifted her swiftly to wrap her legs around my waist.

Her other Fated were unsure what to do. But this is what I did. I took what I wanted.

And I wanted her. Always. My cock stiffened against my zipper and I smirked when I knew she felt it. That faint strawberry hue taking over her face. I could make her pink all over.

And Dove's energy buzzed with excitement, maybe a touch of confusion as she whipped her head around to check on Rhys. I could feel her wondering if this would be too much for him. If it would make him run away. Let him run. I gripped her ass a little tighter, shifting her weight around my cock.

“Seven!”

she chastised, but she grinned and bit the edge of her lip.

Goddess, her screaming my name, now that I could get used to. I could never get enough. Kairos and Enko wanted a piece too, but they didn't know how to take it. Rhys eyed me curiously. It was a side he'd never seen of me. But Dove was ours to share and he needed to adapt. Because I wasn't about to hold back pleasing my Fated because of his judgment.

“We have other fun things we can do, Fated,”

I whispered into her ear, letting my teeth graze down her neck like I wanted to devour her. The others could hear every word, every whimper.

She gasped with pleasure and I knew I had her full attention now.

Enko's eyes changed color as his feral instincts took over, hearing her little moans and smelling that delicious strawberry. And we all wanted a bite. Enko moved in a flash, his chest to her back as he kissed the other side of her neck.

His voice rumbled with an animalistic vibration, “This will be much more fun, little

fox.”

Kairos’ eyes were glazed over with passion. And, for once, Rhys looked slightly panicked. He didn’t know how to please our Fated yet. But we could teach him.

“Tell us what you want, Fated,”

I demanded of her.

She pulled back slightly to meet my eyes, twisting her head around to catch a glimpse of her newest Fated. I thought I might have to find a way to make her tell me.

Kairos helped, taking on a stern voice, “Now, Dove.”

Her images flashed through our heads upon his command.

Kairos held down her arms, taking her mouth, kissing her lips until they were swollen. And me, head between her legs making her cry out in sweet, sweet, sweet fucking ecstasy.

“Now?”

Rhys asked, eyes darting around like he was afraid someone might see him taking care of our Fated. “Here?”

“By all means, brother, stand guard. But it will be your regret for not pleasing her, because I’m giving my Fated exactly what she wants,”

I snarled.

Fuck, was I as feral for her as Enko now?

But Dove's eyes glazed over at the words, leaning forward and stretching upwards to take my lips. I was already kneeling, ready to rip her black jeans to shreds. Enko helped me lower her, easing her back onto the dewy lakeside grass, keeping her head in his lap with her hair spilling over his legs like a waterfall.

“Rhys, take her mouth,”

Kairos demanded, standing over us like an authoritarian voyeur.

We all froze. I risked a glance at Rhys, wondering if he would continue this useless power struggle or just fucking give in already. There was no way Kairos would ever give an inch of his place in the hierarchy. Not to Rhys, at least.

Another image from Dove. Rhys' lips crashed into hers, his hand slipping beneath her shirt.

Finally he obeyed, kneeling at her side, cupping the back of her neck and bringing his lips to hers. Dove sighed in explicit pleasure.

Our first kiss, came the pleasant tune of Dove's song.

I unbuttoned her jeans, dragging them down her legs like I wanted to drag my tongue across her—

“Slowly, Seven,”

Kairos ordered as Rhys moved his hand up Dove's shirt exactly like she wanted.

Fuuuccckkk.

I brought my lips to her stomach, my thumbs gripping around her black underwear,

mostly to control myself as I trailed kisses down one side, tugging at the fabric so I could kiss in all the sensitive spots underneath. She quivered beneath my mouth, little sounds escaping her lips.

Just a taste, my own feral side pleaded. My thumb slipped down, maybe it could be perceived as an accident—

Dove squeaked in shocked pleasure as I rolled over her sensitive hot wet center. Rhys pulled back. Enko growled, and Kairos was now kneeling, stroking her hair.

“Good girl,”

he whispered to my beautiful responsive Fated. A woman who—for whatever stupid reason—didn’t fear me. Then Kairos struck a glare at me. “Did she tell you to stop? Keep going, Seven.”

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Dove

A beautiful sensation came from each of their touches, a breath of fire, a drop of rain, a soft flower petal, and the grip of Shadow.

Seven's lips drove an ache of neediness which he wanted to fulfill...but Kairos wanted to extend my pleasure, make me enjoy every single magnificent touch. Each time Seven came closer to my core, Kairos ordered him away.

Rhys' mouth grazed along my neck, sucking little whimpers of pleasure from me like a magician. Enko's body blazed like a hot fire beneath me, pulsing with want, his hands exploring against my skin. Kairos' hands stroking my hair as though to comfort me for the blissful torture he manufactured just for me.

My entire body coursed and throbbed and shook. "Please..."

Kairos chuckled darkly. "Good, that means we're halfway there."

As if to say, Ha, like I'd make it that easy.

My eyes snapped open in needy frustration and I growled at his laughing stormy eyes. "Halfway?"

Halfway to what?

"Maybe not even halfway,"

Rhys agreed.

“Since when do you two get along?”

I groaned. But the words came out like a wanton moan.

Seven’s lips brushed against that sensitive bundle and my entire body riveted in pleasure. How much more could I take? It was like I was dangling off the edge and being dragged back again. Rhys’ thumb brushed over my nipple, palming my breast and squeezing gently. Kairos’ fingers massaging through my hair. Enko’s hands warmed me as they brushed across my skin.

Seven’s finger moved closer, swirling around and nudging inside of me, so slowly...and then back out again. Seven’s hot tongue brushed over my clit, moaning against me. His lips wrapped around it and he sucked so lightly, drawing sounds from me as his finger pressed in again, deeper this time, making me clench around him. His tongue lashed against me.

“Your tight little pussy is having fun, Fated.”

“Seven,”

I pleaded, this time by name. Because I knew my dark mate wouldn’t deny me.

And he didn’t, his mouth came to my rescue, his tongue somehow bringing me higher, and at the same time heightening that aching need to be filled. Sucking and kissing and licking me into sweet oblivion, his finger probing into me and exploring for every spot that made me quiver.

“Hey!”

Kairos objected.

I let out an airy gasp, a breathy laugh, and a very, very manipulative thought to distract him.

Kairos' hand reached down to his pants, a quick struggle and his cock sprang out, ready to see me. My mouth opened, wetting my lips, looking up at him from Enko's lap as he began to stroke himself. And then gently pressing it between my lips, letting me taste his soft skin—

“Dove,”

Rhys began, clearing his throat and pulling away, his hand slipping out from under my shirt. “You have...uh...quite the imagination.”

The thought had taken only a second, but Kairos' hands were frantically undoing his pants.

One of Enko's hands gripped my hair, the other clamped around my breast. But his entire body was eerily still, his breath ragged and his eyes fiery.

“Finish it, Seven,”

Kairos demanded when he regained control, shaking his head and pulling himself away from me, redoing his zipper. “Before one of us loses control or she takes over it.”

Seven's tongue swirled and his mouth sucked and he relieved that painful ache into a vibrating pleasure that sang throughout my entire body. My body hummed, my eyes closed and I gripped hold of two hands—which two, I wasn't sure—holding them tightly against my skin.

When I opened my eyes, all of theirs were on me, breath ragged, even though I had been the one put through the...situation. Bulges that I wanted to see were blocked with their hands, except for Enko's, which I could feel nearly jumping with each pulse of his heart at the back of my head.

It was Enko and Rhys' hands that I gripped tightly, my knuckles paling from the tight hold. I slowly released them, but still kept my hands on theirs as a frosty breeze offered a cool relief to my heated cheeks and exposed skin.

"Is she always like that?"

Rhys asked when our breathing finally settled, except for Enko's, which was still heavy above me.

"No, I think we've turned our Fated into a sex demon,"

Seven said, his tongue still skimming across his lips. "A strawberry flavored—"

"Seven,"

Enko growled. "Enough."

"The new ability to show us images of her fantasies makes this more difficult..."

Kairos chuckled. "Well, at least she knows what she wants."

I glared at Kairos, "But you didn't give me everything I wanted."

Everyone went silent, stares bouncing between me and Kairos. He finally responded, "That's not how this works, Dove."

“How what works?”

I demanded. “You give me pleasure, why can’t I give it to you?”

“I need a second,”

Enko said slowly, lifting me from his lap. He gently released me to the ground, and as soon as his hands were off, he jumped up, hands threading through his hair, turning his back to me as he began to pace. He looked ready to shift into a fox and run.

Rhys shook his head, a hint of anger in his voice as he pulled his hand from mine, standing to scold the others. “You three are treading a dangerous path. What happens if you go feral? What happens if Enko goes feral?”

“You haven’t had to sleep in the same room with her for weeks, brother,”

Seven snapped. “I doubt you ever would have made it this far, after seeing how you acted tonight. Every night, her scent right beside you. Every morning, her soft sighs, her tits bouncing, pressing up against us in a hug—”

“I’d never lose control, brother,”

Rhys snapped.

“We have maintained control, Rhys,”

Kairos assured him. “Nothing has ever gone too far.”

“Barely,”

the Archfox responded. “How long have you been doing this together? Skirting the

edge?”

“Only a few times,”

Kairos answered.

I sat up slowly, watching as the four men argued. I pulled my shirt down and hastily scooted my shaky legs back into my pants. My arms curled around myself and I wished I could disappear. “What’s going on? Did I do something wrong?”

“See what you’ve done?”

Seven snapped at Rhys. “You’ve made our Fated feel as though she’s not perfect. And she is.”

“We shouldn’t be having this argument in front of her,”

Kairos said.

Rhys let out a long sigh, returning to my side and pulling me against his chest. “You’ve done nothing wrong, Dove. You are amazing in every way. But...”

“But?”

I demanded, withdrawing back far enough to look up at him into his shimmering green eyes.

“Dove, if you go feral, we have the power to fight you...not that we would...but if one of us goes feral, you can’t stop us,”

Rhys answered finally. “These three shouldn’t be pressuring you to the edge, and at

the same time, themselves. It may be fun, but it's dangerous."

"We want to make sure you're ready, Dove, that's all,"

Kairos continued.

"I am ready—" I began.

"You have no idea, Fated, how much we want you. But none of us wants to push you too far. Push you away, or scare you. You only have one tail. You don't heal as quickly as us. You don't have our strength, our speed,"

Seven said.

Enko turned back, finally meeting my eyes once more. He wasn't quite as fiery anymore. "Any of us could hurt you. And I mean really hurt you. Especially me. I've lost control of my anger before. You've seen it."

"Angry at me?"

Why did it feel like I was going to cry?

"Never,"

Enko growled. "I could never be angry at you. But passion is even harder of an emotion to control."

"I know none of you would ever hurt me—"

Rhys exhaled. "Of course we'd never want to hurt you intentionally. And I still have no idea what we're going to do when you go into heat. Then we'll all lose control and

there's nothing that can be done to stop us.”

My eyes went wide and my cheeks heated once more. I hadn't thought about going into heat for a long time. Only female kitsune with tails could go into heat. Which, I guess now I was one.

“We have to just make sure she's strong enough by then,”

Kairos suggested. “Get her more tails—”

Rhys interrupted, “We should have just gone hunting, like I suggested. Maybe now it will help burn off some of this excess energy tonight.”

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Dove

A puff of steam escaped with each breath, my steps silent, my night vision heightened as we strolled well outside of academy grounds. The guys were shaped in a diamond around me, Seven leading the way, Kairos and Enko on each side of me, and Rhys rounding up the rear.

Hunting demons with my men brought a jittery glee to me. I clenched my fists and withheld my outburst—barely—

Having fun, are you? Seven goaded.

Yes, I responded, meaning to add a hiss of anger, but excitement coated the word like sugar.

I can't wait to hear you squeal in terror when you see the next demon, Seven continued.

"I can manage just fine, thank you very much,"

I whispered, stepping onto a stick as I spoke and listening to the crack! echo against the forest.

Seven appeared in front of me, using his unnaturally fast speed to get the upper hand. His eyes narrowed, a powerful disappointment layered his smugness. "Quiet, Fated. We're in demon territory."

“Everywhere is demon territory around here,”

I hissed with a roll of my eyes, hands on my hips as I imagined Seven’s lips crashing down into mine, taking me into the safety of his Shadow, his cock pressing up into me—

The Archfox cleared his throat. There was still a distance between the two of us, a gap I desperately yearned to close. Especially after what had happened earlier, even after our first kiss.

“Get used to it, Rhys,”

Kairos said as he approached, his footfalls still silent as the night. “When they argue with each other, they’re actually both just covering up their hormones. Couple of horny kits that are always wanting to go at each other like rabbits.”

“Hey!”

Seven and I said at the same time before glaring at each other.

“You need to keep strengthening your mind shield, little fox,”

Enko grumbled as he approached. “The Lord of Nightmares may try to attack you at any moment, even while you sleep.”

“I have been working on it—” I began.

“Yeah,”

Seven snapped sarcastically, shooting me that taunting smirk. “Maybe she wanted me to see that, Enko.”

“It’s easy to reflect his attacks while you’re awake. Keeping him out of your dreams will be much more complicated, Dove,”

Kairos said.

“Goddess, I feel like I’m babysitting four kits.”

Rhys groaned.

“Fated mates always work best in their group,”

Seven said mockingly, puffing his chest out to exude authority.

The Archfox snickered, “Someone’s in a mood tonight. Must be all those hormones Kairos mentioned. Didn’t burn off enough earlier when you tasted her?”

“That just makes him more horny,”

Kairos observed.

“Okay, okay, enough,”

I demanded. “We’re supposed to be hunting demons, and I doubt even a Tier I is dumb enough to walk into this ruckus.”

The guys shrugged and sauntered back to their positions as we continued to roam through the forest quietly. It was at least ten minutes before we caught sight of something.

Ten o’clock, thirty meters ahead of me, Enko called out to me, and I relayed the message to the others.

Seven dashed into action, and I began to sprint, not caring about the snapping and crackling at my feet, eager to add to my kill count.

But one of my Fated mates was much more eager. “That’s one-thousand forty, suckers!”

I skidded to a stop within a few feet of him barely in time to identify the demon burning into ash at his feet as he swiped the splatter of blood from his face with his arm and his quicksilver short sword drew in the black demon blood that remained.

“Troll, Tier II,”

I murmured with disappointment. The lumpy grayish-green skin flared up into Hellfire, consuming the very strong yet very stupid demon.

“Give her a chance for some practice, Seven,”

Enko snarled, sidling up next to me and pulling me into the fiery heat of his embrace to ward away the chilly night.

“Yeah, that’s the fifth time tonight,”

Kairos snapped. “I’ll lead from here on out, you take my spot, Seven.”

Kairos leaned over and pressed his lips to the top of my head. “Don’t worry, Dove, I’ll let you have the next one if it’s doable.”

“Not my fault you’re a bunch of slow wussies,”

Seven grumbled as he moved to my right and Kairos began to take the lead. Seven leaned over, snickering as he took another jab at Kairos, “He probably won’t even let

you take on a Tier I by yourself, Fated. You know how he is.”

My lips parted with a retort, but he shushed me and stalked away silently, disappearing when he was five feet from me. I would have to deal with him later.

We continued through the trees for another quarter of an hour, but much to my disappointment, the skies began to lighten with the dawn.

“Damn it, Seven,”

I groaned, sitting on the undergrowth with a crunch, giving a very dramatic show as I laid back in despair.

The Archfox chuckled from nearby.

“It’s not like I’m going to get anything when all four of you are surrounding me like a pack of dogs,”

I snapped.

“Did she just refer to us as dogs?”

Rhys asked disappointedly.

“Sharks, then,”

I corrected.

“Uh, Dove?”

Kairos whispered, nodding his head toward a tiny blue ball of fire hovering in the

distance over a small stream.

We all went silent at the sight. Finally, this was my chance. Fire wasp, Tier I.

I leapt into glorious action, but I wasn't about to try to pin a fly to a tree with my throwing knives or dagger. No, I needed to do this the old-fashioned way. I shifted into my glowing white fox form, leaving my black pile of clothes behind on the dried leaves. If it weren't for my glow, I may have just looked like a perfectly normal white fox with my solitary tail.

I bounded on all fours, moving too quickly for the slow bumbling creature to get away. I leapt into the air, opening my mouth and aiming for the little creature.

Up close I could see all its little features, its dark blue hint of fire at the base, the edges turning to an orange-yellow of a true fire. Its iridescent wings and its body like that of a fuzzy bee. Its head had an eerily human face.

I clamped my teeth around its body, enjoying the satisfying crunch of a little extra power and protein.

And the power expanded within me. What? Now?

I kept crunching on the Fire wasp as I began to spin in curiosity, trying to catch sight of my tail. The glow of my body brightened, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud on a dreary gray day. And when I saw it, I bounded with joy toward my men.

My second tail.

I swished it around happily, brushing up against their legs as I did circles around them.

Seven began laughing robustly, no surprise after how he had acted the first time I had gained a tail, but what could he possibly be laughing about this time? Could he never just be happy for me?

“Oh my goddess, she fucking evolved on a Fire wasp,”

Seven laughed, unable to control himself as he put his hands down on his knees and began heaving for breath in between his laughing spurts. “She is the dorkiest kitsune I’ve ever seen.”

When Seven reached down to ruffle my second tail, I snapped at his hand much less playfully. Then I whined. Stop laughing.

To which Seven laughed even harder.

“Okay, Seven, give it a rest,”

Kairos said after a moment, smiling down at me. “For the record, Dove, it is kind of funny that you got your second tail from the easiest Tier I out there, and you ate it.”

Enko shrugged, less inclined to be as jovial as the other two. “Feral instinct. It’s not like slashing that little dagger would have done any good. What was she supposed to do?”

“Perhaps a fly swatter,”

the Archfox said seriously. Then his smile quirked upwards and the others burst into laughter at the joke.

I remained in fox form as they walked back toward Foxfire Academy and I trotted along beside them. I proudly swished my two tails and kept looking back to make

sure I wasn't imagining it. I wondered briefly if I could shift back into a human immediately this time, but my pride got the better of me. I wanted to show off.

But isn't it a little fast for my second tail?

"Maybe you gain tails more quickly since you're a Disciple?"

Rhys suggested. "I'll look into it tonight. There must be more information about it somewhere."

Rhys stopped off at his office and followed us back to the dorm with a few books in hand. While he and Kairos began to skim through them, Enko lifted a couple of gigantic dumbbells, mentioning something about missing his workout. And Seven let me cuddle on his lap as we drifted off into a quick nap before classes the next day.

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Dove

The sulfuric air singed my nostrils, the cold breeze against the heat from the demon flame. All around, the temple burned. I was there again, seeing my brothers and sisters strewn around, the sacred buildings burning. The dark night sky reflected dark orange from the fire. The eerie silence on the night, the lack of screams more terrifying than when they sounded.

“Why do you always come back to this place?”

a shadowy figure asked from next to me.

Seven?

The figure laughed, hiding in the shadows. “No, not Seven. You thought the same the last time you saw me. That night you were...playing with Enko and Kairos in the forest. Are we really so similar?”

I didn’t answer the familiar stranger’s question. I looked back out over the ashes of the temple, looking up at the boards above me, waiting for them to crush me as they always did. The wood cracked.

The figure dove forward as the building collapsed, grabbing hold of me and dodging the falling debris. When I looked up, I saw who it was.

The Lord of Nightmares.

I held my breath as my heart thumped against my throat in fear. “What are you doing here?”

“Do you fear this place?”

he asked, gesturing over the burning temple. The worst night of my life. “You don’t seem to.”

“No,”

I said, pushing myself from his hold and striding through the wreckage and searching for survivors.

“Dove,”

the Lord of Nightmares called as he jogged after me. “You can’t save anyone here. It’s not real.”

The realization almost jolted me from the dream, but the Lord of Nightmares grasped my arms, holding me in front of him. “Look at me. Stay for a moment. I need to know you’re okay.”

“You’re in my dream. You’re invading my mind.”

I panicked, jerking from his grasp and spinning around, the dreamscape around me fading and distorting with each second.

“Don’t tell your Fated about this. I need to explain before you go. Focus on me, stay here—”

he reached forward, grabbing me again, and some of the buildings around me fell

back into place, returning from the darkness.

I wrenched loose—

“Little fox! Wake up! Dove!”

a voice called me awake.

I snapped my eyes open, my body covered in cold sweat. I grasped my thundering heart as Enko’s cool brown eyes met mine. Seven, Kairos, and Rhys stared at me.

“He was there, in my dream. Talking to me.”

I struggled to breathe. “The Lord of Nightmares.”

“Did you attempt to block him out?”

Rhys asked.

“What?”

I said, realizing that my one session of training had been completely forgotten during the encounter. “No. It was like he had control of it. When he touched me, things would get clearer, sharper. Like they were real. I think he’s been there before because he asked why I always go there.”

“What dream?”

Rhys asked. “What did he try to do to you?”

I shook my head. “It was the same nightmare I always have. When demons attacked

my temple. He just talked to me. He didn't do anything."

"He has complete control of that realm, dreams and nightmares,"

Enko said dismally.

"He said he needed to see that I was okay. Why does he care?"

Seven chuckled darkly. "Don't believe a word he says, Fated. He went rogue a long time ago. And he almost took Enko with him."

"Quiet, Seven,"

Kairos hissed at my dark mate.

"What did he say to you?"

Rhys' eyes disappeared in thought. "Tell us everything."

"To not tell you that he was there. He said he had to explain something...It felt so real, like it was really happening,"

I began, the dream more vivid than any other. I shook my head. "It was just a dream."

"It did happen,"

Kairos said. "He really had that conversation with you, Dove."

"I thought you said he needed to be close to invade dreams,"

the Archfox accused Enko.

“He must have gotten stronger in the last few years,”

Enko said.

“That’s not possible. How many tails does he have?”

the Archfox interrogated, storming up to my giant mate.

Enko shook his head. “I don’t know. Gotta be at least seven now? Maybe more since he has full access to the Hellgate. He’s the only thing standing between kitsune and the demons in Lethe. He could have an unlimited stream of kills by now. It’s not like I keep tabs on him. Isn’t that your job? Doesn’t the Council have any clue of his strength?”

“Keep training her to shield her mind,”

the Archfox ordered as he turned to leave the room, collecting his books. He hesitated, glancing back at me and giving me a smile and a nod before leaving.

When he had gone, my other three Fated males approached. Enko sat at the bedside and touched my shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to deal with him, little fox. If I had known what he would become...Now, he’s out there wreaking havoc worse than a demon.”

I knew something was still missing, but the constant dodging of answers made me keep quiet.

Dove

When I awoke, I found myself entombed between Seven and Enko. Seven's Shadow leaked out around him slightly, keeping us cool from Enko's fiery warmth on my other side.

The beds remained close together, and it was only a matter of time before the sleeping situation caused a rift between my Fated males. Particularly Kairos, who had been forced to sleep in Seven's bed two nights in a row.

I shuffled out from between them, causing several groans and pushing the deadweight of arms off me and scurried into the bathroom. I was in such a rush, I didn't even bother to close the door, which had no lock anyway.

After peeing, I moved in front of the mirror and I lifted the loose t-shirt of one of my Fated mates—Enko's, based on the smell of cinnamon fire and the fact that its hem landed at my shins. My back was still wrapped with white bandages, but there was no blood leaking through. It was healing finally, as slowly as that may be. A year of torment, gone in a week.

“Morning, little fox,”

the massive man said as he stumbled into the bathroom and moved toward the toilet with half drooped eyes.

“Seriously, Enko?”

I said as I scampered out the door, letting the t-shirt fall back down my back.

He talked through his yawn, “Sorry.”

“Hurry up, Enko. I need to take a shower,”

Seven said from outside the door as I passed by him.

“I thought you just roll around in the Shadow to get the dirt off,”

Kairos joked from his dresser, putting on a pair of gray gym shorts. He had already combed his hair back into perfection since he had awoken minutes before. “And you’re sleeping in your own bed tonight.”

“I need the bathroom to change when you three are done,”

I told them as I took out a pair of black leggings and a black t-shirt. None of my clothes had the softness of theirs, nor the lovely delicious smells.

“Little fox, we’ve seen you naked, you are not hogging the bathroom every morning to get changed anymore.”

I scowled. Apparently our times together in the morning had reached peak annoyance with each other. I started the pot of the coffee and hurriedly changed before tossing my clothes in the hamper that Kairos’ magical tiny elves managed to get cleaned twice a week. Except right now, it was overflowing.

“Don’t forget your pain medicine, Dove,”

Kairos said as he tossed the orange bottle in my direction and it clattered on the floor as my sleepy hand missed the throw.

I felt the gentle tug of the Archfox coming closer. A knock came at the door and my Fated males glanced at me.

“It’s Rhys,”

I said as he opened the door.

I poured coffee into my thermal cup and the four of us were now bumping shoulders in the tiny kitchenette. They passed the creamer between them and I kept mine black. Like the color of my soul, the dark thought permeated through the guys and while Seven had a laugh, the other two glanced over dismissively, too tired for my antics.

Rhys’ stern gaze fell to me. “You’re supposed to be working on shielding thoughts, Dove. I shouldn’t be hearing even a word from your mind by now.”

“Not a good time, brother. The lack of space in this dorm makes for late mornings.”

“Not my top concern, brother,”

Rhys told Seven.

“Maybe it would be if you had to sleep in here with us. And tell your brother to start sleeping in his own bed again,”

Kairos reprimanded.

The Archfox looked at the three beds that were still squished together. “What do you expect me to do about it?”

Seven—the most grumpy of our number in the mornings—scoffed. “You’d think the most powerful kitsune in the world would have some sway on a larger dormitory for

his Fated.”

“There are no larger dormitories,”

Rhys responded. “If you’d like, Dove, I can get a second dorm just for you.”

Seven groaned, “And leave me stuck in this sausage fest?”

The Archfox raised an eyebrow and I stifled my laughter.

“She wants to be around all of us and there’s no room in this dorm,”

Kairos said sternly to the Archfox. “Including you.”

Rhys raised his eyebrows. “And how exactly can that be remedied?”

“Oh, I don’t know, the gigantic mansion that is provided to you for being Archfox maybe?”

“That residence is for me only—”

“And your Fated,”

Seven reminded.

Rhys shrugged in a way that made me wonder if he even wanted me there before finally responding, “Very well. I suppose we can’t hide it forever.”

The morning reveille began to play and the Archfox grumbled. “We’ll continue this later. Get to class.”

He raised his eyebrows at all of us as though we were under his complete command.
“And keep your mouths and minds shut until then.”

Dove

After classes for the day, Seven drove us in his Land Rover up a forested dirt road, making twists and turns through the trees until Foxfire Academy disappeared.

“Isn’t it on campus?”

I asked after a long time driving.

“Yes,”

Kairos answered.

Nothing could have prepared me for it, a mansion in the middle of the forest, complete with a gated entrance. It had tall Georgian columns rising to the third floor around the door frame.

Rhys waited at the front door with his arms crossed in annoyance.

Seven popped the gear into park as we stopped in front of the building. We all hopped out of the car and Seven opened the trunk so we could grab our bags. I only had one single bag, and Kairos and Enko fought over who carried it for me, leaving me empty handed and Enko overloaded.

Rhys opened the door as I approached and he nodded at me. His eyes traced the treeline as he gestured for me to enter. Immediately, Rhys’ amber scent came to me, lingering all over the house.

I'm not sure what I expected, but the gigantic outside of the mansion barely did the inside justice. A crystal chandelier that had to have been almost seven feet tall hung in the front entryway—Enko-sized—and the stairs rose up to the second floor where a massive painting of Rhys hung.

“Little self-centered, isn't it, brother?”

Seven commented as he nodded to the picture.

Rhys cleared his throat uncomfortably. “The Council of Elders has them commissioned for every Archfox. The previous commissions consume most of the wallspace instead of my own decorations. It's not my personal house, mind you. It is the residence for the Archfox while on campus.”

“Surely you're not required to keep it hung up though,”

Kairos observed. “But I'm sure someone who views himself as the most powerful Life kitsune alive likes to be reminded of his importance every single day.”

“Goddess, it's creepy enough having you watch us all the time, and now you are going to have the picture watching us too?”

Enko remarked.

“They've definitely captured your handsome features, Rhys,”

I added quietly as I found myself captivated by his striking green eyes. “But I prefer you in person, that way I get to enjoy the smell as well.”

A very, very light blush rose on his cheeks and he nodded slightly. “Thank you, Dove.”

He looked so embarrassed, my own cheeks heated.

“Well, at least we’ll get our own rooms here,”

Kairos mentioned as he began to prowl around the first floor, peering into a sitting area surrounded on three walls by books and a fireplace. A lavish dining area to the side, where I could see a second smaller dining room through a hallway and an archway leading into a kitchen. Behind the stairs, I caught sight of a huge corridor between the foyer and a living room.

Rhys exhaled, “Right, I forgot you’re accustomed to much wealthier accommodations, Kairos Stryker. How is your father doing, by the way? Keeping out of trouble, I hope? Could he not afford to add a new section onto the academy for you?”

It was the first time I’d heard the Archfox use someone’s last name and I shifted uncomfortably, realizing how new it was to have Rhys around. It had taken nearly a month to get to know Enko, Kairos, and Seven.

Seven cleared the air, wrapping his arm around my front and tucking me against his chest as his head rested on top of my head. “Dove and I will retreat into the Shadow Vale if you two can’t get along.”

Enko snorted with laughter. “Don’t pretend it’s us making you want to go there, Seven. And Dove can’t even breathe in the Shadow Vale. You’ll kill her.”

“He can bring me to the edge. Being with him makes it easier to breathe than with a demon dragging me,”

I said mindlessly and all the men froze.

Rhys cleared his throat, “Right, how about that tour?”

He began to walk up the steps that were almost as wide as our entire dormitory had been as he continued to speak, “Most of the rooms are guest rooms, so feel free to pick whichever.”

“Where’s your room?”

I asked as we followed him up the stairs and down another gigantic corridor above the one on the first floor.

“Above the kitchen, near the other staircase,”

Rhys commented as we walked toward it.

We peered into the gigantic corner bedroom. Windows covered two walls and a large bathtub, bigger than a hot tub, was visible. The room was void of any personal belongings as far as I could see. The bed was perfectly made, and larger than a California king size.

“The master bedroom should be Dove’s room, don’t you think?”

Kairos mentioned.

Rhys narrowed his eyes. “I’m allowing you to live here, Kairos. But remember that your presence here remains only on my authorization. The second you prove too annoying, I’ll throw you out.”

Kairos’ eyes rolled. “Of course, your Holy Majesticness.”

He gave a very low and sarcastic bow, his hand outstretched and making small

rotations in the air. A noise came from the back of Rhys' throat as he swiveled around and continued the tour.

A room filled with black décor caught my attention across from Rhys' room. Its bookshelves were mostly empty, and a dark wood desk was placed in the corner. The curtains were black lace, topped with black velvet adornments, leading out to a balcony.

Seven and I glanced at each other and made a run for it to claim the bedroom.

Him, with his super-speed, got there before me. "Ha!"

I sulked, shoulders slumping.

"Don't pout, Fated,"

he said as he crashed onto the bed. "You can have that pink room we passed by."

I opened my mouth to speak, but the Archfox beat me to it. "Seven."

Just the mention of his name caused my dark mate to roll his eyes. "Fine. All yours, Fated."

I grinned and rushed over to the bed, diving onto the sea of black as though it were as deep as an ocean. When I landed, the softness enveloped me.

Seven grumpily got up from the bed. He looked as though he was stomping, but his footfalls were muted as he halfheartedly picked the bedroom next door furnished in dark brown.

Rhys

Kairos and Enko selected rooms based on their closeness to Dove, leaving us all tucked in one tiny corner of the large house, but the grin on Dove's face kept me quiet about it.

It would be good to have all of them so close, if only to keep an eye on them, especially the mischievous Dove. I tried to convince myself this was a good idea.

But before the end of the day, Kairos had people lugging in loads of new items to fill up their rooms almost as quickly as they'd destroyed my privacy. He even ordered an entire range of exercise equipment to be carried down to the basement. I hid myself away in an office as Kairos began to dictate his rules over everyone.

Through the window, I saw my car pulling out of the garage to accommodate his collection of four—four!—expensive racing cars and even then I held my tongue.

“Bring that in there.”

He ordered loudly from outside. “No, the other way. And that chair is for Dove's room. She needs something ergonomical with how much she studies at her desk.”

At one point during the evening, someone opened my office door without knocking and didn't even bow to me as they began to place books on my bookshelf.

“Kairos!”

I yelled, startling the servant into hysteria as they bowed their way out of my room.

He showed up a second later. “Yes, Holiest of opinionated assholes?”

“Are you done with all your commotion yet?”

I growled, tossing my paperwork down on my desk in defeat. I’d only read through three pages since he took over the house like a dictator. But there was no fear on his face. He merely smiled, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

“I’m merely making some small changes. The whole house feels unlived in, and I want to make Dove comfortable. You understand, I’m sure. Our Fated mate has her needs.”

I took a long deep breath. And then another. It wasn’t fair to have to share my Fated mate with three kits.

“No, no, it’s too much!”

came Dove’s voice from outside. “Kairos, this is way too expensive! Where are you?”

I raised my eyebrows. “She sounds comfortable,”

I said sarcastically.

Kairos opened the door to find her prowling the hallway, holding a literal armload of clothes. When she saw the two of us, she entered the room, turning to Kairos with a pout.

“Did you get all these for me, Kairos? It’s too much, you have to return them—”

“Nothing is too much for you, Dove. You deserve the very best,”

Kairos said, puffing his chest out proudly as he patted her on the head.

Her bottom lip quivered, tears forming in her eyes. “All for me?”

“I even hired a personal stylist for you, Dove. She picked out things she thought you would like.”

I stiffened as her tears began to fall and she sobbed loudly, repeating, “All for me? You care so much about me?”

Enko barged in, his breath heavy as his feral gaze roamed around for Dove, only calming when he found her and wrapped his gigantic arms around her and the wad of clothes in her arms. “I heard you crying, little fox.”

Seven slinked in, “Why is she crying this time?”

A slight panic laced in his sarcastic tone.

“Goddess, did I not let you all live here so you could have some more space? This is my office,”

I said, knowing now beyond any doubt that my privacy was completely annihilated.

Dove sniffled, ducking out of Enko’s grip and depositing the clothes onto my couch in a messy puddle of silk before rushing over to me and sitting on my lap and hugging around me. “Thank you so much, Rhys. I’m so happy to be living with all my Fated mates.”

Kairos grinned at me knowingly as she nuzzled her face against my neck, saturating

me with her delightful scent. My want for her held over my logical senses. My arms wrapped around her, gently over the scars on her back, “Of course, Dove. Whatever makes you happy.”

“You did a complete about-face on that one, brother,”

Seven quipped as I glared at him over her shoulder.

“Dove can do whatever she wants in my home. As for the three of you, get the hell out of my office.”

As the sun went down, the house settled into a semblance of serenity, and I was finally able to get some research done. When I finished close to midnight, I walked toward my bedroom.

Dove’s door was open and she curled onto the gigantic bed. A smile graced her lips, her face calm. I stepped forward, wanting to touch her soft cheek, brush her hair behind her ear—

A movement of Shadow by the door startled me and I jumped as a knowing smirk peeked out from the Shadow Vale.

I exhaled loudly. “Get to bed, Seven.”

Dove

“Our weapons have the ability to house spirits, both our own and others,”

Elder Peter said in the sweltering hot room, the Forgefire raged at full blast on the chilly day. “The more they are used, the more power a weapon can contain. Which is why when a kitsune dies, their weapon is donated to the shrine of their choice to be cared for eternally by the Holy Foxes.”

I couldn’t pretend to be as interested in the material as the other weapon-users in the room. The information had been pounded into my brain from a very young age. At only five, I had been given the task of scrubbing areas of grout between the tiles. While we worked, Elder Jane told us the importance of the weapons and not to touch them until we earned the honor. She spoke of the Forgefire like it was a living being. And explained how much better weapons-users were than us. How we should beg for the goddess to bless us, better us, make us just like them.

“Our weapons hold great value in our religion, both spiritually and physically,”

Elder Peter drawled on as he circled the room, holding the red belt at his waist. Each step he took, the thick white fabric of his robe swooshed around his legs “Our weapons are an extension of our own spirit, our own souls.”

Blah, blah, blah...

“You must forge your weapons with the greatest of attention to detail, keep them clean and polished, honor them.”

I was already sketching out my newest design for my next weapon. Which metal, what type of handle, how many times to fold the platinum of the blade.

“Another katana?”

Seven asked dubiously from beside me.

“An odachi,”

I responded in a whisper. “Can’t you tell?”

Seven shrugged, “That will be a little big for you, won’t it?”

“I did my measurements. It won’t drag on the ground if that’s what you’re asking.”

Seven smirked, “Yeah, but you’re so short, an odachi is for...you know...big kitsune. Warriors.”

“I am a warrior,” I hissed.

Elder Peter cleared his throat, “Am I interrupting you, Dove?”

I glanced to my side, noticing that Seven had disappeared back into the Shadow Vale once again so that I would get in trouble for his disruptions.

When the class settled down, I informed the Elder of the amount of metal I needed and began to let it heat as I glared at where I knew Seven lurked after getting me in trouble in class.

I stayed late after the class finished, continuing to fold the metal, pressing it with a clamp, refolding, clamping again.

“Ah, in the style of Damascus steel,”

Elder Peter commented as he watched me continue to work. “And on your own this time? No Forge Master to help you?”

“Kairos is busy today,”

I grumbled, keeping my eyes focused on my work, reminded that he had a meeting with his father again today, whom I still had yet to meet.

As I banged the metal into shape, Seven, of course, had to give his opinion.

“It looks a little small—”

“I’m shorter than you, remember? And what happened to you thinking it was too big?”

He smirked, and tried to distract me from my work, putting his chin atop my head. “How could I forget? Maybe if you actually put some effort into it this time, it won’t shatter again.”

“Great observation, Seven.”

Elder Peter cleared his throat, “Seven is more than proficient at Forging, Dove. I suggest you take his advice.”

“If he’s so proficient, why isn’t he a Forge Master?”

Elder Peter scowled. He’d been unsure where I ranked ever since it became known that I was a Disciple, so he didn’t scold me for my insubordination. “Because while his Forging is extremely skilled, he never shows up to class.”

“Yeah, Fated, maybe try listening to me,”

Seven goaded.

“Don’t you have demons to kill or something,”

I snapped.

“I’m on Fated protection duty,”

he mused sadly. His eyes drifted off as though he was imagining himself killing a demon or some other exciting task. For the next several days, I worked on the blade during my free hours between and after classes.

Seven became increasingly more bored, and subsequently, annoying.

“Enko or Rhys or Kairos couldn’t come today?” I whined.

“I’m sure they’re on their way, I texted them a couple minutes ago about how feisty you’re being and about how I might take you out back to kiss or kill you. Fight or fuck you.”

My cheeks heated.

Seven sniffed at the air. “Really? That turns you on?”

In revenge I shot a thought his way. Seven pushed me up against the wall, my hand slipped into his pants his cock making it a tight fit as I wrapped my hand around his girth and stroked up his length—

Seven grabbed my wrist, not giving me time to finish clamping the metal. He dragged

me after him into the metal storage closet, where the dim lighting made him look even darker. His ruby eyes flickered pure danger, making me tremble in lust and confusion.

“Wha—”

“I think it’s time you got punished for your little games. The others aren’t here to protect you, Fated. I warned you before.”

Every bit of me strummed with excitement as Seven pushed me against the wall, his lips locking with mine, tongue probing curiously. He tasted of sweet mint, he smelled of pine. His entire body pressed up against mine, his hands roaming freely as mine fiddled over him. His front half clenched tightly as my hand slipped under his shirt and over the trail of dark hair below his belly button.

“You make it so hard, Fated,”

he breathed against my hair.

“Your cock?”

“No.”

He pulled back at my joke with an appreciative grin. “To not take you right here against this wall. To please you. Claim you.”

Butterflies wandered freely in my stomach as he leaned forward and began to stroke my hair, kissing my forehead, bringing his fingers under my pants and between my legs. My hand went lower, reaching into his pants and touching him, and for once, he didn’t stop me. Instead he let me stroke his length as he let out a long moan. “Yes, good girl.”

I kept going, fascinated with the pleasure I could bring him with something so simple as his finger rubbed against my sex. But I kept my eyes on him. His head tilted back, his lips parted slightly as he exhaled.

The realization of what we were doing crossed his features. His eyes snapped down to me and he cleared his throat. His hand ran through his hair as he backed away, yanking his hand out of my pants, breathing heavily, eyes dilated and freely inspecting me. I stroked his shaft again and he grabbed my wrist tightly, tugging me away from our game.

“I’m going to the temple to pray,”

he said suddenly, spinning around and leaving me there hot and heavy and wanting for more. “Or to hunt some demons. Or take a long, long cold shower.”

He paused, glancing back, “Don’t tell the others I let you touch...” he hesitated, clearing his throat and practically sprinted from the dark storage room.

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Dove

I carefully wrapped the threads around the handle, making an x pattern of purple and black. The handle and blade were longer than my katana.

The blade was a mixture of white and black, platinum and oxidized iron, patterns like waves rippling as the different types of metal melded together with the help of the heat of the Forgefire.

“It should hold its edge better with an alloy, little fox,”

Enko muttered as he observed with the others. He was just happy I picked iron.

“As long as she doesn’t try to fight another Tier V,”

Kairos whispered back.

I had been so distracted with the blade, they were all trying to get my attention and it was finally nearing completion.

“The metal should be strong enough this time,”

Rhys said.

“What matters is that she actually coats it properly. Does she even have enough blood in her little body to coat that large of a blade?”

Seven sniped.

“Oh my goddess,”

I sighed, “Do the four of you really have to stand over my shoulder?”

“Are you finished finally, Fated? It’s been over a week and I’m bored.”

I smirked, “Maybe go pray in the temple, then. Or hunt some demons before you get any ideas of punishing me, Seven.”

He struck me with a silent glare. The others didn’t know what had transpired between us, and I was keeping our delicious secret, reliving it.

“What’s going on between you two?”

Kairos asked.

Seven and I shook our heads and returned to looking straight on. We spoke at the same time. “Nothing.”

We walked into the shrine, where the goddess waited, her white stone face holding a sense of disapproval. “I should do this alone.”

An uproar of disagreement reached my ears, but one look silenced them all. The Holy Foxes were still bowing as my Fated males passed them back outside.

“Are you ready to begin the ritual, Dove?”

the monk asked.

I nodded, feeling bad for not knowing their names when there was a time I could name every weapon-user who even thought of coming into my old temple. But learning to kill demons was much more important.

Sana and another monk brought forth two flames of the Forgefire, lighting the torches on either side of the goddess. They extended the holy fire carefully, bowing and whispering the sacred prayers. When they finished, they backed out of the room in a bow, closing the door behind them and leaving me alone with the statue of the goddess.

“Don’t let this one break, okay?”

I joked with the goddess as I knelt before her, holding out the weapon for the statue’s inspection and completing my own set of prayers. “You gave me my Fated mates. Now grant me my revenge.”

The blade was perfect, everything in perfect proportion to my body, to my swings. I had poured all my energy into it for the last week. If the weapon proved itself, I would carry it for the rest of my life.

I stood up, giving one last bow to the goddess and slit open my hand. Blood, so the blade would know its purpose, so the weapon could carry my spirit as I carried it.

“More blood.”

I jumped, spinning around in a circle. The female’s voice had been loud, like she stood at my side, but I was alone in the shrine.

My eyes drifted to the statue of the goddess. Had she spoken to me?

Blood oozed from my hand, dripping to the pristine floors. Every drop was precious.

I did as the voice commanded, cutting deeper along the whole length of the blade. My red dripped from my hand, and I tried to preserve as much of it as possible, cupping it to coat the blade.

“More,”

came the voice again. “Soak the blade in it.”

I did as commanded, going over the blade again. Then a third time and a fourth. Each time, the blade took the blood inward, absorbing every drop I gave to it.

Nine times I coated the metal, and by the end of it, I was feeling woozy.

The voice had probably come from a state of delusion from blood loss. Yes, that was it.

Now, shift, the woman’s voice demanded.

My white fox form took over, white light filling the room. My black clothes dropped all around me and once I escaped through my neckhole, my light pulsed with each heartbeat.

My paw healed after only several minutes in my fox form, but I stayed a bit longer as I stared at the goddess. When I shifted back, I continued to stare.

“Thank you, goddess.”

I bowed, feeling the tears form in my eyes the longer I bowed. Naked, I dropped to my knees into my own blood, pressing my head to the floor as I worshiped. Something I hadn’t done for so long. Breath came easier with each repeated bow.

“Thank you for everything.”

Knocking pounded on the door behind me. “Dove! Who are you talking to?”

Enko barged in before I could respond, seeing me crumpled and naked before the goddess in the pool of my own blood. He immediately went feral.

He charged toward me. “Mine.”

Seven and Rhys grabbed either side of him, struggling against Enko’s strength even with the extra tails.

“Calm down, Enko,”

Kairos demanded, lifting my clothes from the floor and passing them to me as he averted his eyes. “Get dressed, Dove. And get that bandaged so it doesn’t reopen.”

Seven watched as I crossed the room and I smirked at him, lingering with the catwalk so he could get a good look.

The black medical bag sat next to the door, and I grabbed some of the cloth gauze from inside, wrapping it around my fresh wound that layered over the old one.

“There’s so much blood, is my little fox okay?”

Enko was gasping as I slipped into my clothes.

“I’m okay, Enko,”

I told him, approaching him.

“Dove, wait,”

Kairos ordered, giving me a stern look as he held onto Enko.

Enko threw Rhys and Seven off and charged at me, pulling me into his arms. “Are you hurt?”

The others prepared to pull him off me, but I stopped them with a simple command. “Let him hold me.”

Enko held me close for a long moment before gripping my arms and pulling back slightly to look over me and then returning me into his hug.

“What the fuck happened in here? There’s enough blood for it to be a slaughterhouse,”

Rhys demanded.

“I coated my blade.”

I mused into Enko’s chest, unable to free myself from his strength. “Nine times.”

“Nine times? Dove, that’s so dangerous, we should have been in here with you,”

Kairos said.

Enko finally released me enough for the others to check me, and they each rushed forward. But Enko’s hand remained around me the entire time, still not over his feral affliction.

“Dangerous? It’s insanity,”

Rhys sputtered. “She could have killed herself.”

Seven smirked, “Determined, not insane.”

“This blade will survive the next Tier V.”

My voice was hardened. The ritual done properly had left me more hardened than before.

As we left the room, the Holy Foxes bowed outside, glancing inward to see the bloodshed and staring at me in awe before they remembered their rudeness and bowed before me.

Dove

The basement of the Archfox's house was a large gym, with plenty of room in the center and a padded mat made for practicing fighting. Seven withdrew his short sword and dagger and held them out. "Ready, Fated?"

"Swords again?"

I groaned. "You are always trying to beat me."

"I'd beat you with any weapon, Fated."

Seven smirked as he took his position. "Besides, you need practice with your new weapon. Do your best to hit me."

Before I could even react, he zoomed forward, stopping a hair short from hitting me. I barely got my sword up in time to block his, and then his strength overtook mine, pressing down hard. I let the blade slip off with a zing!, ducking from the oncoming swing.

Seven swung at me again, and I blocked. I had gotten better at anticipating his moves. He zoomed around me, and suddenly he was at my back, his breath against my hair and tickling my neck. "I'll start to use the Shadow against you now."

I spun around, pushing him, and he stumbled over his own feet in shock, not expecting the move. He rocked backwards and his hand caught mine. My breath faltered and I released the weapon, letting it fall to the ground.

He fell to the floor, and while I wouldn't exactly call Seven's lean muscular body a cushion, he cushioned my fall. He smirked, gripping hold of my back as he spun us around, so that I was against the floor and his teeth were scraping against my neck.

My heated sensitive core throbbed with that yearning for more. And this time, nobody was home to stop it from happening.

"Seven,"

I gasped out as his hands desperately shoved under my shirt. When I lifted my back to help, his fingers grazed over my scars.

I reached up, touching his face and my thumb trailed over his scar. When he glared, I stuffed my hands between us, desperately trying to loosen his pants.

"Fated,"

he breathed, moving to stop me.

"Seven, please. Is the first time we mate going to be when I'm in heat? Because that's not fair. I need practice to make sure it all goes well."

Seven smirked, "Don't be such a kit. It's going to go well no matter what. We all love you."

Love me?

Had anyone ever loved me before?

Certainly not like this. Elder Jane cared about me, like she cared for all the other orphans. Sana and Brynn respected me as a friend.

But I knew he wasn't just saying it. I could feel it through our linked minds. And as weird of a way that Seven showed his love, I could feel it. His playful taunting, his smirks, his glares. Where someone else might view it as mean, I could see the truth. He wanted to be with me, talk to me, make me blush and feel good.

That's when I realized it. He wanted love as much as I did. And the goddess had given us each other.

I stared into his ruby eyes. He leaned forward, eclipsing me in his kiss. I lifted his shirt off him, breaking our kiss for just a moment, expecting him to stop me, but he didn't.

Instead, he helped me to stand, tugged at my shirt, and pulled it over my head. His eyes immediately went to my scars that wrapped around my right side and my hand rushed to cover them, but he grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

"Never hide yourself from me, Fated."

He locked his lips against mine, his hands smoothing over my scars like they were a special part of me that he loved just as much as the rest. He moved his fingers underneath the waist of my pants, curling his fingers to my front and landing on the button, expertly undoing it and the zipper in a matter of seconds.

He tugged them downward, breaking our kiss as he knelt before me and brought his lips to my scars. "You're so perfect. Every part of you, Fated."

I lifted my feet as he demanded silently, pulling the pants off and leaving me standing in only my bra and underwear. Thank the goddess for Kairos' new purchases. I wore a matching set of black lace and Seven's eyes roamed freely over me, remaining on his knees.

I got down to his level, having to raise myself up to trail kisses from his lips to his scar and back again. I brought my hands to his buttons, struggling much more than he had to undo the pesky fasteners. He brought one of his hands slowly to mine, halting me.

I scowled up at him.

He smirked. “Are you sure you want to do this, Fated?”

“I thought you said you take what you want,”

I taunted, finally getting his pants undone.

Once he maneuvered out of them, he was before me wearing black boxer shorts, a clear silent message that he wanted me. I was almost proud of myself for causing such a bulge.

His tattoos went underneath the shorts, but I got a moment to enjoy the ones I could see. Strokes in a foreign language, images of demons. Then he was undoing my bra, his hands going under my breasts as he leaned down to kiss my budding nipples.

His eyes were nearly feral when he looked up at me, but every one of his movements was slow. Intentional.

I knew I was safe with the dark and dangerous kitsune.

My hands went to his waist, dragging down the last bit of clothing on him. His cock sprang out and I leaned forward, placing a kiss on him, my tongue reaching out for a taste. His fingers threaded my hair, tilting my head up to look at him. And then with the speed of a seven tailed kitsune, he had me lying on my back again, his hands gripping the new underwear. He ripped them open and pulled them down my legs and

I cried out in giggling protest.

“Kairos will buy you another pair,”

he insisted as he brought his tongue to my core, dragging it over my heated center, twisting around my clit, sucking lightly and causing me to cry out in elated joy. “Good girl, you’re soaking wet for me.”

He said as he rose, his lips glistening. He brought himself up to my face, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “Okay, Fated. Are you ready?”

I nodded, trying not to appear too eager as I felt him press up against my slippery sex. He pressed into me, slowly, so slowly, and a moment later I understood why. A slight uncomfortable pain occurred within me, and I widened my eyes in shock up at him. He stroked his hand against my hair as he continued to push inward.

“You’re doing so good, Fated,”

he assured me, kissing my forehead as he continued to plunge himself into me.

A noise like a scared mouse came out of me as I looked between us and saw we were only halfway. I could see Seven withholding a joke as he kissed me again. “So fucking good, Fated. Just a little more.”

“A little more?”

I squeaked, looking between us again.

He paused, halfway inside me. “Just say the word and I’ll stop, Fated.”

He stared down at me seriously, but I shook my head, feeling myself beginning to

adjust to his size. “No, no, don’t stop. I want this.”

He pushed himself in with agonizing slowness, but I needed the time. I could feel my wetness leaking from me, longing to take all of him.

Seven pressed himself fully in and a pop of pain exploded and I gazed at him with shock. I felt so close to him, finally coming together fully as Fated mates. He kissed the top of my head as I stared up at his magnificent tattooed chest. “That was the hardest part, Fated.”

He remained motionless for a long moment, staring down at me to assess my reaction but I merely gulped and nodded again.

Pulling himself back, I expected more pain, but this time came a ripple of pleasure with the movement. “Such a good fox, taking all of me,”

he muttered, almost to himself.

He pulled his cock almost all the way out, touching every single nerve ending within me on the way, and then he pushed himself in again, faster this time. I expected the same pain, but instead only found bliss. I moaned, eclipsed by the pleasure as he retreated and pushed himself in again.

His momentum picked up as I began to moan and mewl for him. He had complete control of my every pleasure and I had control of his. My lips reached up to his chest, the only thing I could reach, kissing his tattoos, reaching my arms up to him and pulling him closer as he gave me every pleasure I had ever imagined.

My body clenched around him, my legs quivering as they tightened, trying to close but Seven’s body was in the way. And then he pulsed inside me, causing a new wave of motions as I felt a hot warmth coating the inside of me.

He laid down on top of me, careful not to crush me. “How was that, Fated?”

he asked, slightly out of breath.

“So good,”

I said, breathing heavily even though he had done all the physical work. “So fucking good. Amazing. Otherworldly.”

We remained there for a long moment before he pulled himself out of me and I trembled every sensation as he passed that knot within me and I almost came again. I could see the slight twinge of red mixed with both of our pleasure and I blushed, but he relaxed next to me, kissing my cheek and my temple, stroking my hair.

“I pleased you?”

he asked, his eyes were still dilated with a feral look. I could tell it wasn’t a normal question. It was something he needed to know to quell the wild side within him.

“Yes,”

I whispered, pushing my head below his chin. “Did I please you?”

“More than please,”

he said, still sapped of his playfulness. “Thank you, Fated. For giving yourself to me and sharing yourself with me. And for not giving up on me when I’m an asshole.”

Our bodies pressed together, remaining so perfectly close, only moving for a moment to retrieve our undergarments before returning together and pressing our skin against each other, as close as we possibly could without having sex again.

“Did I hurt you?”

he asked as my finger traced one of his many tattoos, this one of Tengu in bird form, a particularly scary demon that hadn't been seen in many centuries.

I shook my head, but he caught my lie, grabbing hold of my waist and lying on his back, sitting me on top of him as he closed his eyes. “I'm a little sore.”

“Well, thank the goddess it was me first instead of Enko,” he joked.

I frowned, blushing and leaning forward to hide on his bare chest. “Will it fit?”

Seven's chest jolted as he laughed silently at my question and my blush deepened. “You're as red as a strawberry, Fated. But I'm not talking to you about your other Fateds' dicks right now.”

We remained silent for a long moment and his hand rested on the small of my back near my scars. “I'm sure it will fit. The goddess wouldn't have put you together if it didn't, right?”

“Has the goddess ever...spoken to you?”

Seven leaned back, his grin vanishing. “Spoken? Fated, it's just a statue.”

I nodded rapidly, eager to get back to cuddling. “Right, I was just wondering.”

“Has she...spoken to you?”

He lifted himself up on the floor mats, easily bringing me with him and repositioning me on his lap, gazing down at me with his full intensity so that I couldn't lie. “In the shrine?”

“Yes. I heard a woman’s voice.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re a Disciple. You can hear her and I can’t,”

he mused, but his expression remained curious.

A growl came from the doorway and both of us froze, finding Rhys glaring at the two of us, but mostly at Seven. “You didn’t, brother.”

Dove

Seven disappeared within the Shadow underneath me, placing me onto the mats and reappearing by our abandoned weapons. Rhys held his scepter tightly, stepping forward.

Seven swooped down to pick his short sword and dagger up again, moving so quickly. He disappeared in and out of the Shadow Vale. “You haven’t been able to beat me for many years, brother. I don’t know why you bother trying.”

But that didn’t stop the Archfox from making an endeavor. Their fight was much faster than mine had been with Seven. While the Life kitsune had more tails than Seven did, and could keep up with the speed, Seven’s element gave him the advantage. Rhys’ specialty was in healing, not fighting. Pulling from nature, not disappearing into invisibility.

Their weapons collided, neither going easy on the other, Rhys’ anger grew as Seven taunted him. “Oh, come on, I practically gave you that shot. Aren’t you trying to impress our Fated?”

That set off the Archfox, and he dove forward again, but Seven’s Shadow began to cloud up around him as he stepped in and out of it freely. But Rhys predicted where he would come out, and the scepter smacked against Seven with a thwap.

“Ow, fuck,”

Seven said, reaching to touch the tender spot and Rhys took it as an opportunity,

battering him again.

“Aw, poor little kit can’t take a hit?”

Rhys chided.

Seven dropped his sword, diving forward and crashing into Rhys. They both crashed to the ground, Rhys dodging punches and Seven throwing them.

“Hey! Guys, stop!”

I yelled, but neither seemed to hear me. The weapons fight had turned into a full blown feral fistfight. “If you don’t stop, I’m gonna call Kairos!”

I threatened, searching around my discarded clothing for my phone.

Again, I went ignored.

The power of their punches left them both out of breath. The number of tails they both had made the fight like two boulders crashing into each other.

“Kairos! Enko!”

I screamed up the stairs, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the intense brawl. I could only pray they were home.

Rhys jumped up to his feet, Seven followed, grabbing his arm, twisting it behind his back. The sound made my stomach drop, made my heart jump.

A series of cracks coming from Rhys’ shoulder, and then POP!

“Ahh!”

Rhys yelled, shoving Seven off him with his other arm.

Enko and Kairos appeared at the doorway. “What the fuck is going on in here?”

Enko wrapped his arms around me, his thumb going under my eyes and then I felt the wetness from tears as he swiped it away. He growled, letting me go and turning on Rhys and Seven. “You fucking upset my little fox.”

Then his nostrils flared. “More than that. You mated with her.”

It was his feral voice, one I was quickly coming to understand. “No, Enko, don’t, please.”

My words seemed to calm him slightly and he stopped, gaping back at me, but his chest rose and fell rapidly, his gigantic muscles stretching his shirt.

“Looks like he dislocated your shoulder.”

Kairos stepped forward, examining Rhys, eyes falling on me for a moment, down my half nude body with the ripped panties to prove Enko’s observation.

Rhys spoke through gritted teeth, putting a hand on his chest and shoving Kairos back. “It’s fine.”

“Seven, get your ass out of the Shadow Vale right now!”

Kairos yelled, looking around the room as if he might see the invisible Seven. “I swear to the goddess you’re going to regret this if you don’t!”

But Seven didn't appear. I could sense him in the corner, but I didn't give away his position, fearing that would only make things worse. I was careful to hide the thought, shoving it underneath the glorious smell of Seven's sweat. Goddess, I was becoming such a feral fox. But Seven hadn't meant to hurt his brother.

"He's not going to come out. Always running from the issues he causes,"

Rhys growled.

Enko's arms wrapped around me tightly, and Kairos rushed over to him, holding his arm. Enko swiped him off, easily pushing the Storm fox away. Rhys jumped in to help but let loose a groan of pain as his arm looked like it was dangling in the most odd way.

"Rhys!"

I cried out, ducking and slipping free from Enko's grasp.

"I'll get it back in the socket,"

Kairos said, stepping forward, but Rhys raised a hand to stop him.

"I said it's fine, Kairos. Handle Enko for now."

"You can't get it back in on your own—"

Kairos began.

"Dove will do it,"

Rhys said, looking at me.

I rushed forward, careful as I touched him, but I wrapped my arms around him as he sat, which turned into me hugging his head as I kissed the top of his head. “Oh, Rhys, does it hurt?”

I couldn’t stop kissing him, I kissed his cheek, his forehead, his hair, holding his cheek against me, afraid to touch anywhere near his injured arm.

He wrapped a hand around my butt. “It’s really nothing, Dove.”

He said into my chest.

Seven flickered back into view. “Maybe I should have intentionally let you hurt me, then I would be the one getting all the attention with my face in her boobs—”

Kairos charged at my dark mate, but Seven disappeared again.

“Dove, would you mind popping it back into place?”

Rhys asked.

My mouth dropped open. “Me? I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can,”

Rhys said with a growl that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“What do I do?”

I asked hesitantly, pulling back from him to examine the injury.

“Grip my shoulder and lift my arm, then press forward with all your weight.”

It seemed like his pain had reduced, so I began to do as he asked. I pushed forward and the sickening POP! Crunch! sounded again. This time I could feel the grotesque movement of his bones.

Rhys let loose a howl of pain worse than when the injury had happened and I panicked. “Did I mess it up? Oh my goddess, Rhys, I’m so sorry!”

He took a moment to catch his breath, shaking his head. “No, Dove, you did it perfectly. It just hurts like a bitch.”

He pulled me onto his lap, using his one good arm to wrap around me. His lips pressed against mine, his tongue sliding across my lower lip and when I kissed him back, dancing my tongue around his, he groaned in excitement.

Kairos cleared his throat, patting Enko’s shoulder. “So...you mated, Dove.”

He stated the obvious fact like it wasn’t so obvious.

My cheeks heated feverishly, nodding in response.

“Did Seven...go feral?”

he continued his interrogation.

I shook my head.

“Did you?”

I shook my head again.

“Did he please you, little fox?”

Enko demanded as he rushed forward, kneeling beside Rhys and wrapping his arm around my back.

“Yes,”

I squeaked. “Very much so.”

Seven appeared above us, leaning over to kiss the top of my head. “She’s such a good fox. She did so good.”

“I thought we were all going to do it together,”

Kairos mused with a hint of anger.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to mess anything up.”

I hid my face in the crook of Rhys’ hurt shoulder. “I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt.”

Rhys shook his head. “You didn’t mess anything up. But now you understand.”

“Understand?”

“A taste of what us going feral might look like, any of us could hurt you. Badly,”

Rhys said, staying completely calm as he reached out and touched my chin, compelling me to peer up at him. “Why are you blushing? Mating is normal for vixens.”

“Vixen?”

I asked with the new word.

“A female kitsune who has the potential to go into heat,”

he explained. “Didn’t you like it? It shouldn’t make you feel embarrassed. Especially not in front of us. Did Seven hurt you on accident?”

My shoulders slumped and I shook my head, pulling away from Rhys’ hold as he rose to his feet. He reached for my hands and helped me to stand. I looked up at my newest and oldest and wisest mate. He stared down at me, awaiting an answer.

“No, he didn’t hurt me.”

My blush burned like fire. “I did like it. A lot.”

Rhys nodded, pushing my messy hair behind my ear and kissing my forehead. “Good.”

“It really was best that I did it,”

Seven said, his chest puffed up with pride. “I have the most control over my feral side.”

Right on cue, Enko growled. “Yeah, it’s definitely best before Enko loses control. She’s a little afraid of how big you are. And she needs some time to heal. She said she was sore.”

Enko’s noise stopped and he gazed down at me.

“Seven!”

“No, it's a good thing. You need to be honest with us. We want to do what's best for you, vixen,”

Rhys said. And then a purr—a literal fucking purr like I was some kind of housecat getting scratched behind the ears—came out of my throat at his use of the new nickname.

Enko pulled me against his chest. “I'll make sure I don't hurt you, little fox,”

he assured me, his feral side gone away completely now at my fear of him hurting me when we finally mated. “I never want to hurt you.”

They circled around me, hands on me, bodies pressed against my own. Wearing only ripped lingerie. Scars completely exposed. Blush at full power. All my vulnerabilities out in the open. Surrounded by the most dangerous kitsune males in existence.

And I'd never felt so safe.

Dove

The smoke permeated through every crack of the door, but fear paralyzed me. Was the archdemon still outside? Fire didn't burn demons, even the fire that wasn't their own natural brand of blue hell.

I moved the white sleeve of my robe to cover my mouth, trying to filter the thick cloud of ashen fumes.

I couldn't stay any longer or the blaze would kill me. I flung the brass door handle open and the metal seared against my fingertips. As I charged through the smoke and flame toward the door of the shrine, my feet stumbled upon something soft yet hard beneath me and I pitched forward, landing on my knees. My hands moved forward to catch me. And then the warm ooze drenched my hands.

Elder Jane's hollow eyes gazed up at me, a puddle of blood pooling around her.

I gasped in a huff of air, my throat burning against the smoldering ashes, falling onto my butt as I scrambled backwards.

Something isn't right.

I'd been here before, but small details stood out to me as misplaced. Her red belt was tied incorrectly, an Elder certainly knew how to tie her belt correctly. The statue of the goddess was standing upright—she hadn't been smashed. And even more bizarre, she was smiling. The goddess never smiled. Her katana remained in the stone sheath. The floors were too gray.

What was I doing? If I stayed any longer focusing on details, I would die here.

I moved around the body with one last apologetic look at my stern yet caring Elder, charging toward the door. Thick and heavy smoke plumed out into the hallway.

I heaved in ragged desperate breaths as I scanned the area for the demons that had attacked the temple, but as the buildings crumbled all around me, I froze.

Something isn't right.

"This isn't real."

My words rang out so clearly, my throat didn't burn like the hellfire smoke I'd been breathing in. "It's a dream."

"Very good,"

came a voice. "You figured it out much faster this time."

The shadowy figure emerged from the billowing smoke as if he controlled it.

"Damon,"

I whispered. What was it that Seven had said before? The thought ran away from me as I tried to catch it. What had Rhys warned me about?

"Come, my little bird, we need to get out of here."

His hand stretched out to mine.

I hesitated, but a crack of wood rang out above me and my entire body jerked in

preemptive fear. I gripped his hand and the Lord of Nightmares yanked me away just as the roof caved in, collapsing where I had stood just a second before.

What was that thought I had?

The reality pushed my thoughts away and I raced after Damon until we were safely at the edge of the temple. As the two of us watched it crumble, my stomach churned with sickness.

“That’s not Hawthorn temple,”

I said aloud, forcing myself to remember. “This is a dream.”

Damon’s cheek lifted as we slowed to a stop and I snatched my hand back from him. As soon as I did, the dream began to fade.

“Dove, wait,”

he said, reaching forward.

I stepped back, not letting him get me into his grasp. I need to fight back. I can’t let him control me. Who knows what this evil being will do to me? Rhys’ voice came back to me, ‘Because he’s our enemy, Dove. Just like the demons.’

Damon shook his head dismally. “Don’t listen to them, Dove. I’d never hurt you, my little bird. They’re keeping secrets from you. I would never keep things from you.”

He touched my shoulder as I shook my head in confusion, visuals snapping back into place. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

“Then let me speak,”

he said calmly.

Despite the dystopian firescape all around us, his blond hair was perfectly styled and sleek. His dark suit had not a hint of ash. My own white robes were completely covered in soot, my knees were bloodied, and Elder Jane's blood still dripped from my hands. My instincts kept it there, keeping the white robes as pristine as possible to avoid the long task of cleaning them tomorrow.

Damon held out a handkerchief and I took it, carefully removing the sacred blood from my hands. "Then speak, Lord of Nightmares,"

I told him as I held the cloth back out to him. Why couldn't I wake up?

He looked down at it and took it back, only for it to burn and shrivel into ashes, falling like snow to his feet. "Because there is no one there to wake you this time, my little bird. Kairos and Seven are here speaking with me right now. I thought the Archfox would be there with you, but apparently they left you all alone. An unforgivable failing."

I gulped, ripping my body from his hold on my shoulder. "Don't you dare fucking hurt them."

"Your temper almost rivals Enko's. Best keep yourself under control. The more you give in, the easier it will take hold. And you are such a sweet and innocent fox. I'd hate for you to lose that part of yourself."

Elder Jane's voice rang out, one of the many times I'd been scolded as a child. "Keep your head on straight, novice. You'll find the answers come much easier if you stay calm."

"Stop it, leave her out of this."

“Your memories are your own. I can only manipulate what I already know. Dreams are such a distorted reality, but I refuse to alter yours. You are here because you chose to be here. Maybe next time, you’ll choose a different memory.”

“Next time?”

“It’s the only time I get to spend with you. It’s hardly fair. Especially now that the others have poisoned you against me. I wish it could be somewhere else, but you always choose here.”

His lips curled up in disgust as he gestured around us.

I growled, striding away from him along the grassy hill, away from the burning temple. “I don’t want to spend time with you.”

“If you knew the truth, you would. When you awake, you should come to me and learn the truth that has been kept from you. Enko is almost here.”

“What truth? Tell me now if you are so honest.”

Damon frowned, shaking his head. “I wanted to do it sooner, and in person. But if that is your desire...”

“It is.”

“We’re Fated—

The words shattered the dream, and I bolted upright in bed in a cold sweat. I didn’t want to believe him, I wanted to trust my Fated mates. But...

Somehow, I knew it was the truth. Deep down, I’d known it the whole time.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Enko

The filth of Lethe clogged my nostrils like the bad memories stuck in my brain. Nobody was following me, but I passed by the entrance again, not ready to face him.

Come now, Beast, he whispered. We're waiting.

Fuck. He knew I was here.

The handleless door clicked open as I approached it. As I slipped inside, a guard shut it behind me, nodding me toward a familiar set of stairs.

I ascended into darkness until the dim bar lights came into sight. And I wasn't alone.

"Seven, Kairos, what the hell are you two doing here?"

Chuckling, the Lord of Nightmares stepped into the light. "Same as you, Beast. Take a seat."

He gestured to the bar where Seven and Kairos sat as he moved behind the counter and began to make drinks.

"But the real question is who's watching Dove? She has a taste for trouble and a propensity for death."

"Rhys is with her,"

Seven said, testing his resolve.

The Lord of Nightmares' eyes flicked between us. "You left her alone with him? And somehow I'm the bad guy."

"You are the bad guy,"

I growled.

"You kept her a secret from me. Put me through the suffering you'd never survive yourself. She is as much mine as she is yours—"

The Lord of Nightmares rarely lost his cool, and when that happened it was never a good sign.

"We're going to let her know when she is ready,"

Seven said.

Damon growled in rage. "After you brainwash her against me? How kind of you, Cassian."

"Don't call me that,"

Seven snapped.

"I know exactly how all of you think. We used to be friends, remember?"

His eyes flicked upwards, his mind focusing on something else, probably in the dreamworld somewhere. But where?

“Yeah, until you went rogue and tried to take Enko with you,”

Kairos said, returning the Lord of Nightmares back to the conversation.

The Lord of Nightmares laughed gently, an eerie calm about him as his anger dissipated.

“Even the goddess went rogue, yet you judge me? When Dove first met me, she mentioned the Lord of Nightmares, but didn’t know she was Fated to me. I’ve grown stronger than any of you realize in the past years. I could probably sense Dove thousands of miles away. You three kept her so close, so hidden. I merely waited for my chance to strike. And then, there she was. In my city. Right outside my own doorstep. Alone. Driven into my arms by the foxfire.”

Damon paced slowly as he spoke, his arms behind his back as he glared at the three of us.

“Even the goddess disagrees with your methods. Dove needs all of her mates and eighty percent isn’t going to cut it.”

“Dove doesn’t need your evil—”

“My evil? You are all worse than me. Parading around as good while lying to Dove. Even your precious Archfox, manipulating all of you. I only didn’t tell her what liars you all are to protect her from that betrayal. I had hoped you would have been honest with our Fated mate by now.”

“We’re going to when she is ready,”

Seven repeated, growling this time.

Damon shook his head. “Now, I’ve had to take matters into my own hands.”

His words sparked the Fire, a growl exploded from my throat as I jumped to my feet, covering the distance in half a second. My hands wrung around his neck, slamming him against the red brick wall. “What did you do?”

Hands on my shoulders and arms hauled me away from the Lord of Nightmares, voices were speaking in tongues. My fury garbled the words.

The Lord of Nightmares cheek rose into an evil grin, his eyes moving past my shoulder.

“Enko,”

her voice rang out clearly in the distortion, through the blood thumping in my ears like furious waves. “Leave him alone.”

The sweet strawberry scent reached me before I saw her and I turned around upon her command. Her hair was bedraggled and she still wore her new pajamas from Kairos.

He had called her here from her dreams. That’s where he had been in the dreamworld.

Dove

“That’s what you’ve been distracted with,”

Kairos said, shaking his head with wide eyes in disbelief. “Screwing with Dove’s head. I should have known.”

The Lord of Nightmares laughed. “That’s the problem with thinking you can control everything, Kairos. I told you my powers had grown. As has my connection with Dove. And it would be impossible to screw with her more than you three already have. Since you deprived me of the chance to strengthen our bond, I knew I needed to find another way to explain the truth to her. Tell her that she’s my—”

Enko growled. “Don’t say another fucking word, Damon.”

“You can’t threaten me. You may be able to beat me physically, but as you know, power within the Mind is much stronger. If you tried, you’ll be on the ground screaming before you make it within ten feet of me, Beast.”

“Don’t call me that,”

Enko snarled. “We all agreed on the terms.”

“All? You mean you three knuckleheads and the Archfox? Because I certainly didn’t. Did Dove agree? I highly doubt that. Being that she now knows the truth.”

Seven, Kairos, and Enko snapped their gaze to me, an unspoken question. My fists

were tightly clenched. My breathing was heavy and ragged.

“He’s full of shit, Dove,”

Kairos began, silencing himself as my head shook dangerously.

“How could you keep it from me?”

I demanded, but nobody answered. They were all still trying to keep the truth secret, wondering how much I knew. Had Damon been right?

Damon let out a long low whistle. “Oh no, looks like you three are in trouble.”

I turned my attention to him, striding forward toward him. The other three all rushed into action the moment I moved, hustling forward as though to stop me, but I shook my head once more, glaring.

I stabbed a finger at Damon’s chest as I reached him. “Quiet. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you’ve hurt Enko.”

Then I turned to the others. “You knew I was Fated to him and you kept it from me. I trusted you.”

Kairos shook his head, “We wanted to tell you, Dove. You just weren’t ready to know yet—”

“That’s enough,”

I said, silencing the room with an uncanny power I hadn’t known I possessed. My rage pulsed to the surface and I stifled it back down as much as I could without letting my tears free from the betrayal. “Wasn’t it my decision? Is it ever my

decision?”

Damon leaned back against the brick wall, crossing his arms as though he held some kind of upperhand over the others but I ignored him for now.

“I tried to tell you three what would happen if you kept this from her,”

Damon muttered, shooting a glance at me for approval, but he only received another shot of my full wrath.

“You’re a new kitsune, Dove. You haven’t had the training to fight him. You have no idea what he’s capable of,”

Kairos explained. “We were trying to teach you to manage the mindspace before releasing this demon into it.”

He jabbed his thumb toward Damon.

“Or were you trying to keep me weak so you could forever keep your secret?”

I demanded.

Kairos’ mouth snapped shut and Seven stepped forward to take over. “We wanted to prevent this from happening, Fated.”

I growled. “Prevent me from making my own choices. Yes, I know. The truth is that Damon has trained me more in my dreams than any of you have in weeks.”

I paused. “Wipe that fucking smirk off your face, Damon.”

The pain in my back flared up again. I’d forgotten to take my meds before stealing

one of Kairos' cars and driving all the way to Lethe. Each jolting step of my jog threatened to rip the healing wound open once more.

"Explain yourself,"

I demanded of Kairos.

Kairos' teeth clenched, side-eyeing Damon. "In front of him? We should have this talk in private, Dove."

"Apparently, he's the only one who's been truthful since I met all of you,"

I snapped, cringing as I twisted my upper half to hook a thumb toward the Lord of Nightmares.

Enko growled. "Because in this big of a Fated group, there's always a rogue. Thankfully, we already found out who he was before we met you."

"Is there anything else you're keeping from me?"

My voice faltered as the pain shot up my spine.

Seven rushed forward, curling his arm under my armpit and around my back. "Take it easy, Fated. You're pushing yourself too hard."

"What's wrong with her?"

Damon demanded, trying to get closer to me, but Kairos and Enko blocked his way.

"She was hurt in the battle. Your reinforcements arrived a little late,"

Kairos said.

A stream of cooling energy pulsed through one of the mindlinks. “You should have informed me, I can ease her pain—”

“Stop that, my pain is my own. I can handle it myself.”

I snapped at Damon, Enko growling and stepping closer to him.

As he released his pain-relieving distraction, the pain came back in full force and I cried out. Kairos took my other side, helping to support me gently.

“We need to get you back to bed, Fated.”

“Back away, Beast, before I hurt you. You’re far more in danger of losing control and hurting her than I am,”

Damon snapped at Enko. “Actually, I might be the only one here that’s actually in control of my foxfire.”

“You’re the reason I can barely control mine. Now keep out of her head,”

Enko snarled.

“Did you forget where you are? This is my city. With a single thought, I can call in fifty soldiers, both demon and kitsune to settle this—”

“You won’t. Not if you ever want to be with me,”

I whispered. “You’re one mistake away from losing me forever.”

Despite my quiet order, everyone heard. Damon's face fell, and I could feel a rush of emotional pain rush through our mindlink. Was it in his control? Or was he trying to guilt me?

Seven's lip trembled as he tried to keep his simpering smirk hidden. That's our girl.

"And you'll stop manipulating my dreams,"

I continued, leaning into Kairos' hold, barely able to support myself in my pain. Not just physical pain, but the emotional pain of betrayal.

"I would never manipulate you. Not like your other Fated have. I was only trying to help heal your trauma, my little bird—"

"Don't call me that,"

I snapped, repeating the sentiment of one of my Fated males. "I barely even know you."

"Whose fault is that?"

Damon demanded, his eyes widened with shock as though I'd given him a physical blow. "It's only fair I get the same chance as the others, Dove."

Now Kairos and Enko grinned.

"If you don't want to be treated like the enemy, then stop acting like one."

I took a deep breath. "We're going back to the academy."

Kairos and Seven supported me for a moment before Enko took over and held out his

arms. I staggered forward into them and allowed him to lift me and cradle me against his chest as we headed out to Seven's Land Rover. Kairos' eyes flared as he saw I'd taken one of his precious classic cars but he didn't say anything as he snagged the keys from me and drove behind us.

When we got back to the Archfox's mansion, Rhys immediately appeared at the top of the steps in front of his portrait. "You three were supposed to be back an hour ago—"

He stopped speaking as he saw me. "What is she doing out of bed?"

Seven stormed up the stairs to him. "You were supposed to be keeping an eye on her, brother."

"We had a security breach, a false alarm at the perimeter,"

the Archfox explained.

"The Lord of Nightmares created a distraction,"

Enko snarled. "And you fell for it."

"You left her here alone,"

Kairos snapped. "So that the Lord of Nightmares could have his way with his Fated."

"What did you just say?"

the Archfox questioned, giving me a look as though their secret was still safe.

"Yeah, Damon told me you guys have been lying. That's he's Fated to me too," I

began.

“Can I not count on you three for anything? You had one job. One.”

Rhys’ hands flew upwards. “Dove, I know you’re religious and grew up in a temple, but believe it or not, not all Fated are meant to be together. A rogue kitsune like the Lord of Nightmares is dangerous. There’s no law holding him to any standard.”

“I’ll be making decisions about my Fated mates from now on, Rhys,”

I told him, almost as sternly as he spoke, striding past him and up the stairs toward my new bedroom and slamming the door behind me.

Kairos

We all stood there, dumbfounded. Looking at each other and then at the door Dove had just gone through. “What just happened?” I asked.

“She hates me,”

Enko snapped.

“How are we supposed to deal with this? How much does she know?”

Rhys asked.

“Everything,”

Seven responded. “The Lord of Nightmares has been speaking to her in the dreamworld.”

“She hates me now,”

Enko growled, fists clenching, his eyes turning on each of us like we didn’t all agree on this. Like he wanted to rip my throat out.

“Calm down, Enko. She just needs a minute to cool off. And you do too,”

I snapped, but my own brain was raking through every scenario. Because that definitely wasn’t how I had anticipated Dove to react. I thought we’d gained her trust

by now.

“We should have told her,”

Seven growled. He’d wanted to tell her right away, before he had even known that she’d met Damon. But he’d never known the Lord of Nightmares at his full fury. He and Rhys weren’t there when I saw what he’d done to Enko.

“Let’s go talk to her. Before she gets herself in trouble in the dreamworld,”

I said finally.

“Shouldn’t we give her some time?”

Rhys asked.

When Rhys got closer, Enko slammed a fist at him. So unexpected that the Life fox didn’t have time to duck out of the way and it hit Rhys’ arm.

“Oh, fuck off, Enko. You agreed to this too. You don’t get to be mad at me just because I drew the short straw and had to make the final decision,”

Rhys snarled, ready to lunge at the Fire fox.

We arrived at her door quickly, all of us walking at a very non-human speed to get to Dove, standing outside as we all looked between us deciding who should open the door.

I could sense her inside. Enko pushed past me, turning the knob and I all but ran to keep up with him, wondering if he planned to blame this whole misunderstanding on the rest of us.

Dove sat in her bed with her back against the wall and a book in her hands when we all appeared in the doorway, sheepishly filtering in. Her eyes fixated on one spot on a page. She wasn't reading.

"You okay, Dove?" I asked.

She snapped her gaze to me like she was throwing rocks. Her chest rose slowly—dangerously—as she spent a moment to glare at each of us. Spending the longest on Seven. I guess he had actually drawn the short stick, because most of her anger fixated on him.

"Want to go kill some demons with your new weapon, Fated? It turned out so nicely."

Seven was being nice. This definitely wasn't a great situation. Not even a trace of an insult there.

Dove's eyes narrowed, a vibration growing in her throat as she spoke, "Get out of my room."

I raised up my hands, half trying to calm her down, and the other half being prepared to block the book she was threatening to throw our way. "Hey, it's over now, Dove. You know the truth now and you understand—"

"Leave me alone,"

she snarled.

We all looked at each other. We weren't equipped to handle her when she was mad. It was worse than Enko. He was a fire that raged in all directions, but Dove was an unpredictable flame that might lash out at any of us like a whip.

“Try to calm down, Dove,”

Rhys said.

Bad idea.

Dove jumped up, throwing the book next to her on the bed—and thankfully not at us—and charged at Rhys. Jabbing a finger at his chest. “You knew this whole time. All of you have been lying to me.”

Her anger began to dissipate, tears welling up in her eyes.

Seven rushed forward, taking her in his arms. Thankfully, she accepted the hug without lashing out. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Fated,”

Seven whispered. “I wanted to tell you. The others didn’t want to.”

“But we mated,”

she cried to Seven. “I trusted you.”

“She doesn’t even understand,”

Rhys said, crossing his arms and we all looked at him incredulously.

How the fuck could he say that? Was he trying to fuck up this for all of us? All our gazes turned on him, including Dove’s. Good, rather have the wrath aimed his way than mine. Considering I’d ordered and orchestrated the whole fucking plan.

“Understand what?”

Dove snarled.

“How dangerous he is,”

I said. “He ordered Enko to attack humans. Breaking our sacred vows.”

She faltered. “But that means...”

Enko bowed his head shamefully. “That I went rogue.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Damon

Twelve Years Ago

Go to bed, the Lord of Nightmares screamed at me within my head. This is no place for a kid. What will my employees think?

Employees, that's what he liked to call them.

Fifteen years, two tails, and nearing adulthood had done nothing for his respect for me, even as his protege. I stomped up the stairs of the club to the penthouse apartment. The club my father owned wasn't the best place to raise a child, but he'd managed it somehow, with the strippers as surrogate mothers.

It was a nice place, especially given it was in the city of Lethe, the slum of the kitsune world. A large bar took up most of the entertaining room, and we even had a stripper pole. Sometimes I even got to see the show, depending on how drunk the Lord of Nightmares was.

Every teenage boys' dream.

I crashed onto my bed, feeling the soothing thump of the music down below. Over the years it became my lullaby. Something to keep my mind off the shit cards I'd been dealt.

My life? Asshole father, expensive tutor, penthouse suite, and power. And the neon lights dancing on the ceiling.

When the floors didn't vibrate, I wondered who my mother was. What kind of scary bitch would willingly have a child with the Lord of Nightmares? Especially if she knew what it entailed: a lifetime contract to any male heir. My platinum blond hair held a clue, but my gray eyes? Those were all him.

I already slept during the day, just like always. Night was when I felt most comfortable, it was the only time I could play around in the world of dreams. Oh, and did people have some fucked up dreams.

"Go and fucking get it, boy!"

came a screaming male voice from the streets through my cracked window. I exhaled. Just another night in Lethe. The fucked up shit was always worse in real life than in dreams.

"And don't get ripped off this time!"

a woman screamed.

"If he does, I'll fucking kill him myself. That's all the money I have,"

came the male voice again.

I exhaled again, rising from the bed like a zombie and peering down at the streets below.

The boy had bruises all up his arms. I suspected more that were hidden under his clothes. He was two or three years younger than me, auburn hair. He was scrawny, like he hadn't had a good meal...ever.

What kind of parents sent their kid out at midnight?

I checked their minds, just a probe of curiosity.

Drugs.

The boy wandered off down the street, walking with too much comfort for his age in this fucking hellhole city. He walked like he'd been shouldered with the weight of adulthood. I almost envied his freedom. Something I never had.

I opened the window and crawled out onto the fire escape to watch the city below.

Lethe came alive at night.

Somehow the colors stood out more against the black. The rainbow of neon lights, the pink feather boas, the mini skirts made of blue shiny plastic. The blacklights outside of the club made everything glow like a cat's eyes.

The boy returned to the shitty apartments across the street and he lingered outside, dodging the requests made by the filth of the city.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

the man asked, grabbing hold of his arm. “It's been over an hour.”

The woman came outside too, leaning against the wall, a cigarette perched between her lips. Her black eye makeup looked like it had been continuously reapplied for weeks and never scrubbed completely clean. Her lipstick looked fifty layers deep and clung to the butt of the cigarette. Her hand curled out like a skeleton, her painted nails chipping.

My night vision was better since I'd gotten my newest tail.

The boy handed over the clear plastic baggie. Her eyes trailed over it with disappointment before wrath crossed her face. “You fucked up again, ungrateful little shit.”

The man snagged the bag from her, holding up to the dim street lights before glaring down at the boy, raising his hand.

I sat up in shock as he hit the boy in front of everyone, for all eyes to see. But it was Lethe, so nobody gave a shit. The man raised his hand again, “This is the last time, Enko.”

I jumped up from my nook in the window, preparing to go down the emergency ladder. The boy scampered backwards and fell to the ground, and this time the man’s foot raised, knee bent, launching forward to kick the boy—

The street below lit up as bright as day, red flames bursting from the boy like a bomb going off. I was confused until the realization struck me.

He was a kitsune.

I jumped down the last couple floors, landing on my feet. My ankles took most of the blow, but they would heal quickly enough.

“What’s wrong with him?”

the woman was screaming.

“Enko!”

the man yelled, reaching into the flames, but he snapped his hand back as he touched the fire.

The humans all looked on in confusion, disoriented by the magic.

As the flames cleared, a tiny reddish brown fox cowered where the boy had been.
“You think you can challenge me?”

the man yelled.

I wasn't going to make it in time.

I found the man's Mind and the woman's too. Tugging at their worst nightmares, bringing them to their knees as they screamed, clawing at their hair like they could tear the memories from their heads.

I stood between them and the small kitsune. The little fox cowered beneath me. “I won't hurt you, Enko.”

I told him. Their pain dragged out as I reached down, picking up the kitsune kit. “You won't have to worry about him anymore.”

I let their pain go, but their eyes remained wide, fearing that same suffering to return.

“You can't take my son,”

the man growled. He was kitsune too, but even in his older age, he wasn't as strong as me.

I narrowed my eyes and the man threw his hands up in defeat. “You're that boy, aren't you? The Lord of Nightmares' bastard?”

He laughed. “Fine, you can have him. Won't be long before you realize how useless he is anyway and he'll be running home. And he won't have a home to run to

anymore.”

I turned and headed back toward the club. One of the working girls at the back entrance rushed toward me. “Damon! What are you doing out so late? You know your father doesn’t want you exposed to this.”

She looked down to the shaking fox in my arms and she reached out to stroke his fur. “And who’s this little guy?”

“Enko. The Lord of Nightmares took him in,”

I lied as I passed by her.

Nobody questioned me as I walked through the club. I covered the boy’s eyes as topless women served alcohol to the patrons. Others gave lap dances. He was too young for that shit. But I guess I had turned out all right. And it was better than whatever shithole he had been in.

I climbed the stairs and the Fire fox leaned away from me. Afraid of my grip. Unable to control his tail yet, flickering between dark coal to bright flames.

When we got up to the penthouse, I opened the door and finally set him down, closing the door behind us. “This will be your home now, Enko. For as long as you need it.”

He looked up at me curiously. His fiery tail twitched as he stayed close to me as I crossed the large living room. “So…”

I began awkwardly, gesturing to the room as though I’d ever had a friend to show it to, pointing out the rooms. “This is it. Kitchen, living room…”

Enko spent a moment looking around and fell behind. He quickly caught up, cowering at my feet.

“First time shifting, huh? Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it, little dude.”

I wished he could talk back.

I showed him my room and as the hours passed, he curled onto the bed, falling asleep. He shifted back into a human boy at some point and I covered him with a blanket, letting him sleep. His fox ears twitched, and I knew a tail was under the blankets. The first time shifting, it was common for a kitsune to keep them when they shifted into a human for a day or so.

He looked so peaceful as he slept, but his bruises leered at me like angry demons. I wanted to murder his parents. Instead, I opted to haunt their dreams, letting them have an entire night of terror instead. It would soon become my favorite hobby.

The door of the penthouse opened, laughter coming in with the Lord of Nightmares. Enko snapped himself awake, fear seizing him at the sound. The laughter of multiple women rang out from the living room. It wouldn’t be an ideal meeting for the young fox, but it also meant the Lord of Nightmares was in a good mood, so it was lucky.

I pointed to a pile next to him. “Here’s some clothes for you. They’re a bit big. Your old ones burned when you shifted. I’ll be right back.”

Enko jumped into the fresh clothes, tugging at the drawstrings of the pants and pulling the t-shirt over his head. His voice was so small, but tough. “Thank you...uh, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Damon,”

I told him, giving him a moment while I held the doorknob until he was dressed.

As we exited, the Lord of Nightmares had four women surrounding him, and another had taken to spinning on the pole. He turned around as he heard the door open. “Thought you’d be asleep.”

I shrugged. I didn’t expect him to keep up with my schedule anymore even though I was always awake at this time. He should know that, as a Mind kitsune himself.

Enko appeared at my side, at least a foot and a half shorter than me, my shirt making his size look even more haunted and skeletal.

“Who’s that?”

the Lord of Nightmares asked, standing and swaggering toward me with his drunken state.

“Enko. He’s going to stay here a while.”

“Aww, he’s so cute!”

one of the women slurred.

The Lord of Nightmares’ eyes flicked to the women at his side. Is this the time, Damon? Can’t you see I’m busy?

Sorry, sir. I just didn’t want you to be surprised to find him here, I told him.

What about his parents?

I sent him a series of images, enough to get the picture of the situation earlier clear to

him. Very well, but he's your responsibility. You have to feed him and take care of him. I've already raised one too many.

I almost laughed at the thought. As if he had spent any time raising me. As if Enko were some stray dog I'd taken in. But instead I nodded and tucked the thoughts safely away in the safe deep within my mind. Yes, sir.

I grabbed some leftovers from the fridge and Enko followed me carefully, afraid to make even the smallest sound as I heated the food. When I caught him looking toward the stripper pole, I focused on him sternly, whispering, "Hey, you're too young for that, little dude."

It was nothing I hadn't seen. But that didn't mean he had to.

He followed me back into the room and I pulled out the desk chair, setting the steaming casserole dish down. One of the bartenders had made it for me, one of the ones who knew I was on my own up here most days. "Here, eat something."

He hesitated, but then launched himself forward. I had brought two forks, but he scarfed it down quickly and I ignored my own hunger, hiding the second utensil.

That's when he noticed his own ears and tail and fidgeted as his hands reached up to hide his ears. "It's normal, little dude. It always happens on your first shift."

Didn't your parents tell you? I held back the thought. He didn't have parents any more than I did. But at least mine didn't hit me.

He nodded. I wondered how long it would take before he felt comfortable around me.

Because, goddess, I needed a friend. And it was like she had sent one for me.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Enko

Nine Years Ago

“Goddess, Enko, you know you don’t have to work out all day,”

Damon asked me as he entered our bedroom. He was older than me, but at some point in the past few years I’d grown bigger than him. “You’re a beast.”

That’s where that nickname came from.

He could probably still beat me with his mind games, but I tilted my chin up in greeting, continuing to pull myself up in the doorway. My chin went above the bar. One-hundred.

“Buffing yourself up for our girl?”

We didn’t even know who she was yet. But after my shift, it was confirmed through a blood test that we shared a Fated mate, somewhere out there. Maybe that’s why Damon had felt drawn to help me that night. Maybe the goddess had put him there to rescue me. I hoped our Fated mate was having an easier time out there than we had.

“Believe me, no one’s gonna fuck with you anymore, Enko. You’re bigger than a full-grown man and you’re only fifteen.”

“Yeah, yeah. What did you get for breakfast?”

I muttered as I grabbed some fresh clothes to take a shower.

It was just after sunset, but we had both just woken up. Damon liked to stay awake all night in the dreamworld.

“Do you ever think about anything other than food and working out?”

But he passed over a double portion of salisbury steak from a diner down the road slathered with extra gravy. I popped it open and we hopped out on the fire escape to eat.

We had only just finished when a frantic knocking came at the door.

Damon groaned but hauled himself up and crawled back through the window, opening the door.

A man in a full suit bowed to him. “Lord of Nightmares.”

My breath caught. Damon had never been close to his father. But if he had inherited the title it could only mean one thing.

The Lord of Nightmares was dead.

Damon was deadly still, deadly silent. The Lord of Nightmares never used his voice with the servants and I knew Damon was speaking to the man in his head.

The guard handed over a large black envelope. Damon snatched it from the man and slammed the door in his face. I kept still, watching his every movement. I was sure that Damon was prepared to take over the empire. He had grown to be more powerful than his father as a Mind kitsune since I met him. He had less of an alcohol problem and had more fun doing what he called playing in people’s dreams. Or nightmares.

But I was sure he wasn't expecting to have these responsibilities at only eighteen. And with the new job, he now wouldn't be attending Firefox Academy in three years.

"I'm fine, Enko,"

Damon said, ripping open the envelope and pulling out the paperwork within.

He went to his father's office, sitting in the large black business chair as though it had always been his, laying the papers on the desk in a neat stack and grabbing the fancy pen from its holder.

"What happened?"

Damon's eyes rose from the paperwork. "Demons coordinated an escape from the Hellgate,"

he told me simply. Then he flashed the image in my brain. It wasn't as clear as he normally projected, so I knew it came from the guard.

A massive arch of blue fire, hellfire. Inside the Hellgate, inky black shadows distorted, so nothing on the other side could be seen. It was a gigantic underground cave, and I could see part of the ancient staircase rising into our world, its entrance covered long ago by the city of Lethe, right below our feet. The Lord of Nightmares sprawled in front of the Hellgate as a pack of demons rolled out, high Tier, III and IV. One collapsed on its knees, unable to resist the allure of kitsune blood as its teeth dug into the Lord of Nightmares neck.

When its solid black eyes rose to the Watcher, red blood dripped from its chin.

"Is that enough for you?"

Damon asked calmly. So calm, the opposite of me. Was he okay?

“I’m fine, Enko,”

he repeated.

“So...that’s the Hellgate,”

I said, taking a seat in the fancy armchair across from him as he read through the pages and signed at the bottom of each one. Except it wasn’t his name. He signed each as Lord of Nightmares.

It was a contract.

“A thousand year old contract,”

Damon remarked. “The goddess gave this responsibility to my ancestors when she ruled the earth long ago. Now, it’s my job.”

“Whatever you need, I’m here for you, Damon,”

I said. Just like he had been there for me three years ago.

He nodded solemnly. “I know, Beast.”

Enko

Six Years Ago

“Tell us, or I’ll order my Beast on you,”

Damon snarled at the human tied up in the chair, holding a blackened knife to the man’s throat. Red leaked from the cut onto the fancy white collar of his shirt.

My Fire hardened my muscles, clenched my fists, made my growl louder. I’d never been able to control it, no matter how hard I tried and every year it just got worse. The smallest threat to Damon, my only family, and I was ready to be let loose.

Something within me fought against the demand. But it’s a human.

Humans can be as bad as demons, Enko, Damon told me again.

He always had access to my mind. I gave him free reign of it. Without him in there, I would have already attacked and killed the human man. And we needed him alive.

“You made a deal with our enemies,”

I snarled. The voice wasn’t my own. It couldn’t be. But I’d become so used to it, letting the Fire burn freely within me and engulf everything. Everything that threatened us.

I was ready to dash forward, bite down on the soft flesh of his neck without even

shifting into my fox form.

He has a Mind demon protecting his thoughts, Damon told me. We'll need to kill it before we can get the truth out of this one. It has to be nearby. Go and find it, Beast.

I was already on the move, my supernatural speed crossing the room in half a second, my strength ripping the door open. It smashed against the wall, leaving an imprint. I'd hear about that later from Damon. But when the Fire reigned with full fury, I didn't care.

Damon's thoughts guided me to where I needed to go, flashes of imagery he culled from the human as he continued the physical torture. Not really his style, but we would do what needed to be done to guard the Hellgate. Protect the last true stronghold between Hell and our world.

I found the street. Nothing.

Keep looking, Damon told me.

The apartment building looked just like the one I'd been forced into as a child. That's how everything looked in Lethe. Dilapidated and decrepit, no lights but full of yelling and screaming, flickering lights, and chipping paint. The goddess hadn't meant for me to stay there. Only to endure over a decade of torture to make me stronger. I took a long whiff of the air. I could smell demons when they were close enough. They always smelled. Sometimes sweet, like a succubus, sometimes brimstone like they were already burning or had just come to earth, ordered by their masters.

There's nothing here, I yelled back through our connection.

Shit, Damon responded. Come back. I was already running before he said the words, shifting into my fox form, now with my three fiery tails chasing me. I'd earned each

of them along the way, since the first. That one, the goddess gifted me.

The second came after taking out my first Tier III, after at least a hundred of the lesser demons. The third was my most recent addition, from a group of wraiths. Damon made me handle them on my own, but he had prepared me. He could have taken them out, but he wanted me to become strong. He needed me to be strong.

I slammed through the door in my fox form, on all fours as Damon was pressed against the wall by the human man.

Kill him, Beast, Damon ordered.

I hesitated. I fucking hesitated as my best friend choked for air.

But when the human looked at me, his eyes were the blackened pits of a demon.

Possession. I wasn't familiar with the demon type, it was a Mind demon. That was Damon's specialty.

I charged quickly and ripped out the man's throat, enjoying the flavor of blood like some kind of demon myself. Enjoying the fury as it pulsed through me.

Damon heaved for air as I shredded the human's flesh.

"Dybbuk,"

Damon gasped when the human was dead and I licked its blood from my paws. "Shift back, Beast."

I did as ordered, hurrying up to him still in the nude to check on him, but he held out an arm to stop me.

“I’m fine.”

Then he paused, straightening his back, smoothing his suit. “You didn’t sense it?”

I shook my head.

“It couldn’t have been fooling both of us. It’s only a Tier III, it was focusing its attention on me. You are still weak, Enko. You need to work on that. Control yourself long enough to analyze the situation.”

I nodded, eager for his approval, his knowledge. As I always had been. “Dybbuk?”

“Mind demon, specializing in possessions. It’s difficult to tell unless you are close to the person and know their personality. And this fleabag was just your typical evil to begin with.”

He glared down at the shredded human flesh and a smoky spirit rising from it beginning to burn with blue hellfire. “We’ll need new carpets again.”

Damon strode toward his office, stopping for only a moment as he glared back at me. “And for the love of the goddess, don’t fucking hesitate next time. I could have been killed.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Damon

Present Day

Their strategy had worked. They had effectively turned my own Fated mate against me. I had even met her before Rhys had. Clever fox. Clever fuck.

At least I could still infiltrate her mind and try to gain her trust, even if the others tried to keep her away from me. Lied to her about me.

Maybe she connected me to all her bad memories because that was where she spent her time while dreaming.

I waited patiently as I sipped my drink, careful not to overindulge. I'd need complete control tonight to reverse the damage done.

And while I waited, I lingered on those memories, the ones that had started it all. There was one mind I didn't like to have too much time in, and that was my own.

I could feel Dove enter the dreamworld and I relaxed in my office, leaning back in the chair. The penthouse was empty. It had been empty since Enko had left for the academy. When those pricks turned him against me too.

It wasn't my fault that this was my job. My responsibility. That Enko helped me keep control of the city.

Was I truly expected to bear this burden alone?

The fires burned, the nightmare almost as familiar as my own at this point. I looked around and found Dove instantly. I could feel her.

Her white hair billowed, the heat of the fire causing its own wind. She watched the temple burning calmly. Every time she came here, she strengthened herself against the fear. She was getting stronger every night.

Her eyes snapped back to me as she felt my presence. “You’re here.”

“Of course I am, my little bird,”

I said, moving to her side.

“I thought I told you not to call me that.”

“So everyone else is allowed a name for you, but not me?”

My expression was stone, but it panged at my heart.

“I don’t even know you. I barely know Rhys still.”

Rhys, the one who turned them all against me. Like I was the bad guy and we weren’t all terrible for our innocent Fated mate. “Well, what do you want to know?”

“How long have you been coming to my dreams?”

She spun around suddenly, staring up at me with those brown eyes. But the dream lacked the color of real life. Everything in her nightmare was black and white and red. The white of her robes, the red of blood and fire, and the black of coal after the fire raged.

She was beautiful, more alluring than I ever could have imagined a woman could be. The fires blazing around us made her a soldier after a deadly battle. She carried a new weapon, an odachi. It was connected to her spirit, even in the dreamworld. She could use it here, if a Mind demon tried to attack her. But I made sure to keep her safe from other devious beings like me. That was as much my job as guarding the Hellgate. More so, even.

“Since the night I first laid eyes upon you,”

I told her. “I couldn’t keep away, but I kept hidden, just watching. I didn’t want to scare you. I needed to know you, Dove. To know that you were okay.”

She nodded, turning back to the burning temple. “The others will be mad if they knew I was speaking to you instead of blocking you out. But if the goddess Fated us, I know I need to give you a chance.”

She was religious. That much I had figured out. Anyone raised in a temple would have had the old ways beaten into them from a young age. And she had all but been born there. “Praise to the goddess.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. The link between us twanged like a guitar string. “Don’t be a smartass, Damon.”

I smiled. “I heard about your second tail. Congratulations.”

“Heard about it, or saw it in the mindspace?”

she asked rhetorically as she inclined her head. “How many do you have?”

I bristled. It was that distrust I had of everyone now. Even my own Fated mate. Ever since Enko had betrayed me. “Can I trust you, Dove? Or are you here to spy on me

for the Archfox?”

Her head tilted, “It is you that needs to earn trust. After how you treated Enko.”

“I brought his memories to the forefront of his mind. Reminded him of our bond. Did he not tell you? My job isn’t a choice, Dove. It’s an obligation I was born into, my soul was promised to the goddess a thousand years ago due to my bloodline.”

“No, he didn’t tell me. Everyone only warns me about you. But for some reason, I feel drawn to you.”

“We’re Fated. Did you expect anything less?”

“You can trust me, Damon. I’m not here to spy on you, only to get to know you.”

My brows rose skeptically, but our time was running short. “In that case, I have eight tails. As many as your precious Archfox.”

I could feel Enko awakening and my heart fell. Time passed quicker in the dreamworld without me altering it. It was like the whole night was gone with just a few words exchanged between us. I touched her arm, keeping her in the dream for a moment longer.

“Can I see you again? Can I have your number?”

She laughed, a lovely musical sound, “Something tells me you already have it.”

She was right, I’d stolen the digits before she even knew I lurked within her mind. “I’ll text you.”

I was ripped from the dream as she awoke. I could sense the others’ minds, but they

were blurrier than my Fated mate. I begrudgingly stood up, heading out to patrol around the Hellgate and ensure nothing had escaped in my moments of leisure.

Dove

“I talked to Damon last night,”

I said calmly after classes as we ate dinner. Everyone’s gaze snapped to mine.

Rhys slammed down his fork. “Are you insane, vixen?”

“He’s dangerous, Dove. You can’t trust him,”

Kairos snapped.

“I didn’t say I trusted him. I said I talked to him.”

“Don’t you know what he’s done?”

Rhys continued.

I rolled my eyes. “No, and you still haven’t told me.”

“Yes, we did. He’s worse than a demon. He tried to turn Enko into a rogue kitsune. Turn him into a coldblooded killer. Into one of his henchmen. Into a—

Enko remained silent, so I turned to my giant mate, not letting him finish. “Enko?”

“Into a Beast,”

Enko growled. Fire burned behind his eyes.

“He told me that sometimes humans are as bad as demons,”

I said. “It’s one of the first things he ever told me.”

“Sounds like something he’d say,”

Enko mumbled.

Kairos exhaled loudly. “Dove, we told you not to speak to him. Let alone trust his word.”

I frowned. “He’s mine.”

“Great, she’s feral for him. No matter. She won’t be speaking to him again tonight. We have a contract,”

Rhys said, passing a small card over to Seven. “Tier IV. Hopefully you managed to get some sleep last night during your late night chat with the demon.”

“Where’s its web?”

Seven asked, passing the card over to Enko.

“Lethe. Where else? If the Lord of Nightmares could do his fucking job, it wouldn’t have gotten so far from the Hellgate,”

Rhys snarled.

“That’s a lot of demons for one kitsune to handle. And he doesn’t need to be in the

dreamworld to talk to me anymore. He has my phone number,”

I said, returning to the topic.

“What do you think, Enko? Is she safe to speak to him?”

“He won’t hurt her, if that’s what you mean. But he’ll be out for revenge. And with as much power as he has, he’ll get it.”

“What’s the contract?”

I asked, stroking the handle of my new weapon like it was my pet. It purred, dying for its first kill.

Seven passed the card over.

Jorogumo, Tier IV

2459 Main Street

“Can I have this one?”

“If you have to ask, Fated, it’s not really your kill. How about you fight me for it?”

Seven muttered, earning a look from Rhys.

We left the dishes on the table as we prepared to leave, but some mysterious maid always came in to clean them up. We headed out the front door and toward Seven’s Land Rover. It was the only vehicle we had that was big enough to fit all of us.

I dashed toward the passenger side, but Rhys beat me to it, flashing a winning smile.

When I groaned, he said, “I’m not gonna be squashed between Enko and Kairos, vixen. And I know you like to be.”

I crawled into the back middle seat as we drove to Lethe. Enko’s arm stretched around me and Kairos kept his hand on my thigh.

“You’ll be careful around him, right?”

Enko said. I knew who he was talking about. The Lord of Nightmares. “Don’t let him make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I won’t. Are you okay with me talking to him?” I asked.

Everyone in the car was listening, but they let me have this moment alone with Enko. He tucked me closer to his side, kissing the side of my head. “He’s your Fated.”

He paused. “I’m sorry we hid him from you. We thought we knew what was best for you.”

“It’s okay,”

I whispered back.

We pulled into the city as night fell, just as all the unfavorites were starting to crawl out from their holes. Neon lights lit up the roads and the street lights blinked on and off from neglect. Smoke always hung on the air like a smelly cloud in Lethe.

Seven parked in front of an apartment building. Its bricks had been red at one point, but now they were covered in the grime of the city and appeared more of an orangish-brown.

A fancy gray car pulled up behind us, a Rolls-Royce and all the guys stiffened. “Did you tell him we were here, Dove?”

Kairos asked.

I twisted my head around to see what they were talking about. A driver stepped out from the vehicle and walked to the back, opening the door. Damon stepped out like royalty, wearing a suit almost as fine as Kairos’ attire.

He was so much more handsome in real life, unlike the static of the dreamworld like the haze of trying to remember a dream after waking. I jittered with excitement at just the sight of him. Enko and Kairos blocked me from getting out so I crossed my arms and waited as Seven and Rhys exited the Land Rover.

“Good evening,”

Damon said, his words muffled by the closed doors, flashing the whites of his teeth.

Rhys and Seven stood side by side. The Archfox kept his arms crossed. “She told us you visited her last night. That you spoke.”

“We did,”

Damon agreed.

“What did you speak about?”

Seven asked.

Damon looked directly at me, like he could see through the near black tint of the windows. “That’s between me and Dove.”

“I know you rule this city. But I am the Archfox, and you will follow my rules if you want to be with Dove. No manipulating her thoughts or dreams. No making her do anything she doesn’t want to do. And no killing of humans. Let them handle their own kind.”

Damon frowned. “You have your minions, Rhys, and I have mine. You don’t have the slightest inclination of what it takes to guard the Hellgate. If you’d like to switch jobs, by all means. But until that point, I will protect this city however I need to.”

“You’re doing a great job at that. Letting a Tier IV out to pillage the humans. Not that you care about humans,”

Rhys responded. “Did your father ever let that happen? Or are you just his ever-failing bastard?”

“The former Lord of Nightmares didn’t have a weakening Hellgate. The final war is coming, Rhys. There’s nothing I can do to stop the entire flood of demons coming at us. All kitsune need to stand together for this war, as the goddess intended.”

Damon paused and laughed. “That’s right, you don’t believe in her. How does Dove feel about that? You must be aware of her beliefs by now.”

Rhys snorted, but I could feel his discomfort at the accusation. “She wouldn’t let something so small come between us.”

My enthusiasm overflowed now. “Can I get out? Please?”

Seven and Rhys turned toward the car, hearing my question. Rhys opened the door and Enko stepped out, Kairos hurrying out the other side and around the vehicle. And then Enko held out his hand as he helped me from the car like we were as fancy as the Lord of the Nightmares.

Fancy is not the word I'd use to describe him, Fated.

The four of them stood around me as the Lord of Nightmares waited several feet in front of us. I stepped forward slightly, making sure the others wouldn't embarrass me as I got to see my final Fated mate. Just being around all of them made me feel complete.

"Hello, Dove. Would you mind if I joined you tonight? I want to make sure you're safe against a Tier IV."

"She is safe with us,"

Seven snapped as Enko growled.

I ignored Enko's growl and Seven's response as I nodded. "I'd love that."

Even though killing demons wasn't exactly the perfect first date.

Okay, well, maybe it was for me.

Rhys, Seven, Enko, and Kairos didn't say a word as Damon closed the distance between us and held my hand. "It's in here,"

he told us, gesturing to the apartment building.

"No shit,"

Seven spat. "Why do you think we're here? We got your contract."

"Seven,"

I warned, but my voice came out like a whine.

Damon held my hand as we walked up to the front of the building and he pulled out a set of keys.

Seven dove forward, slipping into the Shadow Vale and opening the door from the inside, showing off his skills. “I got it, Fated.”

Damon tucked the keys back in his pocket. “I cleared out the building yesterday, but not before it got hold of a few victims. We’ll need to find them as well. If they haven’t been sucked dry yet.”

“Couldn't you kill it yourself?”

Rhys taunted. “Needed us to do some extermination for you?”

Goddess, I could almost see where Seven got it from.

“That’s your job, Your Holiness.”

Damon dipped his head forward sarcastically. “My job is to focus on keeping the Hellgate guarded. Is there a reason it took you an entire day to send someone to kill it? Because the last Archfox never took more than a few hours to send a kitsune group to kill a Tier IV. I can’t afford to have my resources tied up for this long.”

“I’m protecting my soldiers. Can’t just send anyone to deal with a Tier IV,”

Rhys growled.

I nudged my elbow into him. Play nice.

For you, vixen. But he didn't look happy about it.

The apartment building loomed over us with its darkness, no lights turned on within, but the first floor looked fairly normal. It wasn't until after climbing to the second floor that I saw the first traces of the demon. Shiny white threads stretching out like tripwires, barely visible to the eye. We stepped carefully over them to not warn the demon of our presence and climbed another flight of stairs.

Webbing blocked the entirety of the hallway. Enko pulled out his sword and his Fire flowed through it. He took the lead and slashed through the thick strands.

The sight of the demon stole my breath away. At the end of the dark hallway, a flash of red caught my eye. It remained perfectly still, as though we might be stupid enough to fall into its trap.

I nearly tripped over a strand of the web and Kairos caught me before I could fall forward into the sticky trap.

The jorogumo rushed forward at us. I drew my sword, barely getting it out in time as the creature came into sight.

A red and black pattern encased its humanlike face, red diamonds and white spots and black stripes. Its head was attached to a hairy black abdomen, eight legs of a spider stretching out. Other than the red diamond and white dots on its head, it hid easily in the darkness. Those features allowed a small amount of warning to its victims. Probably why it had taken the power out.

Even with her odd features, her face was that of a beautiful woman, enough that if only her face was seen, it may lure in an unsuspecting victim.

The jorogumo's legs easily maneuvered through the web, her legs stretching out and

touching the walls, ceiling, and floor, her speed not hindered by the stickiness. But it came to a full stop as it saw the six of us standing within its destroyed web of perfection.

“Kitsune,”

she whispered, like the echoes of a thousand voices of its victims.

No more hiding now. We all drew our weapons, cutting through its web like a demonic jungle to pin down the fiend. The spidery demon backed up, but it knew as well as us that it had nowhere to go. Trapped in its own tunnel web like one of its own victims.

Enko shifted into his fox form, tails of pure fire whipping around and lighting the webs on fire so we could move faster, spreading like wildfire as the creature retreated. Damon held a rapier out, a hint of purple Mind magic wrapping around the blade. For a moment, I admired his weapon, unable to see in the darkness what metal he had chosen.

We chased it down the hallway until it was wedged against the wall and our sharp metal points.

Seven disappeared, crossing the distance through the Shadow Vale and stabbing at the demon.

One of its legs severed, and it screamed out in pain. “Filthy sneak!”

Its voice caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. I dashed forward, my blade calling for its first taste of demon flesh. The white metal shone as though it had its own light, sapping it from my own magic. “Seven, it’s my kill!”

I yelled at my extremely skilled dark mate.

He glanced in my direction and the demon took the chance, grabbing Seven with two of its remaining legs, webbing shooting from its backside onto him. Two fangs extended from the jorogumo's mouth, aiming for Seven's body.

I swung my odachi down onto its head, slicing into her beautiful face, black blood squirting from the wound.

It dropped Seven, skittering at me now, but I swung my blade in a circle, slicing off the ends of the two legs that tried to grab me. Black blood splattered over me, acidic holes forming in my clothes where it landed. I ignored it as I stepped back, holding my weapon handle with both hands as I stabbed it in the abdomen and twisted the blade within it.

The jorogumo froze and sputtered, its legs curling in on itself as it twitched into death. The blue fire of Hell consumed it, lighting the hallway and filling it with the smell of rotten eggs.

My blade absorbed the black blood as I turned around and sheathed the weapon. Unable to withhold my animated jump of zeal as Enko, Kairos, Rhys, and Damon looked on. Damon gave me a wide smile.

"She's quite something, isn't she?"

he asked the others. "An angel of darkness."

They all glared at him, but he pulled out a black handkerchief and tossed it over to me like their eyes weren't shooting daggers at him. Like it didn't bother him at all, even though I knew it did.

I caught the piece of cloth and when I looked back at Seven who was trying to wipe the sticky web off himself, I struggled to withhold my laugh. “I think Seven needs it more than me.”

We continued forward, finding several pods of spider webs hanging from the ceiling. Snacks the jorogumo had planned to eat. I pulled out my dagger and carefully cut away the webbing from one of the ones in front. My mates rushed forward to the others.

A mouth appeared and I sheathed my dagger, using my hands to rip open an air hole for the abnormally pale gray human. Enko helped hold the person as he reached to rip the strands of web holding it to the ceiling and guided the body to the floor.

“That’s a really nice rapier,”

I told Damon as we worked. “What kind of metal did you choose?”

Damon looked at the weapon with indifference. “I didn’t. It’s an heirloom, said to be made by the goddess herself to guard the Hellgate. Only to be used by the Lord of Nightmares.”

“Oh my goddess, stop trying to brag and impress her,”

Kairos mused scornfully.

We carried the humans down to the first floor, leaving them in the apartment building. Enko burned away most of the webbing that was left, hiding what had occurred within the city.

The humans gaped at us with confusion as we toiled. They would tell this story as if this was some delusional nightmare, and that was for the best. Because in their minds

they would know the supernatural existed and nobody would ever believe them.

Dove

Midterms, another form of hellish torture implemented on the students of Foxfire Academy. I spent every waking moment studying my books, inhaling every piece of new information like air. I had missed two weeks of class and there was no way I would manage to pass. I sprawled my notes all across my bed, the only place large enough to arrange them all.

Maybe I didn't deserve to go to the academy. Maybe all I was good for was being Fated to the most gorgeous and deadly men.

"Top of the class isn't good enough for you?"

Seven slinked into the room and plopped himself on top of all my perfectly organized notes.

"Seven!"

I shouted, trying to push the devilish rogue off, but he easily overpowered me, prowling toward me until I fell back on my pillows and he hovered over me on his hands and knees. His knees crunched over my papers and I glowered at him.

Kairos came in to save the day, a cup of black coffee in a thermos slammed onto the desk as he launched himself at Seven.

Seven was too quick, turning into a cloud of Shadow and disappearing. That didn't stop Kairos from running—no, literally, running—across the top of my bed, leaving a

series of shoe prints over my already crumbled notes.

“Kairos!”

Enko and Rhys appeared, and I knew I needed to stop any further infliction of damage upon my superbly curated notes.

“All of you, stop!”

Seven rematerialized and winked at me. “Oh, come on, Fated. You’ve been studying all weekend. We’re bored. At least have some fun with us for a few minutes.”

I glared, but it slipped into a smile as he leaned forward to kiss my neck and pull me back to a sitting position. “Maybe I’ll make you be my study-buddy, Seven.”

He snapped his head back, “That is not what I meant.”

“That’s actually a good idea, vixen,”

Rhys said with a nod, his eyes twinkled with approval.

“Don’t encourage her, Rhys,”

Seven snapped, standing up. “I’ve had enough studying for a lifetime.”

He grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me to my feet. I stumbled off the bed, but he easily grabbed hold of my waist and pressed me against him until I found my footing. “I’ll take you demon hunting.”

“Why? So you can kill them all before her and laugh about it?”

Kairos said.

Seven shrugged. “She won’t learn by working with weak kitsune. She needs to be faster.”

“She won’t get faster if you kill every opportunity she has to gain tails,”

Enko reached forward. “I’ll go with you this time, little fox.”

I shook my head with determination. “I have to finish studying and then I’m going to sleep. You know a good night’s rest—”

Seven mocked my voice, “Is as important as studying for an exam. Yeah, yeah, you’ve only said it about a dozen times.”

“Once,”

I corrected my dark mate. But my Fated males filed out of the room and let me work.

The next day, I found the exams for Demonology, Elements, and Forging easy, but stressful. I could name all the types of demons and their abilities. I knew the purpose of each of our elements—except my own. The essay on the different metals caused me to stress slightly. And I flew through the Religion and History test faster than any of the other first-years in my testing group, leaving me with only the physical exam.

I waited in a line of students in the cement hallway beneath the school. Everyone chattered excitedly, but I kept my head on straight, going through my sword’s motions in my head, imagining what opponent monsters I would be put against this time.

“Taylor Griffin, pass.”

“Dove Hawthorn, first-year,”

the speaker announced as a fellow student exited, covered with blood, both demon and their own.

“Good luck,”

said the kitsune as they exited, bowing their head slightly.

The door clanked open fully and I entered the cement box. I glanced up, knowing that my name would have caused a stir up above to the students looking down through the glass on the second floor. But from down here, all I could see was the dark hint and shadows. Like they were all Shadow beings watching me through a black mirror.

I kept my odachi sheathed as I strode to the middle of the arena. My Fated males would be watching and Seven expected perfect technique.

The ground was covered in the evidence of previous fights with the other students. Crumbled cement from sharp claws or a tail whip, inky blood mixing with the red of our own. And the smell of brimstone lingered like the pits of Hell.

The door clanked shut fully when I reached the center and the lights went out around me in a series of clunks as I waited. It was the only way to lure demons out of their cages, to make them think it was dark enough to be night. My heart pattered nervously, remembering my first time in the arena. The fear of failure filled my lungs.

But I calmed my racing heart, kept my breath steady. Because I was forged for this. Trained to kill demons so one day I could get my revenge.

Its screech rang out, bloodcurdling and terrifying as it entered the area with me,

hiding within the shadows. Then it sprang out from the darkness, leaping into the air and circling me from above. Where there should have been arms, brown tattered and ripped wings flapped, hollow black eyes that were too small for its head beamed down at me. Its upper half was exposed, breasts showing amid its hazel fluff. Its burnt sienna beak protruded out of its human face as it circled me like prey. If only it knew.

Harpy, Tier II.

An easy opponent compared to what I'd already seen with my talented males by my side. I kept my sword sheathed as I watched it, waiting for it to make the first move, otherwise it might get afraid and make this fight last forever. I couldn't fly.

I had a new set of throwing knives that I'd made in Forging class, but a distance kill didn't seem fair for the poor creature, nor for my odachi that was craving some demonic blood.

It screeched again as it circled, and I knew once it had the confidence, it would launch itself at me. I kept my hand away from gripping my handle, careful not to alert it to my weapon.

The flapping of its wings and my breath were the only sounds, and its occasional screech. And then its beak pointed down. My breath held as I waited for the opportune moment, and when it was only two seconds away, I drew the blade, its metal singing against my sheath. The harpy's black eyes widened, but it was too low in its dive to back out. Its body curled as it twisted in the air so its talons were aimed at my face.

In one clean movement, from unsheathing my weapon into a slice, its head landed on the ground beside me. The head bounced as its body swirled downward, caught in a whirlwind of feathers preventing it from dropping too quickly. Its body began to burn in the air.

The gates buzzed again. I knew another demon had entered the room, and now my sword was already drawn, no tricking this one.

The demon breathed heavily from the shadows and I knew it was watching me from within. With more tails, my night vision may have been strong enough to see it, but all I had was sound to go off of.

Its heavy footfalls plodded the ground, and the slow movement of the creature trying to keep quiet before it went on the attack. Trying to get a good idea of my weaknesses before it showed itself.

I wasn't about to reveal any.

It let out a heavy breath through its nose, like it wasn't getting enough air. Its feet padded against the cement again.

It ran around quickly and I spun in a circle waiting for it to come out, and when it did, I was faced with a monster I thought only existed in lore. I had studied its page in some demonology book. A bull-like head, two horns rising from its forehead, and a nose ring piercing through its septum, It stood upright like a human. Its body was thick and muscular and covered with a layer of black hair. Its hands were oddly human, but with only three large fingers and a thumb wrapping around a club. Bovine hooves trod against the cement, at the top of its muscular thighs, a leather loincloth covered his private parts.

Minotaur, Tier III.

None of the other first-years had to fight anything higher than a Tier II, and I knew the Council of Elders had thrown in the minotaur to test my abilities.

The minotaur roared and blew out heavy breaths from his nose, causing his nostrils to

shake and flare from the pressure. I knew its favorite food—similar to all demons—was human flesh. But it would take kitsune just as easily.

Its hoof skid several times along the ground as it tried to gauge the traction it could get on the smooth cement surface. It leaned its head forward as it charged, losing his sight of me, but pointing the deadly horns directly at my chest. It moved quickly, charging at me, but I stepped out of the way and it skidded to a stop behind me.

I gripped my hilt tightly, wondering if the thin metal blade could cut through the powerful flesh as it charged again.

I swiped the blade in front of me and watched as the metal took on a glow as it drank in the demon black blood.

The essence of my blade filled me with the power and courage of a minotaur, confident that I could win as I swung it around again, this time feeling as the blade swiped through its body and hit bone. I pulled the blade back and swiped forward again, but the powerful creature wasn't deterred by its many bleeding gashes. They were all just on the surface of its thick skin. I'd need to damage something more vital to take this one down.

With its bowed angle, taking off its head would be a hard task as I danced around the minotaur, cutting and slicing at its beefy coat to no avail.

I aimed for its heart, but its hand smacked my blade away, causing the metal to twang pleasantly as we continued to dance.

It reached for my hair, but I ducked, not letting it get a grip on me as I spun around, determined to get a high grade. I skewered him again, this time through its stomach. And while it gushed blood, the minotaur only growled, heightening his anger.

I stabbed again and again, using my faster speed against the creature, coming up behind it and piercing underneath its ribcage, trying to hit anything of value.

Finally, it collapsed to the ground. I was out of breath as I waited for the sound of the gate to open again.

Instead, the speaker sputtered to life. "Dove Hawthorn: Pass."

Dove

As a reward for finishing midterms, Firefox Academy put on a ball for all the students. As I prepared in my room, a certain Fated male decided to make things difficult.

“No, I’m not dancing with you, Fated,”

Seven snarled, still wearing his normal clothes as the rest of us already were dressed. “Do not fucking pout at me. You’re not going to convince me. What will the rest of the students think if they see me dancing?”

His lip curled up in disgust at the word.

Enko sidled up next to me. “I don’t know, maybe that you love our girl and want to make her happy?”

“I have other ways to show my love,”

Seven argued.

Rhys laughed, “Maybe leaving a dead demon or two at the foot of her bed as a gift?”

“No, I think he was talking about eating her out and gushing about strawberries.”

Enko grinned.

I blushed, but none of the men seemed to notice.

Seven bristled, “Goddess, you two are such ass—”

“Calm down, all three of you.”

Kairos entered the room with his serious face on until his eyes glazed over as he looked at me. He immediately strode forward, pressing his lips to mine. He kissed me deeply and when he released me he grinned sheepishly. “On second thought, maybe we should stay in tonight.”

“Stop thinking with your cock, Kairos. She wants to go,”

Enko interrupted. His fists didn’t clench. Progress. He knew how I’d feel if he hurt one of my other Fated males. And if there was one thing that kept Enko’s feral side in check, it was knowing something would upset me.

The floor length gown I had chosen was black—obviously—with gold embellishments and black gemstones embedded across the bodice and trailing down the skirt like scattered black stars. Kairos had gotten it for me when he realized I wasn’t so quick to wear any of the other fifteen he’d purchased for me in all different colors and styles. When I told him he could return them, he merely insisted that another occasion to wear each of them would come up. Now they were stuffed into the closet never to be worn. I’d have to secretly donate the rainbow prism of dresses.

Rhys checked his watch. “We’re going to be late.”

“The driver is waiting outside. Everyone ready?”

Kairos said, eyeing Seven but thinking better of saying anything as we all headed down the stairs.

Seven used his super-speed to get into a suit and even managed to slip a black rose into his jacket pocket before we made it out the door. “I swear all of you are slow.”

Outside, Kairos had a vehicle waiting, a long black limousine with a driver in a pure black suit holding the door open for us.

Kairos gestured for me to go first and I took his hand as I stepped in, finding a square area of black leather seating and I immediately crossed the open space. In the center there was a champagne bottle in a bucket of ice and five glasses.

I frowned. Kairos had gone out of his way to disclude Damon. But at least I got to see him in my dreams, a private date none of the others ever got to attend.

The others crawled in after me and I had a small giggle at Enko trying to fit through the smaller car door, mumbling something about a Hummer. Seven and Rhys sat on either side of me, while Enko and Kairos planted themselves across from us.

Once we were all in, Kairos popped the champagne, spilling over the luxurious carpeting without a care as he poured a glass and handed the first to me.

“To being Fated,”

he said as we all held a glass and outstretched it toward the center.

The glasses clinked and I took a small bubbly sip. Before I knew it, the car came to a stop and we were in front of Firefox Academy.

The school was lit up like the millions stars in the sky, flashing along the stone walls. Torches of the Forgefire lit our way, and Holy Foxes stood beside each of them. I knew it was their duty to make sure none went out on the chilly winter night.

The symphony of music fluttered to my ears, violins, a cello, and a viola of a string quartet growing louder as the students stood in line in their fanciest outfits, but all I could do was observe each of my handsome Fated.

First, Rhys, who had been a tad bit ashamed to be around me at first. But now he stood in a bottle green suit, slightly darker than his eyes.

Seven, in all black to match me but his ruby eyes assessed the crowds around us, scanning for a demon to kill.

Enko, so huge that I wondered what tailor had custom-made his perfect tuxedo.

Kairos, his tie sparkling with black gemstones that matched mine and holding out his arm for me. “Dove,”

he offered and I grasped his arm, mainly to guide me as my eyes wandered over the beautiful decorations.

Seven possessed my other arm without permission and I grinned, leaning over to plant a wet kiss on his cheek, if only for those ruby eyes to glare again. Rhys and Enko took positions behind us as we walked up the steps inside the academy.

Inside was even more magnificent. White flowers hung from the ceilings, twisting around the white and copper lights. Couples danced and I was giddy with excitement at the thought of dancing with each of my Fated mates. Then I frowned when I remembered one was missing. If not for ruining the night, I would have chastised them for it, but they clearly wanted me to have a good night. Besides, I had made other plans for Damon.

“A dance, little fox?”

Enko asked first.

The others glared with envy.

But I took his arm, assuring them, “I’ll dance with all of you.”

Seven’s arms crossed. “Not me. I want something else from you instead.”

Enko swept me out onto the dancefloor, his hands gripping around my waist as he twisted us in circles under the lights, not a care in the world for the other couples around us, who scooted away like my hunky giant was something to be afraid of.

When we finished, we found our way back to my group of jealous and grumpy males.

“I need a drink,”

I said, and Enko scared away all those around the refreshment table. I only got a sip before Kairos took his turn, and then Rhys.

The students all around us murmured. The music stopped. Rhys stopped dancing and tucked me close to his chest, his eyes glaring at the entrance.

Damon stood, wearing a fancy pinstripe suit, his blond hair slicked back. Some of the students gasped, but a rope of Fate tugged me toward him.

“Why is the Lord of Nightmares here?”

some student whispered.

Rhys held tightly to me, holding me in place. “Vixen, don’t you dare,”

he whispered in my ear.

But then Damon zoomed across the space between us, causing at least three of the students to scream. “May I have this dance, Dove?”

My smile couldn’t hide my excitement, even if all the guys were glaring at me. “Yes.”

He was so polite and gentlemanly, and smelled of amazing orangy citrus, how could I refuse?

He took my hand and Rhys’ hand remained planted on my waist until I gave him that look. And he finally released me.

“She’s Fated to the Lord of Nightmares too?”

I heard the students whispering.

Damon danced me through all the steps of a fancy dance even though I didn’t know them, and we were the center of attention in the room. The bright lights shone down upon us like the most beautiful starlight. The students surrounded us in a circle, whether because our dance was so beautiful or because the Lord of Nightmares was so scary, I didn’t know.

Seven snagged me away. “My turn, Fated.”

He didn’t ask for my permission, or Damon’s. But Damon bowed his head and backed away. But a circle of fear remained around him as Seven danced with me now.

“I thought you said you didn’t dance.”

I beamed. I loved being the center of their attention. If only I could dance with all of them at once.

“Stop grinning at me like a fool, Fated. I was only saving you.”

“I think you have a twinge of jealousy. Your eye is twitching. Do you even know how to dance?”

Seven glared. “I can give you more pleasure when we’re not dancing, Fated.”

I grinned harder.

The song ended and Seven still clung tightly to me, holding my waist possessively as we joined the others and allowed the other students to have a turn on the dancefloor without shitting themselves in fear.

“What are you doing here, Lord of Nightmares?”

Kairos growled.

“Just ‘Lord’ is fine, Kairos. No need to be formal.”

Damon winked to show he was joking.

Kairos glared. He didn’t like being challenged. “That’s not an answer.”

“I wanted to see my Fated. And she wanted to see me. Seems our girl loves to dance—”

“Our girl?”

Enko growled.

“Yes, Beast. Our girl,”

the Lord of Nightmares responded.

“Oh my goddess, can you guys just get along tonight,”

I groaned as I noticed we were gaining an audience as my giant mate and my mysterious mate’s hostility blazed. I pivoted to Damon. “I’m glad you could make it.”

He bowed to me. “Thank you for the invitation, Dove.”

That turned the outrage onto me.

“Vixen—”

“Little fox—”

“Fated—”

“Dove, you wily fox. Are you looking to get yourself killed?”

Kairos demanded, silencing the others.

“Maybe.”

I winked as Damon placed a corsage of black roses on my wrist. By the end of the night, my cheeks were sore from smiling so hard.

Dove

In the back of the Archfox's residence, there was a beautiful area. Kairos guided me behind the trees as we explored the property, walking with me through the fallow garden. I gasped as I saw it.

Lights cast over the water, flickering as the light breeze caused ripples. The sun had set, but a purple ring remained in the sky.

"I didn't know there was a pool!"

I squealed with excitement as I frolicked forward. Turning around to smile at Kairos, I made circles with my arms spread wide. "We should go swimming!"

Kairos smiled. "I think you're just hot and feral after bouncing around on Seven's lap that entire drive home from the academy."

I blushed, but nudged his shoulder. "Come swimming with me."

Enko's laugh rumbled from the doorway and I waved him over. "Enko! Are you finally finished working out? I haven't seen you since we got home."

Kairos smiled and moved forward to kiss me, but hands grasped my waist and spun me around. Seven materialized behind me and locked me in a possessive kiss. "What about me, Fated?"

"Goddess, I haven't been able to get any peace and quiet since the four of you moved

in. I thought, hey, it's almost winter, maybe they won't come outside and bug me, but of course not."

Rhys sat on a cushioned lawn chair hidden in an alcove of trees but he watched on with a smile. "But the pool is heated if you want to. Since you've already distracted me."

"Okay, well...I'm going swimming,"

I mused. "If you want to join us."

Enko immediately tugged his shirt off and stepped out of his shorts, leaving me with a full view of his huge naked body. I squeaked slightly...eyes mesmerized by something in particular, before he ran and jumped into the pool, causing an enormous splash.

Seven shifted into his fox form and then back into human form to save himself the time of stripping down, dashing into the water.

"Skinny dipping?"

Rhys said with a teasing grin on his face. If I didn't know any better, I'd say having us around was good for the lonely solitary fox. He needed some unwanted company to loosen him up.

My hands moved to the hem of Kairos' shirt but his hands immediately caught my wrists. "Don't, Dove."

I stared up at Kairos, raising my eyebrows. "Are you going to join us?"

Seven laughed from in the water. "Kairos doesn't get naked, Fated."

Kairos glared at my dark mate, but I frowned. “Why not?”

The Storm fox shook his head, and it was only then that I realized that I’d never seen my golden fox without clothes on. Even when he shifted into fox form, he was careful to hide himself from me.

“Don’t you trust me?”

I began, feeling uncomfortable taking my shirt off when one of my Fated mates refused to.

“I just don’t feel comfortable naked, Dove. It’s more of myself than I care to show.”

“But you’re perfect,”

I said quietly, turning to Enko and Seven in the pool for support. Was it my own scars? Did he think they were ugly and imperfect? Did he not want to be naked around me because it encouraged me?

Rhys stood up from his chair and joined us at super-speed. “It has nothing to do with you, vixen.”

Kairos exhaled and pulled his shirt off.

I saw it immediately, even before I saw his perfectly carved muscles, his six pack abs, that delicious trail in the center of his sculpted V leading to his—

Seven cleared his throat, smirking at me. I was projecting all my thoughts and quickly put up a shield around myself.

A multitude of blue scars marked his shoulder and a good portion of his chest, one of

the lines nearly reaching his belly button. Prominent and painful scarring, forked and scattered like...lightning. I strode forward, wrapping my arms around Kairos, placing a hand over it. Heat came from the lightning-esque scar. But the first thing I felt wasn't sympathy. It wasn't understanding. It wasn't companionship for having a similar scar. No, the first thing was rage.

Who dared harm my Fated mate?

"It was my father,"

he said calmly, but I could see that silent storm raging in his eyes, those emotions he was hiding. "For disobedience."

"It almost killed him,"

Rhys said.

Kairos glared at the Archfox, "Shut up, Rhys. It's not your place to—"

"Oh, Kairos,"

I said, bringing my lips to his scar. "You don't need to hide from me."

I paused, meeting his eyes. "From us. We're a family. The goddess clearly meant for us to be together because we are all so similar."

I glanced at Rhys. I didn't know their stories, but I knew it must be as dark as the rest of ours. And I knew we were made for each other. Goddess or no goddess, some external force sensed that we all needed the others. And it knew we cried out to be family.

Kairos tucked me close into his chest, kissing the top of my head. “It’s a lot of problems for one little kitsune to take in. Are you sure you can handle it?”

Of course, Seven decided it was the time to brag. “Well, she took my dick like a champ, so—”

“Seven,”

Kairos and Rhys growled at the same time, but I only giggled because they were so similar and so different at the same time. Both had needed to adapt to control my wry dark mate.

“Are we going to swim then?”

I asked. Rhys tried to back off, but I grabbed his hand. “No, you could have gone inside before.”

Kairos took off his pants and delicately placed them on one of the lawnchairs and showed off his powerful muscles to me in their full glory for the first time. He hopped into the water with Seven and Enko, and then I turned to Rhys.

“Your turn, Your Holiness.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. “As you wish, vixen.”

He remained in eye contact with me as he pulled off his pants and hopped into the water before I could get a good look.

They all stared at me, still fully dressed, from the water. And I slowly peeled my shirt off, flicking it off me and leaving me in a blue bra—all the black ones were missing and I suspected Kairos ordered his mysterious maids to hide them all—then I stepped

out of my black pants.

“Oh my goddess, Dove, you look so good in color,”

Kairos moaned from the water. My suspicions of the crime and the culprit proved correct.

With four sets of eyes on me, I suddenly became timid. My back wasn't in sight, but they all expectantly watched me while I decided if maybe the best option was to run instead of trying to be sexy in front of my tempting Fated males.

“Oh, fuck no,”

Seven said, naked body dripping wet as he jetted from the pool and stopped me. “Take ‘em off and join us.”

I quickly discarded the bra and underwear and hurried into the water to hide myself, only to find the lights within the pool kept everything well-lit and well-exposed. It made my scars look even bigger.

But none of my mates cared. Even Kairos had his scars. We were all so different yet the same.

We swam in the warm water, Seven splashing me playfully, and when Rhys remained an onlooker, Seven splashed him too. Enko held me until Seven demanded him to hand me over. Enko ignored my dark mate.

Kairos swam forward and imprisoned me in his arms, but I kicked my legs to keep my afloat. Kairos was able to stand and keep his shoulders above water, but my head would be partially under if I tried. I wrapped my hands around his shoulders to hold myself up, wrapping my legs around him.

And like it was meant to be, his hard cock pressed against my sex. I wiggled a little closer, throbbing with want.

“Dove,”

he said softly. “Are you sure?”

I nodded furiously, desperate and a second away from turning feral.

“Are you still sore from Seven?”

Rhys asked.

“No,”

I responded quickly.

“Dove, we don’t want to push you too quickly,”

Kairos said, his hardness still pressing against me. Even with the water, I could feel how easily he could start to slide into me.

“What about Enko?”

Seven asked with a taunting grin.

Enko growled. “I want to be ready when my Fated mate goes into heat, Seven. I’ve gotten better. Seeing this might help, since you stole her first time from us. I want to hear my little fox moan in pleasure.”

“Oh my goddess,”

I said, wishing I could just drown in embarrassment.

Kairos reached up and touched his wet hand against the side of my head. “I’ll be gentle, Dove. But I’m not about to do this in a pool.”

Kairos grabbed me around the waist, throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me into the house like it was the easiest thing in the world.

And my harem of dripping mates followed us, more interested in what was about to happen than their own nakedness. At the very least, I got to watch their cocks bounce as Kairos carried me into my new bedroom.

He placed me gently onto the bed, despite the roughness of getting me there. I had dried off in the short ride from the pool to my bed. He moved above me and that slight anxiety struck me again.

Kairos kissed my head. “It’s okay, Dove.”

But then he ordered, “Hold her hands down, Rhys.”

It wasn’t the scary freedom of Seven, but it was something just as exciting as Rhys immediately moved into position above me, managing the feat with only one hand, placing his lips on mine for only a moment before Kairos came back into view.

Seven smirked from the side of my bed and I thought I might burn to ashes like a dead demon in my fiery embarrassment.

Kairos’ hand reached between my legs, his hand against my sex as his fingers moved my wetness around. Enko breathed heavily and some silent exchange caused Seven to move next to him—in case he went feral.

Then Kairos' cock pressed against me again. Rhys' hands smoothed against my hair, his mouth against mine again for a moment.

“Such a good fox,”

Seven said as he stroked himself.

“My little fox,”

Enko growled, getting possessive.

I had so many sets of eyes on me, yet somehow I found comfort from it. Kairos pressed himself into me, not as slowly as Seven had, but my body accepted him without any pain this time, even as his girth stretched me. I bit my lip and enjoyed every sensation as Kairos' body jerked inward and I let out a small mewl of pleasure.

All my worry and wonderment had been for naught, being surrounded by them in bed as they pleased me. It was so natural as Kairos pulled my hips into him to complete the journey and fill me, as Rhys stroked my hair with his free hand, as Seven leered, and as Enko growled.

Kairos stroked himself within me, watching my eyes as I purred in excitement. I raised my hips to meet his as Rhys' thumb traced my lips, staring down at me. Kairos' hand reached down and massaged my clit and I let out a gasp as my vision sparkled and my body quivered in appreciation. So close...

“Come for us,”

Rhys whispered as he stole another kiss.

“No, not yet,”

Kairos slowed, bringing my pleasure back down to Earth and I snapped my eyes open with frustration.

He smiled, returned his fingers to that slow gentle movement as he dragged out my pleasure. In and out of me, circling my pleasure like water in a drain. He angled himself somehow, massaging me with expertise.

He moved faster, pumping into me, finding a rhythm between us, and I was so close as he drove his length into me again. My breath came out in short huffs, and hasty gasps.

And he slowed again.

I bit my lip, sending him images through our linked minds. Kairos drove himself deeply within me, pulling out part of the way and reentering me. Thrusting hard and fast. My hips rose to meet his thrusts, my head rolled back and I let out a cry as he finally let my release come.

His control snapped. He buried his cock deep into me, moving faster and harder, his finger working its magic as Rhys pinned my hands down. I tugged and pulled against the hold, wanting to do something with them, but I didn't know what. Grip onto Kairos and drag his chest down to me to bite him, or kiss his lightning bolt scars maybe. But Rhys didn't let me, and that made it even more exciting, having Kairos dominate my every pleasure.

And I finally came, a heady sound escaping my lips.

Kairos stilled above me and drove himself in deeper as I clenched and contracted and pulsed around him, somehow out of breath even though he did all the work. He throbbed inside of me, releasing his own ecstasy after giving me mine.

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head, remaining inside me, and Rhys released my arms, letting Kairos have a moment alone with me. “You wily fox.”

“Yes, a small punishment for your blessed torture,”

I breathed, reaching my arms up around him, my thumb grazing over his bluish lightning scar, mesmerized by its patterns. Enko breathed heavily but had remained in the same place. “Enko?”

“Yes, little fox?”

he asked, coming closer and sitting next to me on the bed as Kairos pulled himself out and I felt the undeniable wetness leaking from me, somehow both cold and warm at the same time.

“Is your feral side okay?”

He took a long gulp and then nodded. “You’re a very seductive little fox, though.”

The night had grown late, but I wasn’t ready for it to end, pulling Enko next to me as I cuddled with him and Kairos slithered in behind me, forcing Rhys to slide out from above us. He leaned forward over Enko, despite the fiery fox starting to growl and pushed my hair behind my ear. “Good night, vixen.”

“I want you all to stay.”

Seven laughed, “The bed’s not big enough for all of us, Fated. Especially not with Enko in there.”

I supposed that was fair.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Dove

My phone buzzed at breakfast and everyone at the table glanced up at me as I pulled it out of my hoodie pocket.

DAMON: Would you care to have dinner tonight? I would love for us to get to know each other better.

Rhys leaned over my shoulder and read the text. “No, absolutely not.”

“I don’t remember asking your opinion,”

I responded scornfully.

“No, Dove,”

Kairos agreed. “It’s not safe. You’re not having any one on one dates with that...”

Kairos hesitated, glancing around the table. “...rogue kitsune.”

Well, at least it was nicer than calling him a demon.

“He has never harmed me. Only protected me. The same as all my Fated. I have no reason not to trust him.”

Enko scowled. “Maybe he’s just trying to gain your trust before he betrays you.”

The day squeaked by, the minutes passing like hours as I skimmed through the closet for an appropriate outfit. While Kairos was trying to get me to wear more color, I selected the only dress that felt right for the occasion.

I slipped into black heels and checked the mirror again, touching up my red lipstick. It had been hard enough to get the others to agree to let me go, and I had the strong feeling that at least one of them would be coming with me tonight.

While I trusted Damon, it was clear that they did not. The little black dress Kairos had purchased for me fell just above my knees. The v-neckline was modestly appropriate and only showed a little bit of my cleavage.

“Absolutely fucking not,”

Rhys snarled from the door of my bedroom.

When I turned around, Kairos, Seven, and Enko joined him, their eyes going over the outfit.

“I didn’t buy you clothes to impress him.”

Kairos cleared his throat and stepped forward, “You have your phone?”

he asked as I began to head down the stairs.

I nodded.

“Don’t go anywhere with him alone,”

Rhys added.

“And if he makes you uncomfortable, just tell me through our mind link,”

Enko said.

“Most importantly,”

Seven began, “Have fun, Fated.”

“Gee, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to having four overprotective boyfriends,”

I said sarcastically. “Which one of you is going to be stalking me tonight?”

They all eyed each other until their gaze landed on Seven. “Of course, that way you can remain hidden in the Shadow Vale.”

“Where is he taking you?”

Rhys asked.

“A restaurant for dinner. Charburger.”

“Really? For a first date?”

“Well, he does own it,”

I said. “It’s probably safer than any random place.”

“Classy,”

Seven said sarcastically. “Really breaking out the big bucks for my Fated.”

The doorbell rang and all of us froze. Rhys cleared his throat and strode to the door. He swung it open and I could feel his glare at Damon through the back of his head.

“Good evening, Damon,”

Rhys greeted bitterly, finally moving out of the way so I could see Damon.

He wore a black suit, and his blond hair had been swept back and styled. His eyes immediately landed on me and he smiled. “Good evening, Dove. You look amazing.”

“We all know she’s beautiful, but there’s more to her than her looks,”

Kairos snapped.

Damon’s eyes went to my stormy Fated mate, curiously raising his brows. “I am aware of how special she is, Kairos.”

I budged past the wall of men blocking me. “Yeah...they’ve been like this all day. Shall we go?”

Rhys shook his head, pushing me back behind him and shoving a finger at Damon’s chest. “You’ll have her home before nine.”

I let out an exhale, feeling a blush rise. “Rhys, I’m not Cinderella.”

Stop embarrassing me! I screamed through the mind link at the four of them, feeling that I had accidentally let Damon in on the thought.

He smiled and let out a chuckle. “I got these for you.”

He revealed a dozen black roses from behind his back.

“Thank you.”

I grinned, taking a moment to smell and admire them. “Kairos, will you put them in a vase on my desk?”

Begrudgingly, he took the flowers and nodded.

Enko’s hands gripped around my shoulders and he stared down at me for a moment before pulling me into a hug. “Are you sure, little fox? We can all come with you.”

I hugged him back. “I’ll miss you, Enko. Besides, Seven is already coming along.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell him that,”

Seven growled, glaring at Damon. I pulled back from Enko and got up on my tippy toes to kiss Seven’s cheek, but my dark mate tricked me into a deep kiss, grabbing my ass, his teeth nipping at my lip gently when I didn’t let him deepen it immediately.

“Seven,”

I warned when he finally released me, and my face must have lit up like a mortified beacon as he glared at Damon for the entirety of the kiss.

Kairos kissed my cheek, and whispered in my ear, “Be safe, Dove. If he tries to move too fast with you, we’ll be here to back you up.”

Damon watched the interactions with a good measure of curiosity and a great amount of patience. Despite my own embarrassment, he waited politely just outside the door.

And lucky for me, I only had one more left. Rhys stepped forward. He tucked my hair

behind my ear and kissed my forehead. “I’ll see you at nine, Dove. Not a minute later. If you want to stay with him past that, you can do it here. With us.”

I nodded and slipped past the overprotective Fated men and gave a small wave as I grabbed Damon’s hand and dragged him away from the four of them watching through the open front door.

“Sorry about that,”

I whispered nervously.

Damon cracked a smile. “Nothing to apologize for. It’s good to see you so well protected and cared for. You deserve it after all you’ve been through.”

There was a slight tug of a thought, but Damon quickly squashed it with his keen power of the Mind. So I asked, “What?”

He glanced back to the door, where the four of them still watched intently and we reached the vehicle. He opened the rear door for me and scooted in beside me, closing the door before he answered.

“I hope we can come to some measure of trust after I prove myself again,”

he remarked with a hint of dismal sadness. “Enko and I used to be very close friends, you see.”

I nodded.

The driver began to move and I saw Seven disappear from the doorway as I glanced back. “You don’t mind if Seven comes along? I think it’s the only way they would agree to this.”

“Not at all, Dove. You could have brought all your Fated mates and I’d be happy for your company.”

“I thought we deserved some time alone, after...everything. Not just in my nightmares.”

I hesitated. “Well, almost alone. But Seven is pretty good about keeping out of sight.” I hope.

He smiled. “It’s not easy after all we’ve been through and with all of us having to share your time. Thank you for giving me a chance. You look ravishing, by the way. The most beautiful Fated I could have ever asked the goddess for. I had hoped to tell you that very first night we met, but I didn’t want to scare you. You didn’t have your first tail yet.”

The driver pulled to a stop and Damon opened the door, holding out a hand to help me out. “I thought something casual would be best to start. I have no hopes of competing with the overwealthy Kairos Stryker.”

“There’s no competition, Damon,”

I reminded him. “I need all of you, just as the goddess intended.”

Despite what he viewed as casual, we were in front of a very nice restaurant. We entered and the hostess sat us at a private table near the windows in the back, with an amazing view of the sunset. Damon pulled out my chair and let me sit—like a true gentleman—before sitting across from me himself.

“What can I get started for you two,”

a waiter asked, passing over two menus. From what I could smell, he was human.

I quickly opened it as Damon waited for me. “I’ll start with a salad and a coke—”

Seven materialized next to him. “Don’t be polite, Fated.”

The waiter nearly jumped out of his skin, eyes shooting between Damon and Seven. “Oh, uh, shall I set the table for three?”

“You promised, Seven,”

I growled.

“I would never promise.”

Seven turned to the waiter. “She’ll have your fattest juiciest burger with extra fries. Make it extra cheesy and messy so that we ensure this one—”

He jabbed his finger in the direction of Damon. “—knows exactly what he’s in for.”

My face was a piping redhot color, I was sure of it, based on it feeling as hot as Enko’s flames. “Seven,” I begged.

“Okay, fine, have your date, Fated.”

He glared at Damon. “I’ll be right here.”

Seven disappeared once more.

The waiter glanced around, confused before settling down his nerves again and looked at me. “A burger, then?”

I’ll admit, it sounded delicious. But I wasn’t exactly ready to stuff my face in front of

the overly polite, newly Fated mate of mine.

“Yes, a coke and a classic bacon burger for her, and a house salad as well. I’ll have the same,”

Damon swept in to save the day.

“I’ll have that right out for you, Lord of Nightmares,”

the waiter said, giving a small bow.

“Sorry about that,”

I muttered, glaring at where I felt Seven’s shadowy essence exhuming.

“No apologies, Dove,”

Damon said with a smile. “It’s for the best that I learn how we all get along. And I saw how bright your eyes got at the mention of a burger. My Fated mate will have whatever she wants.”

I might kill you later, I shot at Seven. Damon smiled as soon as I thought it and my blush deepened. “You can hear that?”

He nodded.

“Sorry, the others—”

“Do you always apologize this much? With my Mind powers, it will take you a lot of practice to be able to hide any outward thoughts from me. If I could block it out for your comfort, I would, but it’s quite like you’re screaming at me.”

“Right,”

I said, hushing before the sorry spilled out again. The waiter set a coke in front of both of us and I quickly took a long sip to cool off the heat of my embarrassment. “So what do you like to do for fun?”

“Not a lot of time for fun lately while guarding the Hellgate in Lethe. But when I have time, I enjoy music. Something to quiet the thoughts, you see. What about you?”

“Studying demonology, weaponry, training.”

And reading, Seven added very helpfully.

I rolled my eyes and decided to appease him before he intervened on his own again.

“And reading.”

“Well, it’s perfect that you were accepted at Foxfire Academy, then.”

I frowned, the flood of shameful thoughts overwhelming me, wishing I knew how to hide them from Damon. I wasn’t sure I was ready for him to know every weakness of mine yet. “I wasn’t accepted. Not until the Elder found out who my Fated mates were. I grew up in a temple, Hawthorn, before it was destroyed by demons.”

Damon nodded politely, his expression twitching into a frown, and I wondered how much he already knew from my endless stream of thoughts erupting from my head.

The burgers arrived, and just as Seven had requested, it was loaded with cheese and too large to fit in my mouth and bigger than Damon’s burger. I cursed him silently.

Damon took a bite, somehow making it look easy, and I followed suit. But after a few bites, I felt the unmistakable dribble down my chin and quickly covered it with a

napkin, like I was some cute fox who had been taught manners, instead of the one that could probably win an eating competition against Enko.

You are a cute fox, Damon's voice came into my head. "You have nothing to worry about in that area."

I smiled, trying to relax around the intimidating Lord of Nightmares. "And what area do you think I should focus on?"

"Probably how to keep five strong kitsune males in line,"

he joked. "But it seems you're getting a fair amount of practice at that."

I nodded. "How could I not?"

Desperate to check my makeup, I excused myself. "I'll be just a moment."

Once out of sight, I rushed into the ladies room and checked the mirror. I exhaled a sigh of relief. At least I hadn't completely embarrassed myself yet. Not that Seven or the others had done me any favors. When I exited the bathroom, I turned back toward the table, but a cold hand grasped me, tightening over my mouth and dragging me away.

I tried to scream, but the noise couldn't get through his hand. When I got a glimpse of my attacker, I saw the unmistakable face of Elder Allen underneath a hood. He wasn't wearing his red Council robes.

Seven! Damon! I screamed, but I was already out the backdoor into a dingy alley of Lethe, being shoved toward a van by multiple masked kitsune, all much stronger than I was.

Kairos

Downstairs, Enko's feet pounded on the treadmill, practically making the entire house vibrate, trying to run off his feral haze of worrying about Dove. Upstairs, Rhys had locked himself in his office for the past hour, not a sound coming out.

And I wandered around the library, unsure what to do with myself as my fingers grazed along the titles, wondering which one Dove would pick to read. Probably Lore of Legendary Yokai, her favorite topic, if she hadn't already read it. Since we'd moved in, she seemed to finish about a book every other day...as long as it didn't interfere with her studies.

In just the couple months I'd known Dove, my entire life had changed, and now I didn't know what to do without her. If she were home, I'd probably be bossing her other Fated mates around, making sure she was comfortable and had everything she needed. Scolding Seven for teasing her, ordering Enko's feral instincts to calm down, or arguing with Rhys. Now, she had a new Fated mate I'd need to learn how to deal with. My cheeks lifted. Dove always kept things interesting.

Tires sounded outside and I zipped into the foyer, watching the closed door anxiously, quickly shoving the copy of Lore of Legendary Yokai onto a table, planning to ask Dove about it later. Rhys appeared at the top of the steps, right in front of his egocentric portrait. And Enko appeared with a sweat-stained shirt from the basement.

"Is she home,"

Enko demanded with his usual growl and fire in his eyes.

“Yes,”

I answered as we all waited for the door to open.

Rhys descended the stairs, checking his watch. “She better be, it’s eight fifty-four.”

But instead of our beautiful white-haired Fated mate, Seven’s panicked eyes met mine. Followed by the Lord of Nightmares looking tired and out of breath.

I peered around their bodies, expecting her to come around them as if this was some kind of cruel joke she would play. But that was unlike my Dove.

“Where’s Dove?”

I asked, trying to remain calm for Enko’s sake.

But the Fire fox raced forward, slamming into Seven’s shoulder as he searched for her outside.

Seven shook his head, dropping his eyes to the floor in shame.

The Lord of Nightmares opened and closed his mouth several times.

“Where the fuck is Dove?”

I repeated, charging toward them as Enko shoved the Lord of Nightmares against the wall, his arm pressing against his throat. And, very unlike him, the Lord of Nightmares didn’t fight back.

“She’s missing.”

“I lost her scent outside the back of the club—”

Enko’s fist wrapped around Seven’s throat, going full feral. I allowed it. “You were supposed to be watching her.”

Rhys aimed his anger at the Lord of Nightmares, striding across the foyer and staring firmly at him. “What happened? Did you upset her?”

Seven and Damon shook their heads, looking at each other and then back at the floor. The Shadow fox choked against Enko’s hand, but didn’t ask to be released or make a run for the Shadow Vale. The Lord of Nightmares was still slammed against the wall, also choking.

Like they both were ready to die for their mistake.

I was almost ready to let Enko kill them.

“Enko, let them go,” I said.

The Fire fox snarled, and it took both Rhys and me to pull him off and pin him on the floor.

“We looked everywhere we could think. Anywhere she might have gone,”

Seven began, a hand raking through his hair like he was ready to rip his own head off.

“How long ago?”

Rhys asked, pulling out his phone.

“Thirty minutes? Maybe more,”

the Lord of Nightmares responded. “She’d gone to the bathroom and she thought-yelled for us. She was gone by the time we got there.”

Enko snarled and snapped at us like a rabid beast as he tried to free himself. “You lost my little fox? You didn’t protect my small, innocent Fated mate? What if she’s hurt? What if she needs me? My little fox needs me!”

“You didn’t hear her Mind?”

I asked as Rhys furiously pounded a text into his phone.

“No, not after she screamed for us. Could have been a Mind demon blocking me,”

the Lord of Nightmares defended.

I turned my interrogation onto Seven. He was the one responsible for losing her. “You didn’t scent her?”

Seven bowed his head shamefully again. “I told you. I lost her scent outside the back of the restaurant. There was no trace of it after that.”

“You let her out of your sight?”

I questioned.

“She was going to the bathroom, Kairos. I was giving her some privacy. And you told me to watch Damon.”

“I’ve reported her missing. We need to see the Council,”

Rhys said, glancing at me.

I nodded. “Enko, calm the fuck down or we’ll chain you up in the basement. Everyone, get in the car.”

We sped the entire way, arriving at the Council chambers quicker than I ever had. Normally it wasn’t a place I rushed to go.

The Holy Fox opened the door as our car pulled up and we all raced inside at super-speed. The Council was shocked by our sudden appearance, some of the members missing.

“The Disciple is missing?”

one of the Elders asked immediately. “We need to find her straight away. Every minute is crucial. The longer a victim is missing, the more likely they are to be killed.”

Enko snarled in a pained way but managed to control himself.

“This is why we wanted her to have extra protection,”

one of the Elders reprimanded. “You may view yourselves as capable, but a kitsune as important as her for the war against demons...We can’t afford to lose her.”

Afford, as if Dove were a commodity, and not the most important thing in our lives. Irreplaceable.

The door opened again and Elder Allen entered the room. “Sorry I’m late, got held up—”

Enko enraged, slamming into the Elder and pinning him against the wall. “I smell my little fox on him.”

Rhys and I dashed forward, pulling him off, letting Seven and Damon hold the man down.

“He’s right, he smells like Dove,”

Seven reported, his red eyes flashing dangerously.

“Where is Dove?”

I snapped.

Elder Allen looked around, confused, hoping the Council of Elders would defend them, but none stood in our way. He shook his head, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rhys’ nose pinched upwards. “We’ll handle this the old-fashioned way.”

The Elders were suddenly in an uproar. “You can’t, he is in a respected position.”

and “That hasn’t been performed in almost a century—”

Elder Allen flinched at the suggestion, continuing his own defense. “If you do this, the armies will rebel. Just like the last time an Archfox overstepped his station. Now call off this beast before we derank him from Major.”

We ignored him and the man began to panic, wiggling to try and free himself from our custody.

“He knows something about our Fated, and he will answer, or he will face the ultimate punishment. Call all nearby kitsune to the academy, Council. Ninth Order of the Goddess,”

Rhys ordered, his face full of disgust for what we had to do.

Order Nine, death for disobedience. But we would do it, anything for Dove. And it was Rhys’ turn to prove himself. To prove that he was worthy of Dove.

When we arrived at Foxfire Academy, a voice rang out over the loudspeaker, the reveille playing in between each announcement. “All kitsune to the stadium as ordered by the Archfox. Order Nine: those found in noncompliance will be executed.”

Elder Allen was strapped to a pillory at the center of the stadium as it filled and Rhys snatched the microphone violently from Elder Peter. Three rows of Holy Foxes were in attendance, more than I’d ever seen. All together, they looked the same. The perfect white robes, with belts of black, white, and red, to denote their rank.

“The Disciple has been kidnapped,”

Rhys announced, and whispers broke out among the student body. “Anyone who has seen anything is required to come forward immediately.”

Nobody came forward, and Rhys retrieved his staff from Elder Peter. He slammed it against the ground, calling the power of all the previous Archfoxes to his aid. The magic within his scepter was much stronger than the average weapon. It was a weapon used by every Archfox. It was said the goddess herself had crafted it a thousand years ago when she ruled our kind, giving it to her strongest general to command her armies. The goddess dictated it to be passed down to each Commander to keep the kitsune together, and to hold the demons at bay.

Rhys' magic crept out, calling the earth to his aid, every living thing to obey his directive. Vines crept from the unseen earth, around the pillory at the Archfox's will. A vine stabbed into Elder Allen, wiggling beneath his skin as the man screamed. His blood leaked out onto the white platform, easily visible for the entire stadium to see.

Some of the students gasped. All were too young to have seen the ritual. Even I had never seen an Inquisition. We only read about them in History and Religion as though the custom had been lost to us.

Another vine pierced the man and Rhys turned onto him, yelling over his shrieks, "Tell me why you smell like my Fated mate!"

Elder Allen's head shook as he screamed, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know."

I almost felt bad for him. Almost. But he had been around Dove recently and if he had no excuse then he knew something about her disappearance.

Another vine stabbed into him, jerking itself inside the man, under his skin, through all his veins, not damaging anything significant, keeping him alive as he bled through the torture. I forced myself to watch.

Enko, Seven, and Damon observed with glee. They craved the darkness. I watched the Archfox flinch. Him and I were similar in that sense at least.

"I made a deal!"

Elder Allen screamed and bawled. "I traded her to the demons! She is in Hell, guarded by an archdemon! Please let me live!"

Enko rushed forward, his eyes glancing to me and the Archfox, begging us.

Rhys left this decision for me. My head titled, satisfaction and terror within me. “Finish him, Enko. And don’t make it quick.”

Enko’s sword blazed as he began the slow and torturous execution. The first to be performed in almost a century.

I hurried to Rhys, whispering, “How are we supposed to get her out?”

Seven appeared next to us. “We’ll need something to trade, and for Dove, it won’t be cheap.”

There it was again, like our Fated had a number on her head. But she was priceless. She was worth more than the entire world. And we all knew it.

“Me.”

Damon stepped forward. “Trade me for her.”

Dove

Elder Allen dragged me, throwing me into the back of a van and slamming me into the darkness. My hands reached around, feeling for some kind of resemblance, but found every wall to be hard and metallic, the inner walls of an unfinished back of a van. The vehicle screeched to life and I grabbed hold of the nothingness of the bumpy metal as we lurched forward, finally managing to get a grip around the smooth curve of the wheel well.

I curled into myself, clutching my knees with one hand and trying to remain upright with the other.

“Let me out!”

I screamed, banging on the side of the van, and a darker side of me added, “My Fated mates will fucking kill you!”

No response came from the driver behind the flat dark wall near the front of the van.

I had no representation of time in the back of the dark van, and I’d left my phone in my bag on the table at the restaurant. We drove for a long time, and like a kidnapped victim in a movie, I tried to memorize each turn of the vehicle, and attempted to track time.

It was hopeless.

I kept screaming and pounding on the hard walls.

When the van stopped, I was unprepared, cowering in the corner. The back doors creaked loudly as they opened. Bright lights shone in onto me, blinding me. I propelled toward them anyway, desperate to free myself.

A fist slammed into my stomach, and they shoved a bag over my head, restraining my hands behind my back. A rope twisted around my wrists tightly and they dragged me out of the safety of the van.

I fell to my knees, sharp pains shooting up my body as I hit the hard ground. But there was a clue. It wasn't the pavement and cement streets of the city of Lethe. It was dirt.

Someone gripped the ropes around my wrists, nearly breaking my arms as they yanked me back to my feet. My heels had been lost in the fall, and I now was barefooted. "Get up, Disciple."

"Release me."

Then I laughed. "Or don't. My Fated mates will be here any minute. And you will be punished for your insubordination, Elder Allen."

"If they can find you, we welcome them. The more of you we can capture, the better,"

he laughed back at me. But it was cold and heartless, evil and void of sympathy. "You're just the bait."

Something in my heart squeezed, some part of what he spoke was the truth. At long distances, how would my Fated mates find me? How long did it take before Damon and Seven had noticed I was gone?

The man continued to laugh as I stumbled behind him over the uneven ground.

My skin trembled and burned as something scorching passed over my skin, and then a pain I recognized passed.

Hellfire. I could see its blue lighting up all around me through the cloth mask blocking my vision. An arch of blue fire. The Hellgate?

The sound of metal hitting against rock, grunts of unearthly beings—demons—rang out. The crack of whips, the higher Tier monsters commanding the lesser. The cries of pain, whimpers of hopelessness. The distant cackle and roar of the everburning fire. I didn't need the cover over my eyes to be lifted to know where I had been brought.

Hell.

A hand grabbed the fabric covering my head, some of my hair ripping out with it as I saw the gray-green knobby fingers with claws like a reptile. Shiny skin made of scales. Horns wrapped with dirty twine. I followed the hand to the face, misshapen teeth protruding and covered with a black film. Demon blood. Because the occupants of Hell didn't have the privilege of eating humans or kitsune or other supernatural creatures. They feasted on their own.

Oni, Tier IV.

His slit eyes widened as he saw me, then his eyes flicked down to my arm. A stream of red blood dribbled out and he smacked his lips together several times, a lumpy tongue with sores swiping over his lips as he imagined the taste.

The demons all around ceased their work, their own nostrils flaring as they smelled their favorite meal. The irresistible blood they all craved more than life itself.

The oni hauled into overdrive, dragging me away from the surrounding demons as they drew closer, their whispers and deals meeting my ears.

“Just a taste, master, just a taste.”

The oni snarled at the others, whipping me around as his clawed hand stretched out and swiped at the oncoming attacks.

“NOT THIS ONE!”

he screeched, biting one of the arms of the demons. Black blood spurted out, covering his face and hitting my cheek. With my hands behind my back, there was no hope of wiping the disgusting filth from me. It smelled putrid. Decaying garbage and filth mixed with the sulfuric rotting egg. He whipped me around in circles as he fended them off. “We need this one!”

“We were promised,”

the lesser demons cried. “Why do you get a taste and not us?”

The monsters snickered and clicked their tongues, alien sounds erupting from their throats like garbled plastic crinkling.

“Nobody is tasting it! Not even me! You will have more than your fill when the Hellgate is broken! Now get back to work!”

The oni managed to fend off the others, and for a brief moment, I was thankful to the high Tier demon. He growled in my ear, “As much as I want to.”

Until I remembered I was merely captured for some greater use.

What had Sana said? Her voice rang out into my ears. Dove, I heard what they plan to do with you. You need to leave. It's a fate worse than death.

I could think of several fates worse than death. Losing my Fated males, for one. But having the flesh peeled from my bones and eaten alive by demons was a close second.

Whips cracked, getting the lesser demons back under control. The only light in hell was the blue of hellfire, hot and bright. It hurt my eyes to look at it directly. It was scorching, and the dirt was blackened char. Burnt bones crunched below my feet, and I knew I walked over centuries of bodies of all types of beings. And there was a wetness I had no desire to identify.

I staggered and the demon towing me had no patience for my inability to walk over the terrain. He had feet like a reptile, only the ball of his foot touching the ground, his claws sinking into it. And I could see the black liquid seeping up as he pierced through it. My bare feet turned black from the minute I'd spent in Hell.

We entered a long narrow cave, this one empty of demons, instead, it was a hallway of cages, hands reaching out to me as though I could save them.

"Please, food, water, anything, please,"

the voices echoed, rasped, begged.

Most of the hands were human, but some looked demonic, clawed. All were dirtied with the filth of Hell.

The oni clanked open a barred gate, some kind of blackened metal, demon iron by my best guess, hardened by their hellfire. It was what composed their strongest weapons. The oni cut the rope from my wrists before tossing me in and slammed the cage shut

behind me.

I crashed onto the ground, feeling the squish and give of the muck beneath me and I immediately jumped back to my feet, afraid to even brush away and touch the sticky damp wetness that clung to me. It was too dark to tell what it was. I didn't want to know.

Then I suddenly missed the smell of sulfur. Because here, it was excrement. I gagged on the air and began to dry heave, what few bites I had for dinner threatening to come up, but I shook my head. Based on the other starving prisoners, I had no intention of losing what little nutrients I had to give me strength.

A light laugh came from the corner of my cage, "Stop being so dramatic, princess."

I scrambled backward, almost falling over once more. "Who are you?"

I demanded.

"A prisoner, just like you,"

she said, stepping forward. Her voice was wispy and alluring.

I squinted in the limited light. The only illumination came from a faint hellfire torch a ways down the cavern of cages, but as my eyes adjusted, she came into sight.

Black eyes, purple skin, folded wings like a bat. Black claws, sharp teeth.

Succubus, Tier III.

She stepped forward further, and I stepped back, hitting another cage and feeling something reach through the bars and grab my neck. I screamed and wrenched myself

loose, risking a glance back at the cage next to ours. I couldn't tell in the darkness, in the filth, demon or kitsune or human. Whatever it was, its bones protruded out at odd angles, its starved and hollow face staring back at me.

The succubus laughed. "Don't mind him, he just can't resist your sweet aroma. He was actually pretty nice a month ago. But I think the hunger has gotten to him. So keep your distance, before he tries to eat you. At least until you smell as bad as the rest of us."

My eyes snapped back to her. "Are you?"

I asked, and she raised her sharp eyebrows. "Are you going to eat me?"

I clarified.

She cackled, losing any allure she held. "Eat you? Are you stupid, kitsune? I'm a succubus. I can only feed on something else."

She raised her eyebrows, winking at me. "If you're interested."

I shook my head, hurriedly, holding my hands out defensively as if to stop her.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, they wouldn't put a good meal in here for me. I can only feed off your pleasure."

She shrugged. "Maybe once you're desperate enough, we can serve each other some good."

"I don't make deals with demons."

"Oh, you will. After he's done with you. You'll give him anything he wants. Then

you'll be begging for a little comfort from your cellmate."

She winked and took another step forward and I remained still, a hand from next door brushing against my leg. She walked with a limp and her wing was broken, and her stomach had a circle of dried black blood.

"You're the demon I killed."

She clapped her hands together several times, "Very good, kitsune."

"Demon lock up their own kind?"

"It's all a hierarchy, princess. The whole world runs on them, even down here. They found out I had a go at a Disciple. If I'd known at the time, I wouldn't have tried. There were orders out to report your location to him. The archdemon in charge of this part of Hell. Apparently had a bounty on your head. But you were just so pretty. Your sexual energy pulsed that night. I thought it might have been me, with how you were leering my way. I could have shown you a beautiful flight. Being flightless yourself, you don't understand the beauty of the world above. But then you attacked me. Must have been those males nearby you were interested in."

I didn't respond, just trying to keep myself still as I took it all in. It had been less than an hour and I was already adjusting to the nasty smells all around me.

"I suppose we can get along. Since you like to take multiple partners too. I'm Akanksha,"

she whispered, sitting back down on the filthy ground, flinching as her clawed wing caught on one of the bars.

"I'm—"

“I know, Disciple. You’re all they’ve talked about for weeks, the higher demons.”

She rolled her eyes, raising her voice, taking on a sing-song voice, announcing my presence. “Dove, the mystical kitsune sent by the goddess.”

A few of the creatures in the surrounding cells gained interest from her announcement, creeping closer and watching us. Calling out to me in weak voices.

“How lucky I am to share a cell with a Disciple. But they must think you weak, to put you here with us. They have stronger cells deeper down for the dangerous beings. Usually what you call Tier IV and Vs. But I won’t bow to you, anymore than I’d bow to your goddess. You’re just unlucky, cursed. You will be preyed on for your power, Dove.”

“You know of the goddess?”

“I know you’re young, but try to keep up. I was born centuries after her time, but the stories of her always permeated to a disgusting degree. Those who view her as a god, and those who view her as a devil.”

She laughed. “What a funny kind you are, kitsune. Worshiping a false goddess, murdering in her name. If only for the sake of more power.”

“We only kill demons—”

“And I only have sex with those who want me. It’s how my curse works. But you killed me.”

I snapped my mouth shut, shaking my head.

“On to more important matters. How vigorous are your boyfriends? Aren’t they the

reason you're viewed as powerful in the first place? And some Fated magic ties you all together? Do they love you?"

I started. Do they love me? Seven said they did, but none of them had really said it.

"Fuck,"

Akanksha snapped, throwing her head back to look at the dark ceiling. "So they aren't even going to come rescue you? There goes our chance to get out."

A few of the creatures in the surrounding cages slumped, losing interest.

"Prepare for a long sentence, Dove. Hell is an eternity of suffering and starvation and boredom. Take a seat, you can't stand forever."

She paused. "But it's no more than you deserve. How many of us have you sentenced to Hell? How many of your kind send us back here when all we really want is to be free?"

"Twenty-two,"

I answered, remembering my last look at the leaderboard in the front lobby of Foxfire Academy.

"Huh?"

"That's how many demons I've killed."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Dove

The cell door creaked open, and I snapped awake, too weak to even look up. How many days had it been? It was impossible to tell in the constant darkness of Hell. All I had to keep track of time was Akanksha's longing for sex and my own for water.

My new succubus friend cowered back in the corner, whimpering and holding her broken wing. The two demons—Pit fiends, Tier IV—grabbed hold of me and dragged me from the cage, down the hallway, their whips threatening me into subservience.

I closed my eyes as we reached outside of the dungeon, the bright blue fire like staring at a million suns after my time in the darkness.

I coughed at my dry throat, no energy to walk, so I let the demons lug me along.

Soon, the smell changed to something almost pleasant. A smoky fireplace, maybe.

The pit fiends tossed me to the ground and I coughed again, crawling up onto my hands and knees. I found myself on a hard floor, a clean red rug beneath me. The room was nicely decorated, given that it was in Hell.

“Pathetic,”

said a voice. Horns, purple skin, black eyes. Tall. Able to order around Tier IVs. It could only be one thing, though I didn't recognize him. Archdemon, Tier V. “A deal has been made for your release.”

“What deal?”

I demanded.

“Fated,”

came a familiar voice, and Seven’s ruby eyes stared down at me like my guardian angel. He reached forward, but Enko’s big arms wrapped around me, not caring about the filth covering me, even though I knew I didn’t smell or look good.

Enko held me close, “Little fox, don’t worry, you’re safe now.”

“Let’s get her out of here,”

Kairos ordered. “Before this fucker changes his mind.”

Kairos glared at the demon.

“Rhys couldn’t come, as the Archfox, archdemons fucking hate him,”

Seven explained. “He’s waiting for us outside.”

Several Tier IV demons guarded us as we walked through Hell. When the blue fiery Hellgate came into sight, I saw the demons all around it, chiseling away at the ancient structure and trying to dismantle it from the inside out. Only kitsune could pass through the barrier unharmed. And it seemed very little progress had been made over the last thousand years.

We passed through it easily, into the same dark cave structure. After the days in Hell, it felt so cozy.

Maybe that's just because the smell was mostly gone. Now it all permeated from me, my clothes, my hair, every part of me covered in it.

Enko carried me up the stone staircase, and they placed me into Seven's Land Rover. Rhys reached over, stroking my hair behind my ear. "You're okay now, vixen. We got you."

The drive passed in a blur. The next thing I knew, I was carried up to a shower, where my Fated males helped remove—and hopefully burn—the sickening dress. Standing under a stream of water which I opened my mouth and drank in desperately.

A bath had been drawn in a large tub, red and orange rose petals floated on top and I quickly climbed in, still desperate to get the scent of Hell out of my nose.

And then, wrapped in the fluffiest robe, a plate of food rested before me. "Don't eat too quickly, little fox. You'll get sick."

I followed his advice, taking a few small bites before exhaustion overcame me. And then I slept.

The time to recover could have been as long as my time in the dungeon, but I couldn't tell. When I awoke, for the first time since I'd been taken, I felt aware, not confused. I remembered snippets of food being fed to me, being escorted to the bathroom, my Fated males surrounding me and comforting me during my short moments of awakening.

"She never deserved to be involved in any of this,"

Seven snapped from outside the door. "She's an innocent."

"So were you, Seven. Fate isn't determined by fairness,"

Rhys responded.

“Rhys? Seven?”

I called out to them and they appeared in the doorway.

“We’re here, Dove,”

Kairos said, climbing into the bed next to me and holding me against his chest. “I’ll never let you get hurt again. It was so scary when we lost you. I can’t ever go through that again. I love you so much. I can’t live without you.”

Akanksha’s words came back to me. Do they love you?

“You love me?”

My heart swelled with so much love it was fit to burst as the four of them surrounded me in my fluffy bed.

“Of course we love you, little fox. You mean everything to us.”

Rhys nodded, kissing my forehead. “We’d be nothing without you. I love you, vixen.”

Seven nodded, raising his eyebrows as if to say, Told ya so.

“Seven,”

Rhys growled.

“Unlike you fools, I already told my Fated how much I love her.”

Kairos growled now too. “No harm in saying it twice.”

I love you, Fated.

“Wait, something’s missing.”

My heart stopped as though I’d forgotten something very important. Because I did. It wasn’t something missing. It was someone.

“Where is Damon?”

Damon

“You actually traded yourself for that weak little girl?”

the purple skinned archdemon laughed at me through the bars. “This is exactly what I had hoped for. Without a guard, the Hellgate will be down in no time.”

Fuck, I didn’t want to imagine my sweet little bird in this disgusting place. Not even for a second. She was so innocent to the darkness of the world. There was only one thing worse than being killed by a demon, and that was being captured by one.

It wasn’t my first time in Hell. As the Guardian of the Hellgate, the Lord of Nightmares occasionally had to keep things in check. My first time at eighteen, to ensure the inner framework was still in place. With the demons constantly hammering away at the magic, I knew it wouldn’t make it another thousand years, maybe not even one more year.

“Not speaking to me, Lord of Nightmares?”

the demon asked, shaking his head and chuckling. “I thought we were becoming friends over the last nine years with our agreement. You keep yours on your side, and I’ll keep mine on my side.”

My eyes flicked over to him, “Except you haven’t been keeping your side of the agreement. Why are you letting them out?”

“Let them? I have a horde of prisoners, and I haven’t let any out intentionally. You

try reigning over this side of the Hellgate, and then tell me how it goes. Besides, there have always been loose demons on Earth, and kitsune are always nice enough to escort them home with their magic. As your goddess ordered long ago.”

The demon showed me his row of sharp teeth, fit only for eating flesh. “Does it matter? You’re my prisoner now. Our contract is null and void.”

The cell was in the deeper trenches of Hell. The bars were reinforced with demon iron, a tight lattice to ensure not even a hand could slip out of the cell. The bed was made of stone, but a dingy sink and toilet rested in the corner, providing some dignity for the more worthy prisoners.

I slipped into the archdemon’s mind as he distracted himself by lording over me. It was a repulsive place. The glee of torture, the excitement of his newest deal, his plans for me.

I confessed, it was disappointing how easily the others agreed to my plan. Not even trying to come up with an alternative. But it was better than Dove being in this goddessforsaken place.

The archdemon continued, “I knew her, you know—your goddess—saw her make the deal myself. To protect her kind from us, and to protect us from her. I had just barely become a demon back then. Your goddess helped them build the Hellgate.”

Them, the royalty of Hell. They lived far from this disgusting torture chamber. If anyone could believe it, in the nicer parts of Hell.

“It’s too bad your goddess didn’t live the eternity she traded for.”

Then he flashed the images in my mind. Like a dusty portrait held in an attic for a thousand years, he showed me the cracked and diluted memories from a millenia ago.

Her katana sliced through flesh like fire through paper. Flames flickered over her skin. Her true power was killing. Her blade hummed with life as she killed another dozen, and then a dozen more. Demons desperate to stop her from breaking through their defensive lines. If they died in Hell, they were truly killed, never able to come back to life.

And there he was, the lover she fought so desperately for. The first Fated pairing known to our kind. She killed everything in her path, hordes of demons never ending, all ready to die to defeat her.

She reached him. He was limp and tortured, blood that leaked from his body now dried, teeth marks covering him like he was used as a blood bag for a hundred demons.

She fell to her knees beside him, demons still coming at her from all angles, swarming her like an angry wasp nest. Teeth and claws ripping and nipping at her like she was next.

She screamed, not from the physical hurt, but from the loss of her Fated mate. An agony far more painful. She exploded, her fiery light blasting through the demon throng around her and her mate, killing them all like an atomic bomb.

That's when she became the bad guy.

When she embraced her rage.

When she became the goddess.

Dove

“You sent Damon to Hell?”

I snapped, staring at the four of them. My fists clenched in rage, forcing myself to take deep breaths to calm myself after what they had done.

“Well, he offered to go, Fated. To save you,”

Seven mused. His cheek quirked upwards and snapped back down when he saw my anger.

“And you let him?”

I growled the question. Something inside me pulsed that wasn't only my wrath. It was fear, fear for my Fated mate's life. “I knew you hated him, but I didn't know you hated me.”

Kairos stepped forward, hands up and I snapped my gaze to him. Everything was so clear and colorful, like my eyes had gotten better since I learned the information.

“Dove, calm down.”

“Do not tell me to calm down.”

He stepped back, pleading to the others for help.

“You're going to go feral, vixen. Relax.”

I already felt it coming. It was a wave. No, a tsunami of fury and fright. What would they do to him down there?

“We’ll get him, little fox,”

Enko said.

My gaze snapped to him, like everything zoomed in, too brilliant, too vivid. My voice was no longer my own. “No, I’ll get him myself. You four have done enough.”

My fox form came so easily. Like I’d shifted a million times.

I’m going to get him back. I won’t let anything hurt him.

My thoughts had gone feral, working on their own agenda. I sprinted back toward Lethe, back toward the Hellgate that they had rescued me from.

I never agreed to this deal.

I don’t make deals with demons.

My paws moved a mile a minute. My Fated males chased behind me. When I flung my head back, I saw them, and it was almost like they were struggling to keep up. I growled at the sight of them.

Rhys, golden brown fur, eight tails. Seven, black fur and ruby red eyes sparkling, seven tails. Enko, reddish-brown fur and the largest of my harem, six tails. Kairos, the golden fox, his five tails sparking with lightning.

So handsome, so majestic, so powerful.

Yet so fucking stupid.

That's a little harsh, Fated, came Seven's voice.

But I'd lost control. I skidded to a stop, teeth clamping around his neck as he leapt past me and I clenched tightly.

Panic hummed on our connection, but the others didn't dare intervene. Seven whimpered below me, but I didn't release, not until he submitted to me. I growled at his sensitive neck as he began to yelp in pain. But I didn't break skin. He would heal quickly if he stopped playing games.

My Fated males are not to be used in bargains, Seven. Was it you who made the deal?

Seven whimpered again, shaking his head as he tried to lash out and gain some control over me. His eyes flashed to the others, like they would help him.

It was all of us, Fated. I'm sorry.

I released him, turning on the others and growling. Each of them dropped to be lower than me as I padded slowly, dangerously, over to them. For Enko, it was hard to be shorter than me, but he rolled to his side, exposing his belly.

Good enough.

Enough playing around. Damon needed me. Damon needed us. And we weren't about to leave him on his own again. After all the suffering he'd been through since I'd first met him. Not even getting to spend time with me outside of the dreamworld for so long.

We were faster in our fox forms than we would have been in a car. We didn't have to

stick to the roads, we crossed the forest surrounding Foxfire Academy and headed straight to the center of Lethe.

The city was oddly empty, but in the distance, screams rang out. Without the Lord of Nightmares upholding the integrity of the Hellgate, some stronger demons slipped through the defenses.

My paws pounded against the cement, and my Fated males closed in around me. But I wasn't scared, even as the blood coated the pavement. Even as I jumped over the bodies.

The first demon came into sight. A fat protruding belly, something they never bothered to cover. A pair of ripped shorts that were probably full length on whatever creature it stole them from. Its head was too small for its gigantic body, and two tusks protruded from its bottom set of teeth over its upper lip. And one eye closed from some past injury. It carried a flail with a morningstar on the end, wrecking through what few of the kitsune fought against it.

Ogre, Tier III.

My weapon pulsed with excitement, ready to suck up all its energy and stop its wrath mid-slaughter. It sensed us too, because it stopped, taking three steps in a slow circle to face us. And five kitsune were certainly a force to be reckoned with, because it stumbled toward us like a drunken idiot who couldn't control his giant feet or its big body, about to crash forward face first into the pavement.

Seven leapt into the Shadow Vale, and Enko's tails lit, creating a fiery circle of light around us. Kairos let it rain, something to douse the demon flames all around us, but it didn't affect Enko's Fire. A massive hole had been blasted into the side of Damon's club where I had first met him, the entire building being swallowed into the sinkhole.

Demons streamed from the bottomless abyss, hellfire guarded the entrance like a new Gate. Down below, monsters escaped through the Hellgate onto the streets of Lethe. Rhys focused on the injured, trying to help them enough to either get away or rejoin the fight. His green magic flowed from his scepter, stitching wounds and absorbing the hellfire char.

We would need all the help we could get.

Seven began his ruthless stabs as he jumped from the Shadow Vale in his human form, but I wanted a taste of blood between my teeth. Payback for all the demons who had drank from my kind. A clean slash from my odachi would be too easy for them.

I vaulted for the closest throat of the largest demon, seeing my fur light up with my anticipation as I leapt through the air, directly for the ogre's throat. He slashed his flail, but Enko had returned to human form, using his size against the ogre, and the handle of his weapon blazed to life as he sliced off the creature's hand.

He had to ruin all the fun.

I dug my teeth into the ogre, ferociously ripping at its flesh as its blood coated my face. But I didn't care, I lived for this. I could feel the pleasant pull of tendons and blood vessels, tearing through them and wishing it were a tasty bunny.

Goddess, I'd gone full feral.

She'd be proud.

The ogre dropped to the ground, but I had no time to be happy about its death, because the next demon was already on its way toward us.

Five heads, one for each of us. It usually kept near the water, its draconian skin needing the moisture. Each of the heads connected to its large body, all the heads wanting to go a different direction. The heads were small, attached to long necks, but their teeth were sharp. It was faster than it looked lumbering around.

Hydra, Tier IV.

Seven appeared next to it, slicing its head off, but his eyes were on me, smirking as though he needed my approval. I was proud to have him as a mate, but right now I had more important problems.

Vines ripped from the ground, Rhys' scepter leaking a green magical light and calling to the roots below for help. The vines wrapped around a neck and dragged it to the ground, locking it in place.

The center head focused in on me. Kairos and Enko stood on either side of me as we rushed forward. Enko defeated his head easily, the creature trying to escape his fire, his blade beheading it. And Kairos' lightning bolts rained from the sky striking into another. The creature screeched, its last head snapping forward toward me.

I shifted back into my human form, drew my odachi and sliced off its head and resheathed the weapon in one clean blow.

The Lord of Nightmare's army cleared out the way in front of us as we blew through the lesser demons like they were merely playthings. We crossed the path of hellfire into the cave deep beneath the city.

A few kitsune warriors approached us. Enko growled as he covered me with his own nudity.

The Archfox ordered, "Get us some clothes and shoes, and quickly."

They obeyed, returning to us with a few stacks of clothes and we all dressed outside in record time. This time, I'd walk through Hell in shoes.

And then it came into sight once more. The Hellgate.

I didn't hesitate, running at full speed into Hell to rescue my Fated mate.

As I came closer to it, the blue flames flickered brighter, and as I passed through it, the flames sparked and then dimmed.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:58 am

Dove

The stray demons on the surface were nothing compared to the legions below. The demon horde lined up and prepared to exit as soon as the Hellgate broke. And based on the dimming flames and growing armies, we didn't have long.

The endless lines of demons stretched farther than the eye could see. If I thought outside had been bad, then a massacre approached Earth. And not just Lethe was in danger.

Enko, Kairos, Seven, and Rhys entered behind me. The demons hadn't noticed us yet. What were five kitsune warriors to the masses of demons?

"Dove, this isn't safe. We need to get back outside,"

Kairos began.

I shook my head, dashing to the side where it was darker. Where we might have a chance to remain unseen as we rescued Damon. "You can go back if you're afraid."

"We're not afraid, vixen. But we need more kitsune if we're going to fight this,"

Rhys argued.

"No, what we need is Damon to return the Hellgate to its full strength before these demons are unleashed onto Earth,"

I whispered back.

“Even if we do make it through, how are we supposed to find him in this mess, little fox?”

Enko asked.

“I know where he is. I can feel him. They’ll keep him in the lower dungeons, where the stronger supernaturals are kept.”

We crept into one of the small tunnels that skirted around the edge. I had no idea where it led, but some mysterious feeling within me guided our way. I searched for Damon in the mindspace, but only found a weak pull in the right direction. He had been down here for at least two days, and the imprisonment sapped his strength.

A forked path stopped us and I hesitated, testing both ways before choosing the right one. Just in the nick of time too, because pounding footsteps came from the other, a pack of demons heading to join their army.

We watched and waited before moving forward again.

“Close one, Fated,”

Seven said, moving to my side and gripping my arm. I welcomed the cool air drafting around him, the Shadow he called to pull me into the Vale if needed. And I knew then that he had planned to save me if needed. He didn’t have the power to bring all of us to the Shadow Vale and get us out. He had planned to sacrifice the rest and save me.

I glared. “We’re all getting out of this, Seven. Or we’re all dying. I will not leave any of you behind. And you will not interfere to save only the two of us.”

Enko growled, “We’re not going to let you die, little fox. Even if you’re the only one to survive.”

I reached a hand up to his cheek, gazed into his feral eyes, “Then know that I’ll follow shortly after.”

Kairos and Rhys glanced at each other, keeping their thoughts to themselves. My four mates' shoulders stiffened, keeping their hands on their weapons and their eyes peeled as we continued down the path.

“How do you know we’re going the right way?”

“I have a feeling.”

“Yeah, Rhys, she has a feeling,”

Seven quipped. His eyes flicked all around us, looking for any sign of an attack and was more uncomfortable than before I had spoken.

But the deeper we got, the more I prayed to the goddess that I was going the right way. If I get all of us killed...

“We trust you, Dove,”

Kairos said as he heard the thought.

“You, maybe. Did you forget she’s just a kit who just got her first tails?”

Seven whispered, shrugging when I sent a scowl his way.

The path devolved into a large opening, where there were at least a dozen options of

where to go and I froze.

“Which way?”

Enko asked.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the feeling of Damon’s mind to guide me, but the minutes passed and nothing came. When I opened my eyes, all the guys were staring at me with worry coating their expressions.

I panicked, keeping my expression tightly under wraps as I stroked my blade for comfort.

A white gold light shone in one of the tunnels and I blinked to ensure I wasn’t hallucinating.

She appeared like a ghost, her hair blowing in a nonexistent breeze, a small smile gracing her lips. Her weapon was sheathed and her eyes were serious.

“This way,”

the goddess whispered as though she were by my side instead of across the subterranean corridor.

“There,”

I pointed, glancing at the others. Just a perk of being a Disciple.

“How do you know?”

Seven whispered. “Did the goddess tell you?”

“How the fuck would the goddess tell her? She’s been dead for a thousand years,”

Kairos asked.

I gave a look of disappointment at my dark mate, but he shook his head. “Oh fuck no, don’t put this on me. They deserve to know, Fated. That you hear the goddess. That she speaks to you.”

Enko, Kairos, and Rhys all looked at me with different levels of ‘Is she crazy?’

“Let’s go,”

I demanded as I jogged toward the correct tunnel, “Before any demons use these passages.”

We continued forward, and the tunnel led even deeper into the pits of Hell, but then I felt him nearby and I sped into a run, causing the guys to try to keep up with me. The cages came into our sight and breathed a sigh of relief, glad the goddess hadn’t misled me.

I began checking each of the cages, so engrossed in finding my Fated mate that when Enko and Kairos zoomed past me I twirled around in shock.

“Akuma!”

I screamed at him. Akuma, a word for the worst kinds of demons. Archdemons. The purple-skinned demon stopped before us in the tunnel, tilting his head. “Why in the devil’s name are you back? We had a deal.”

“Deals off, Emperor Sutoku Tenno,”

I told the archdemon, my brain not so clouded from starvation this time.

His face shuddered as I spoke the name, eyes flaring and smile fading, shaking his head.

“Kill him now,”

I ordered, my feral voice taking over, and my Fated males launched into action, taking him by surprise. Kairos’ mace smashed into his face, no mercy for the Tier V.

Kairos shifted into his fox—involuntarily—killing the Tier V had granted him his sixth tail. His tails sparked with lightning, leading the way past the dead demon, the burning flesh giving off a strong odor of brimstone.

We stopped in front of Damon’s cell, and I could feel his pulse within. I grabbed the gate, only to remember we needed a key, but Seven appeared behind me, holding up the demon iron key that looked centuries old.

“Got it off the guard before it could burn with him,”

Seven mused as he pushed it into the lock and the door clanked open. It was a nicer cell than the one I had been put in. It had a sink and a stone hard bed that Damon rested on. Somehow, in the pits of Hell he had remained somewhat clean.

I rushed inside, falling to my knees beside Damon. His heartbeat was weak, his breath shallow, but he was alive.

I slowly lifted his head off the ground, my hands cupping both his cheeks. “Damon, wake up—”

“No time, Fated. There’s more demons coming this way,”

Seven reported from outside the cell.

Enko reached down, gripping Damon. The movement awoke my mysterious mate and his eyes met mine with panic. “What are you doing here, Dove? You’re supposed to be safe.”

“So are you,”

I muttered, frowning. “I refuse to lose any of you.”

“Vixen, we’re out of time, let’s go.”

Enko picked up Damon, and despite the Lord of Nightmares' resistance, he let my giant mate carry him. Enko had to turn to get out of the cell with Damon, and then we were back in the long hallway.

I led the group the way we had come, but Rhys and Seven kept at my side, with Kairos bringing up the rear in his fox form. Enko walked between us, keeping Damon safe within.

“I can walk,”

Damon muttered irritably.

“Not fast enough,”

I said as we picked up the pace.

“Which way?”

Rhys asked as we came back to the room with a dozen tunnels. I easily picked the

correct one this time without the goddess' help.

“FIND THE KITSUNE! The Emperor is dead!”

some demon yelled from behind us, and we were running toward the dim blue fire of the Hellgate. When it came into sight, I realized it would not be so easy to exit as it had to enter.

I pulled out my sword, while Enko passed Damon over to Rhys. Neither was happy about the arrangement, but I ignored their complaints as Rhys wrapped an arm around Damon's shoulders and helped him hobble along. Enko's sword lit up and Seven slipped into the Shadow Vale. In the light of hellfire, a shadow could be seen around him, not allowing him to fully hide within Hell.

“Let us handle this, Fated. Stay with Rhys and Damon.”

I ignored my dark mate, positioning myself for the first wave.

I didn't even bother to categorize the demons, they were too fast, too many, all different types and colors, some types that I had killed before. But my odachi drank up their blood indiscriminately as I slashed through them.

Enko and Seven tore a hole in the horde with me, while Kairos flung lightning from his tails in fox form, calling down the clouds even underground to scare away the lesser demons as his rain began to shower upon us.

My movements were smooth and practiced, my blade an extension of my own body, dancing through the demons as I felled them. I didn't bother to count as we slowly moved through the packed crowd of our enemy blocking our escape.

With each demon down, we moved forward, the four of us circled around Rhys and

Damon, until we finally made it to the gate. Enko sent a whip of fire out of his sword handle as we dashed through, safely reaching the other side.

The blade of a kitsune from Damon's troops almost whacked into us, but they stopped a hair from our faces.

"Archfox, Disciple,"

the kitsune bowed as he saw Damon behind us, "Lord of Nightmares, what were you all doing down there? Nevermind, get out of here to safety. We're guarding the gate for now."

"Good,"

Rhys responded, striding past, supporting Damon's weight, though now the Lord of Nightmares desperately tried to maintain some amount of decency and walk on his own two feet. "Have you alerted the Council of Elders?"

The kitsune nodded. "They are sending more backup."

"The Lord of Nightmares will get the Hellgate back up as soon as he's recovered. Hold them off until then."

The kitsune warriors nodded as we hurried by them.

The Archfox commandeered a vehicle, and we all scurried inside, me in the backseat with Damon's head on my lap. I stroked his hair, finally feeling like my heart wasn't about to fall out of my chest. Knowing he was safe. That they were all safe.

"Little fox,"

Enko whispered, gazing at me with feral eyes, his body stiffening. “Your eyes are glowing.”

From the front seat, Rhys glanced back at me. “Fuck. She’s going into heat.”

Dove

“We need to get her somewhere safe before it happens,”

Kairos grumbled. “Drive faster.”

My breath was heavy, all my handsome males kept looking at me. I wanted them all, all at once.

“Hold it together, vixen, breathe.”

But instead, when Damon lifted his head from my lap, my lips locked with his and our tongues thrashed against each other, and I tasted his citrus. He smelled like bergamot.

“You’re safe,”

I told him when we pulled apart and he sat up, somehow gaining energy from the kiss. Seven and Damon sat on one side of me, and Enko on the other. And the second I was free, I moved on top of Enko’s lap, jolting with each bump in the road on his lap as my hands moved through his silky soft hair, over his hot skin.

He was breathing heavily, peering out the window away from me, but I kept my hands on his face, forcing his eyes into my gaze. “No, don’t hide your feral side from me.”

“Hurry up, Rhys,”

Enko growled, locking lips with mine. I giggled under his growl.

Oh, goddess, they were all so perfect. Angry and aggressive. Caring and kind. Soft and hard. Sexy and alluring. And I got to have all of them.

Seven's hand stroked my hair. "We're almost home, Fated."

Before the car had even stopped, Enko threw the door open, gripping hold of my ass with one hand and carrying me inside. He kicked at the front door as Rhys rushed forward with a set of keys.

Enko rushed up the stairs with me, carrying me into the shower for a very quick wash before tossing me onto the bed underneath him and kissing me hard. "Good little fox,"

he groaned against me and that hardness pressed against my thighs, partially blocked by a towel.

When my hands moved down to remove it, another set of hands was already there, helping me. And it wasn't Enko's, because his hands were moving through my hair, his lips attached to mine.

And when his cock pressed against me, he paused, breathing heavily for a moment and looking away from me.

I growled in frustration for making me wait.

"I don't want to hurt you,"

he growled back, almost as feral as I was. But I wasn't afraid, I knew he wouldn't hurt me. He and I were meant to mate.

Seven moved to my side, biting at my neck in rebellion. I snapped my gaze to my dark mate. “We’re taking care of you, Fated. Just enjoy the ride.”

“Please,”

I begged, grabbing his neck and bringing it to my mouth, biting against him until he smirked.

Enko pressed forward, and I cried out as my body accepted him. As big as he was, I wanted him to fill me, feel him stretch me to accommodate his size. But he went slow and I saw at least one set of hands on him that weren’t my own.

“He’s mine,”

I growled at the hands, and they retreated, letting my giant mate free as his cock pressed into me until his hips pressed against me. A feral mewl escaped as he thrust into me, and he gazed down at me, waiting a moment. I could feel his heartbeat within me, exhaling with the amazing feeling of being filled and complete. “All of you are mine.”

Enko went feral, there was no stopping him now, stroking his cock freely into me as Seven bit at my neck and Rhys sucked on my nipple. Kairos stroked my hair, kissing my mouth.

My entire body pulsed with elation and joy with each thrust from my giant mate. He was gentle and rough in all the right ways, giving me exactly what I needed. A tear escaped my eyes and it was kissed away. A finger rolled against my throbbing center as I cried out in ecstasy.

Enko’s cock pulsed within me, letting out an ungoddlessly amount of his seed within me, and he held himself deep inside me for a long moment, replacing the kiss

as Kairos backed away. My body milked his seed further and when he tried to withdraw, I growled, gripping hard onto his shoulders until I felt him complete within me.

“Good little fox,”

he purred. He withdrew, his eyes going onto my pussy as a small drip escaped me, and his thumb moved to stop it. I watched him curiously as he pushed it back inside me.

Damon appeared behind him, his hair wet and steam flowing out of my bathroom. My eyes watched him, feeling exposed but somehow safe in front of my newest Fated mate. His tongue ran over his lips and I gazed around, breathing like I couldn't get enough air. But it wasn't air that I needed. All of my Fated males watched me, waiting for something. Waiting for what?

Seven's hand rested on my breast and I met his eyes, arching up into his hold. And then I glared at Kairos, “Hold me.”

He did as commanded, his hands going to either of my wrists and his lips pressing against my forehead.

My eyes went back to Damon and Rhys, who were in a scuffle as Rhys tried to hide me from my Fated mate.

“Rhys,”

I murmured.

With the sound of his name, he released Damon and rushed over to me. “Yes, vixen?”

“Play nice, don’t try to control this.”

He nodded eagerly, unable to control his feral side as his eyes went all over my body, his mouth going to my navel and kissing between my breasts.

When I opened my eyes again, he knelt between my legs. “Please, vixen, may I take you?”

I grinned, my entire body humming with the request. “You’re all mine. And I’m all yours.”

His cock pressed against me, and my sleek core was ready for him. He grabbed hold of my hips, and pulled me onto him, one hand remaining there as he pushed himself in me, filling me. Petting the inside of me with his shaft, kneading that knot of sensitive muscles inside of me over and over until I came.

There was no pain. No words to describe it as he filled me. Except...delicious.

And when the Archfox withdrew, he too pushed what leaked out back into me. I watched curiously, some male mating tactic that I couldn’t get enough of.

“Damon,”

I cried out, and my mysterious mate was there.

“My little bird, I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“Take me,”

I ordered. Under normal circumstances, I would have wondered if he wanted to yet. But in heat, I could feel all their want and need for me. None of them could get

enough of me, and I couldn't get enough of them either.

Damon hesitated and some part of me remembered my base instincts. "Kiss me first."

His eyes landed onto my scars that wrapped onto my stomach, and he leaned forward, kissing the scars. "My little bird, I'll never let you get hurt again."

One of my other males growled, Enko, "Don't make her feel insecure."

But I felt safe under his lips as he moved them around my side. I pulled away from Kairos and Seven. Damon's hands lifted me up onto his naked lap, his lips pressing against mine, his hand holding around the back of my head and gripping tightly in my hair, deepening the kiss. The head of him bumped near my sensitive pussy, which was so sleek, so ready.

"Are you sure you can handle me?"

he asked, his cheek rising as I pulled back in dismay, but he lifted me and pushed himself up into me in one smooth movement.

"Oh,"

I said the word with confusion, watching him with my lips parted and the two of us stared at each other as though my other four mates weren't watching our moment of privacy. "You're not mad? To share me?"

"I am honored to be your Fated mate, Dove,"

Damon told me. "I've always known I would share you. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Something tells me that I couldn't handle you alone."

“She is needy,”

Seven said and instead of glaring at him, I grinned.

Damon moved me up and down over his shaft, lifting me like I was a bag of feathers, watching as my breasts bounced with each thrust until he came inside me. As he began to lift me off of him, I felt all within me threatening to come out and the males around us growled.

Damon pushed me back down onto the bed, holding my shoulder as he carefully pulled out of me, and he too pushed his seed back within me.

My tongue curved over my lips, and I turned to Seven, down to his pants. And without a word, he understood my meaning, and showed me what he had for me. And when I turned to Kairos, he too had his within his hand.

“I want to be filled,”

I said the words out loud, though I meant to keep them to myself, the feral heat transforming me into a wanton vixen.

My tongue reached out and stroked against Kairos’ manhood, tasting his precum and then letting him press himself into my mouth. I took only a bit of him, sucking and stroking against him with my tongue as I rolled onto my side.

Seven snarled, growing impatient as he flipped me onto my back and knelt on the bed behind me. He gripped my hips and pulled me onto all fours in front of him. “My turn, Fated.”

He slid into me, releasing a groan from me as I felt the familiarity of him, holding myself up to lick against Kairos’ hardened head as he continued to stroke my hair.

“Good, Dove. You’re doing so good taking all of us.”

His compliment made my pussy tighten around Seven and I pulled away from Kairos’ cock to glance back at Seven’s smirk. “You look so great from this angle, Fated. I’m going to fuck you to sleep tonight, too, so don’t get tired yet.”

When Seven finished, pushing all that threatened to come out back inside me.

I was exhausted, starryeyed and breathing heavily as Seven pushed me down, and Rhys shoved a pillow under my thighs so that my pelvis was higher than my head, murmuring something to the other guys about spilling and they all agreed with nods, as if fucking me was a business meeting.

Kairos hovered above me, gripping both my wrists and holding them over my head as he leaned down to take my nipple into his mouth. “One more, Dove. You can do this.”

I gulped and nodded eagerly as he speared his malehood into me, keeping my hands held hostage above my head and his mouth sucked on my breast. Controlling my every pleasure. I could see all the guys watching with appreciation and seeing all their gorgeous faces made me come again.

And when he finally came, he carefully pulled himself out, pushing his seed back within me, placing another pillow under me and kissing my forehead. “Good girl.”

I was throbbing down there, not with soreness but with exhaustion. How many times had they made me come?

Enko kissed my cheek, “So many times, little fox. I love hearing your little moans, watching your tight little pussy clench around my fat cock.”

Damon laid at my side, and none of the men stopped him as he kissed me again. “My mate.”

My hips were high, all of me exposed to my Fated mates as they began to surround me, Seven between my legs as he pressed his finger up against my sex, rubbing gently and making my entire body shiver and jolt with each movement as I hummed with pleasure.

“Don’t let any of our seed spill, Fated,”

Seven commanded.

I nodded in agreement as Rhys took my other side and Kairos and Enko were stroking my thighs and streaming their fingers over me. Every sensation rippled through me, each of them masters of pleasuring me.

“Let her absorb it all,”

Rhys was saying as his mouth trailed over my neck to my lips.

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Dove

All the troubles of the world were gone as I recovered, my Fated males taking very good care of me.

“Are you pleased, my little bird?”

“Oh, vixen, you did so good. Can I do anything else for you?”

“Did you have fun, little fox?”

They were all just questions, but I made sure to answer all of them because the males needed their egos stroked a little after such a pursuit. “You are all so perfect. I’m so happy the goddess gave me the best males in the whole world. I can’t wait for us to have more fun.”

“Not yet, Fated,”

Seven growled, wrapping his hands under my ass and raising it into the air as I giggled myself into oblivion.

“Are you hurting, Dove?”

Kairos was asking, his thumb brushing under my breast. “Were we too rough on you?”

“Goddess, no,”

I mused, relaxing on top of Damon's arm. But my heated feral side was far from quelled. She was a needy bitch and wanted more. Much more.

And my Fated mates were ready to give it to me. And more importantly, I wanted to give them pleasure too. If the attentive males would ever let me. Maybe now they would since I had gone into heat.

But I was so tired. It had been a long day.

"Seven?"

I asked quietly, and there he was, staring into my eyes with his own ruby orbs.

"Yes, Fated?"

"Will you fuck me to sleep now?"

He smirked at me and then glanced possessively at the other guys, holding the position of power between my legs defensively.

"Seven,"

Kairos growled. "She needs to recover. We all got a taste already."

But my request made Seven feral as he moved closer, ignoring the order from my other mate. In some ways, Seven was the most feral, though he had complete control of it.

"Let me please my Fated,"

my dark mate growled as the others tried to hold him back, but—thank the

goddess—he was so strong, so shifty, so stealthy.

He pushed himself in, my wetness ready to welcome him again as Rhys and Damon rested on either side of me. My dark mate pushed himself in fully, leaning down to rest his chin above my head. “You’re such a good fox, Fated. So responsive and ready for all of us.”

My hand reached up and stroked against his scar, causing him to stiffen and glare at me, just the way I liked. “You’re so scary, Seven. But I’m not scared of you.”

He smirked, glaring at the other four who watched him. And he maintained his promise, nudging inside of me and taking me slowly, a sleepy massage as he continued. I only let my eyes close as I felt him coming inside me, whispering, “Good girl, so good at taking my cock.”

When I awoke, all my males rested around the bed and I desperately untangled myself, waking all of them as I rushed into the bathroom. I didn’t bother to close the door. From my seat on the toilet, I could see my brown eyes glowing almost golden still.

And my males rose from the bed like zombies from the grave, following in after me.

One of them started the shower in the other room and I quickly moved to follow my mate inside. I was still naked from the night before, and I didn’t have to even take my clothes off. It was Kairos inside, his beautiful blue scar like lightning on his shoulder, and I went up on my toes to kiss it gently. A fruity smell mixed with the steam as he began to stroke soap over my body, lathering me up as his hands slipped through it.

“Good morning, Dove,”

Kairos greeted warmly with a kiss on top of my head as the door opened behind me.

“Oh, for goddess’ sake, can’t I have a moment with her?”

I glanced back to find the rest of my Fated males had already stripped down and were filing into the shower with me. Thankfully, the shower was as big as the entire bathroom in the dorm, even with places to sit around the edges. I giggled at the sight, and Damon stole me from Kairos into his arms under the rainfall of water.

“I had so much fun with you last night,”

he told me, and my sex throbbed with delight.

Enko immediately pressed himself behind me, his hardness pressing against my lower back and jumping out, soothing my old scars like they had tormented me in another lifetime.

“How long did we talk about this exact situation, Enko?”

Damon asked. “Taking her together?”

Enko growled, reaching around me under my breasts and pulling me against his chest as Damon pushed himself closer.

“No, she’s definitely not ready for that,”

came Rhys’ voice.

“For what?”

I asked innocently, simpering before my males.

Their feral sides had faded slightly, but at the first scent, they were riling up and

ready to go again. And I wanted them all again.

Seven smirked, “For such an innocent fox, you are a needy and horny woman, Fated. But I don’t think I’ll ever smell strawberries again without getting hard.”

Damon pushed me against the wall that was Enko, his cock entering me exactly like I wanted it to. I bit at his neck, scarring his perfect body with temporary wounds. With each little suckle from me, he pushed himself deeper.

As he came, hands moved to my hair, strawberries and cream scents filling the hair as Kairos massaged it into my hair. “I got it just for you, Dove.”

Seven groaned incredulously, “Seriously, Kairos? What are you trying to do to me? At this rate, I’ll be fucking her every day during training.”

“If you do, take her into the Shadow Vale, because I’ll kill anyone who sees her naked,”

Enko growled.

The water began to run cold and as I shivered, Enko released his heat onto me, pulling me from the water and wrapping me in the fluffiest towel in existence, carrying me back to the bed.

“Are you hungry, little fox?”

“For you,”

I demanded.

And he gave me what I wanted, so perfectly filling me with his size, holding me in

his arms. I felt so small and protected as he went feral, driving into me slower this time. Hands were all over me, and I knew the feel of each touch, never wanting it to end.

“Hold her for me, Kairos,”

Rhys demanded.

My stormy mate obliged the order, holding my wrists and shoulders, twisting my fingers within his.

The day passed and they each took me over and over, stroking me, comforting me, giving me exactly what I needed until I was so exhausted, I thought I might die of happiness.

When I finally awoke from the sex coma, the sun cast pinks and purples through the room as I laid naked in the bed, so completely and utterly satisfied. All my Fated males were equally tired and each trying to touch some part of my naked skin, lying on me and petting me, stroking my hair, kissing every little nook and cranny.

And as if to ruin the moment, my stomach growled the instant that my feral heat ebbed. In some ways, being in heat made everything clearer, everything felt nicer. But it also made me forget every basic need I had except for my hunger for my Fated males, starved for sex and their delicious scents.

“I ordered some food, I’ll let them know we’re ready,”

Kairos said immediately, getting out of bed and going outside the room for a few long minutes, then he returned to me, glancing at the others. “Let’s get cleaned up and dressed. We can eat downstairs.”

“What, you don’t want to eat in our Fated’s sex den?”

“Seven,”

Rhys warned as I began to blush, the memories coming back to me. Distinctly aware of my nude body and all of them staring at it. If I could have tugged a cover over me, I would have, but they were all lying on it.

“Don’t you dare hide, Fated. You’re perfect.”

I glanced around at them all anxiously. “I did okay?”

“Okay?”

Enko began, “Little fox, you are amazing. You did exactly what you needed to. More than you needed to.”

Damon nodded. “It’s us that needs to know if we gave you everything you wanted.”

I nodded, pressing my legs together as those sensations threatened to come again. I slowly sat up, rushing over to my dresser and grabbing new clothes and slipping into them as my Fated did the same as quickly as possible. None of us wanted to be away from each other for long, and then they all stood around me, much faster with their superior tails, waiting for me to jump into my black jeans and pull a black hoodie over my head.

Downstairs, dishes clattered and all my males except Kairos shot toward the door, ready to run and attack the intruder.

“It’s fine, it’s just the food,”

Kairos told them and they calmed down.

Except for Rhys, “What, did you take over my kitchen as well?”

Kairos shrugged, grabbing hold of my hand. “Let’s go eat, Dove.”

I eagerly followed him and the others weren’t far behind. As we entered the dining room, the table was filled with all of my favorite foods, which was pretty much all of them at this point.

A feast for me and my Fated males.

Seven scooped out a large helping of strawberry shortcake, glaring at us before any of us could give him shit for eating dessert first.

“Did you hire a chef or something?”

Enko asked, scooping out mashed potatoes onto his plate, and when he caught my eye, he gave me a scoop, squished down the middle, and dumped a load of gravy into the mini volcano.

There was even a whole turkey at the center, which Rhys began to cut and gave me all the best slices of meat.

“It's a bit early for Thanksgiving, isn’t it?”

Damon asked cautiously, the only one that wasn’t filling his plate. I paused, stopping my hand before I could grab a healthy serving of stuffing. He stood at the edge of the table like he wasn’t welcome to join us. Enko and Seven had already taken the chairs next to me, and Rhys and Kairos sat across from me at the large table. Taking all the good spots.

“Seven, move over. Damon, sit down next to our Fated mate,”

Kairos demanded. “You’re making Dove get all weird.”

Seven groaned and glared but did as ordered and Damon took the seat next to me.

“So he can live here with us too?”

I asked, glimpsing at the Archfox with a pleading look in my eyes.

“I doubt you would have it any other way, vixen,”

Rhys said, distracting me as he reached across the table for my hand and Kairos plopped a very large serving of brussel sprouts onto my plate before I could block his attack.

“Kairos!”

“Eat your vegetables, Dove.”

I had to love him for it.

I ate until I was positively stuffed, with barely enough room for dessert—mostly because Kairos had me eat about a million brussel sprouts before letting me have seconds—but Seven insisted, giving me some of the shortcake and somehow I made room, just for him.

A frantic knocking pounded against the door and Rhys stood up, rushing to the front door in the other room.

“I haven’t been able to get ahold of you, Your Holiness,”

a voice said. I stood up, following the others out into the foyer. Elder Peter stood in the entrance, his white robes and red belt slightly disheveled in his panic. He bowed toward us, “General, Lieutenant, Major, Lord of Nightmares, Disciple. I’m glad you’re all here. We’ve been calling your phones, but couldn’t get an answer.”

“What’s going on, Elder Peter?”

I asked, sensing the distress in his voice.

“The armies have been mobilized, the Council had to override your authorities when we couldn’t reach any of you.”

He looked between us suspiciously as if his lifetime of knowledge knew exactly what we’d been doing the past day, but he didn’t say anything. He let out a slow exhale.

“All of you must put your armor on now. We’re out of time. The Hellgate is nearly broken. The last battle is here.”

Seven

“I forgot,”

Dove said as Elder Peter scurried out the door, her brown eyes all big and filled with guilt like it was her fault it slipped her mind. “Damon, we need you to repair the Hellgate before the demons come out. There were legions down there preparing for battle.”

Damon shifted uncomfortably as we all turned to him. “I would if I could.”

“What do you mean?”

Rhys demanded. “You will do as ordered. It’s your job.”

The Lord of Nightmares frowned, a confusion crossing his expression. “My job is to guard the gate. But I have no way to repair it.”

“Then what the fuck are we supposed to do?”

Enko demanded.

Dove straightened her shoulders back, looking at each of us seriously. “We fight.”

All of us erupted at Dove’s words, various forms of disagreement, all in our own way, but Dove was already racing up the stairs.

We followed her, heading into our own rooms. I opened my closet, pulling out my armor and beginning to put it on. For regular demon hunting, I never used it. But if what Elder Peter said was true, I may need it this time.

We all geared up and met again in the hallway, Dove still only wearing her thin human cloth, her odachi at her side, along with her dagger and throwing knives strapped to her legs.

“Vixen, we made something for you. Just in case this happened,”

my brother told her, gesturing for all of us to follow him into his room.

Against the wall, it stood. A brand new set of armor, made to perfectly fit our Fated. We had argued for weeks over what to make it out of. Whether she would want it to be black or white. Eventually we compromised, a layer of blackened quicksilver and iron, adorned with the white gold and platinum.

Dove’s jaw dropped, looking at the armor while we all looked at her beautiful admiring smile. “For me?”

“Yes,”

I snapped. “Now put it on and remember how important you are to us.”

She grinned as I glared at her, but she rushed forward to hug each of us. We ushered her back to the armor, each of us grabbing a piece and shoving our Fated into it. Because right now we didn’t have time for her thankfulness.

I unstrapped her odachi while Kairos’ secured the cuirass across her front and Enko tightened the sides. Damon and Rhys worked on either arm as I knelt before her and began on her greaves. I unfastened her knives and dagger, touching her thighs a bit longer than was necessary.

We would have imprisoned her at home if we could, but she would never forgive us. It was a double-edged sword. Letting her fight and endanger herself, or lock her up and have her hate us for the rest of eternity. But when it came down to it, she would get what she wanted, no matter the cost. For Dove, it was worth it.

My Fated let out a gasp as I tightened the straps near her upper thighs. She peered down at me, admiring me in a way I never thought a woman would. She loved me. She didn't pretend my scar across my face didn't exist, or that I was good-looking despite it. She gazed down at me like I was attractive because of it. She understood what it meant, the pain and the story behind it. She loved it like any other part of me.

Goddess, protect her at all costs, I prayed. As a Disciple, Dove could hear the goddess, which must mean that the goddess was real. And after being blessed with my Fated, I knew she was watching over all of us.

“Ready?”

Kairos asked in his golden armor, jerking his head toward the door. My own armor was black, and Enko's grayish-silver, with the slight twinge of red iron-oxide. My brother wore the armaments of the Archfox, more adorned and embellished than the rest of ours because it was made for the Commander of our army. He wore a white cloak trimmed in red and gold, in honor of the goddess.

And now Dove had her own. We hadn't had time to finish the helmet for her, and her white hair flowed freely down both of her shoulders. Her expression had turned serious, and I knew she was hellbent on getting revenge against the demons that had attacked her temple. She stroked her odachi like it was a shrewd kitten she was keeping calm.

Dove gazed at Damon, who wore only his normal clothes. “Where's your armor?”

Damon bowed his head slightly to hide the trace of a smile on his lips. “I'm a Mind

kitsune, Dove. I won't be in the heat of the battle like the rest of you. My job is to protect you from afar."

Dove nodded in understanding. "Let's go,"

Dove said, still giving Damon a concerned look and we headed downstairs and out the door.

I got into the driver's seat of my Land Rover and everyone else piled in. Before the doors were even closed, I revved the engine and drove.

Through my rear-view mirror, Dove wasn't her normal playful self in the backseat. Her face was stony and determined, staring through the middle of the front seats and out the windshield. When I tried to penetrate her thoughts, I hit the hardened shield of her Mind. Damon had trained her well, fortified her against her fears, watched her face them and helped her through the turmoil.

Smoke rose from the lower city of Lethe, and I sped toward it, coming across the occasional destroyed building and the patrols of kitsune killing any demons that had slipped past our armies.

I turned down a main road, far from the Hellgate and slammed on the brakes, the car squealing to a stop.

Our army blocked the street. We hurried out to see what the commotion was so far from the Hellgate.

Elder Peter scurried toward us, relieved, raising a hand in greeting. The five of us stood around Dove as he bowed.

"Why are you so far from the frontlines?"

Rhys demanded.

“Demons broke through the blockade an hour ago,”

Elder Peter explained. “The enemy has begun to set up a forward encampment a quarter mile around the Hellgate.”

“How many are free?”

Rhys asked, and I could see his brain already churning through the battle strategies.

“Several thousand and growing,”

Elder Peter responded.

“Thank you for monitoring, Peter. Get your Holy Foxes back to safety.”

The Elder gave a long and relieved bow, “Yes, Your Holiness.”

We moved toward the army of kitsune, a good portion of which were students of the Academy, looking nervous. The first-years were given standard-issue weapons, ones that weren't tethered to their soul and wouldn't serve them much good against any more than a Tier II.

Elder Peter passed by us once more, and each of his Holy Foxes bowed as they went by us, fear dripping from their faces. Dove's little red-headed friend was among them rushed forward and wrapped her arms around my Fated.

“Be careful, Dove,”

the Holy Fox said.

Dove returned the hug, leaning into her friend for a second of comfort. “You have nothing to worry about. I have my Fated mates, Sana. Get yourself back to the temple. A battlefield is no place for a Holy Fox. This is our job.”

Sana bowed and hurried off to catch up with the other Holy Foxes.

Rhys took the lead, pushing through the scattered kitsune army in front of us. He began to shout orders, “Get into your assigned groups! First-years in the back and keep close to your assigned Officer, your best chance of survival is with each other! Decorated warriors to the frontline!”

The kitsune moved as ordered, hiding their fears as the Archfox moved through them. The army parted for us as we made our way to the frontlines.

“Brynn!”

Dove called out to the retreating first-years. “Be safe!”

The book-smart kitsune girl waved back, but was ushered along by her Officer, a third-year student who looked almost as scared himself.

When we got past the throng of kitsune, I realized why.

The demons had blasted a hole into Lethe, the skyscraper lined streets near the Hellgate were all but rubble now. Tents made of ragged patchwork cloth—skin, I suspected—had been set up. And Tier IVs patrolled the inferior fiends with whips and screams.

Nearest to the Hellgate, I could hear the banging of metal, crude weapons for the demons to use in the battle. I scanned the battlefield.

“Seven, check the Hellgate. Report back to me,”

Rhys demanded as he shook his head. “At least three thousand strong, and that’s not counting the ones we saw in Hell.”

Dove’s eyes immediately went to mine, the first flash of fear I’d seen from her since she found out we traded Damon. I smirked at her confidently, masking my own uncertainty at the battle. There were more demons than I’d ever seen in my life.

I entered the Vale, drawing my short sword and dagger as I began to slaughter my way through the Shadow creatures to the center of the hellish encampment, down into the cave where the Hellgate stood.

Or where it once had.

The arch of the Hellgate was shattered, the top crumbled into boulders below. None of the blue hellfire flames wrapped around it. The center no longer had its protective barrier. I could see straight into the pits of Hell. Demons marched out in legions and hordes, crawling over each other like bugs to escape.

I rushed back to Rhys and the others, who now stood at the front of an organized army. I gulped before exiting the Shadow Vale.

“The last stronghold has fallen,”

I announced.

My Fated and her mates steeled themselves at the news. Rhys nodded solemnly as though he already suspected it.

The demons had chosen their battlefield, right at the center of Lethe. And in front of us, our foe assembled.

Weakest at the front, mostly composed of Tier I imps and other small creatures. My

clever Fated probably knew the names of every single one.

“Hold our ground!”

Rhys was yelling. “We cannot retreat, or these demons will rule over Earth!”

Fireballs began to rain upon us and Kairos struck his mace onto the ground, causing the rumble of thunder above us as a cloud formed to douse them before the hardened coals hit us.

Demons—Ifrīt, Tier III—launched them like throwing burning baseballs at us from the middle of the demon army. I only knew because my pesky Fated tortured me with her constant study sessions. She always thought about demons, too. I had learned so much from her.

I didn’t dare tell her that, lest she subjugate me to even more endless reading and knowledge. Now I almost wished I had.

A large black bird swooped above us, wreaking havoc as it plowed through our numbers.

“Kokakucho, Tier IV. It’ll go after the weaker kitsune first,”

Dove yelled, grabbing one of her throwing knives and nailing the creature in its wing joint. It screeched, diving at us now.

Enko’s fire unleashed from his sword, slicing through the demon.

Each of us slaughtered every demon that came our way, but the endless waves continued to come.

Demon blood covered my black armor as I took out a swath of ghostly demons who

skirted the edge of the Shadow Vale to bypass us.

We all surrounded Dove, protecting her, but each demon that got through our defenses, she slashed with her odachi. And despite her small size compared to us, she wasn't afraid.

Hours passed, but night was only just beginning, and I knew our army couldn't hold them for much longer. A horde of screeching wraiths broke our frontline, heading straight toward the first-years.

"We need to retreat!"

one of the Officers yelled at the Archfox.

But Rhys only shook his head. "Retreat will kill us all."

Would it be like Dove said? Would we all die here? Together?

But I looked to my Fated, expecting to see the fear of a timid kitsune. But she wasn't afraid.

She fucking smiled.

The demons broke our Fated group apart, and while Enko went feral, desperately trying to reach her, Dove ran away from us, directly into the demon army.

My eyes shot to her destination.

The archdemon, Zalgore, neared us. Deadened blue skin, his horns coated in pitch. But there were at least a hundred demons between us and him.

But that didn't stop my beautiful and deadly Fated.

Her blade whipped through every monster that stood in the way of her revenge, her sword glowing with power.

“Damn it, she’s going to get herself killed,”

Kairos snapped as we all sprinted toward her, but another flank of our enemies separated us.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, was all I could think as I entered the Shadow Vale, where less demons stood between me and my Fated mate. I bolted toward my Fated, stabbing anything that stood in my way.

Dove reached Zalgore, and his poisonous blade slashed and sputtered and sprayed at her, while a pile of demons lay dead in a circle of blazing hellfire around her.

She blocked his swing, and her weapon whacked it back out of the way, and she went in for another. But she was still so far away.

She moved at speeds that were impossible for my eyes to keep up with. Faster than I knew she was capable of.

Her blade impaled Zalgore’s face, and the demon screamed as hellfire burned from where the odachi stabbed into. Finally getting her revenge.

Brilliant white light exploded from her, spreading across the entire battlefield, demons falling as soon as her light touched them.

As the light dimmed, I raced to where my Fated had been.

I skidded to a stop, scanning the battlefield. The demons all around us shriveled into ash, leaving the kitsune army confused, their weapons mid-swing as the monsters they’d been fighting burned. Snowfall sizzled against the fiery embers of the dead

demons, turning swiftly into a blizzard.

Rhys, Kairos, Enko, and Damon rushed forward until they stood next to me, stopping as they saw what I did.

A small white scintillating fox gazed up at us, her eyes glowing brightly. Her tongue whipped out to catch a snowflake. Six tails swished excitedly behind her. As the rest of the kitsune moved forward to inspect, they all dropped to their knees, bowing before her.

”She doesn’t hear the goddess.”

I finally understood as the five of us glanced at each other and then to our badass Fated. I dropped to my knees and bowed my head in worship as I spoke it out loud.

“She is the goddess.”

To be continued...