



My Soul Is His (Our Souls #2)

Author: *Tanya Lynn*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The air in Cavum Terra is heavy with the scent of damp earth and fear, a constant reminder of the struggle for survival as you fight your demons.

With fierce loyalty, Sebastian dedicates himself to saving Marla from all that tortures her. Despite the shadows that surround him, she remains his one true light, his entire world.

Marla is consumed by her internal struggles, a silent battle waged within her heart. When things change, she has no other choice but to take charge.

As they try to build communities and find peace, will the strength of their eternal bond sustain them through the hardship?

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Dear reader,

If you haven't read *Your Soul is Ours* , leave this book and do that, otherwise this won't make a lick of sense.

I was certain that I wasn't going to write anything else to do with Sebastian and Marla, but they started talking and wanted to finish their story.

To love someone with a mental illness presents challenges, yet it is worth it. Living with demons in your mind at every turn makes everyday life so much fucking harder.

How mental illness affects us is different depending on the person. I know I said that in my last dedication, but it still holds true.

Just because a person is smiling on the outside, or seems to be doing well, doesn't mean they're faking, or that they don't dream of a world where they don't exist anymore.

I dedicate this to those who lost their battle, to those still bravely fighting, and to all who silently endure the pain.

You are important, and I'm so proud of you.

Tanya Lynn

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One

Marla

Jess calls my name like a soft whisper through the night.

I open my eyes, slipping out from under Sebastian's muscular arm, and duck my head as I leave our little tunnel.

Branches cover the entrance—it's a far cry from the house we used to live in, but this is all we have. Each moment can be ripped away, our shelter destroyed, and we will have to move on, but for now, this place is ours.

A sense of dread runs through my veins, but I ignore it and jog through the smoky haze that carries the sound of her speaking my name. I am certain I can contact her now.??????? Speed is crucial to locating her before they find me.

Her voice is as I remember it. Each morning that she calls out to me has been nothing but a trap, a way for one of my demons to capture me in their web.

This time will be different.

The path, a treacherous mix of broken grass and jagged rocks, snag at my shoes. Each stumble sends a jolt through my feet, but I press on.

The demon who has watched me for years haunts every thought I have. It's relentless and pulls at any string of insecurity to unravel me until I'm a shell of a being.

Ducking through the branches that try to cut me, chills run through my body. It's watching me again.

I crouch down and crawl along, breaking through a barrier of tall grass, and while the haze of orange and red covers everything, a white circle of light glows through the darkness of the trees.

At the wall, I press myself against the glass and watch the different realm. The first time, I could see everyone I've lost in my life. Their smiling faces brought me peace. Before it was all taken from me.

I thought I'd reach Jess before they threw her back in here. This is the furthest I've gotten in a few days. Her long blonde hair is brushed out, and she's enjoying the sunshine that blesses her.

My heart aches in a way I'll never be able to tell Sebastian. He does everything for me, and I can never let him think I'd trade this realm for a different one.

The ability to see my grandparents and Jess through the window, to sense their presence even from a distance, is more precious than anything I ever dreamed of. They never look at me, and the subtle reflection in the pane confirms my suspicion that it's similar to a one-way mirror.

A searing shock of pain jolts through my body, my chest constricts like a vise, and with each ragged breath, it's as if I'm pulling shards of glass from my lungs.

Every muscle tightens and my knees buckle, bringing me to the ground.

I breathe through the tremors the way Sebastian taught me to, but nothing works, and my vision darkens.

Memories throw me into a backdrop of my trauma, and horrors play like a movie behind my eyelids. My mind fills with fog, and I know he's here to dance. The demons never leave me alone for long. I've made a mistake falling for their trap again.

The air hangs thick and still as I scan my surroundings. Grey bricks encircle the space where I last glimpsed her, their rough edges blurred by the swirling smoke.

Pain throbs through my body, sharp and insistent as phantom fingers twist in my hair, yanking me back, but I don't hesitate. I surge forward, gritting my teeth against the fire in my veins, and plunge into the suffocating haze.

I realize I shouldn't have left our camp, but the demons lingering in my mind entice me out like a moth to a flame. Their presence is lurking nearby, a constant threat. They love to chew people up and spit them out, then allow their prey to heal before coming back once more.

Glancing over my shoulder as I run, the decrepit tree branches sway, but the camouflaged demon has advanced over the years, and I know it'll catch me soon.

It's gotten so adept at blending in with its surroundings that some days it can be right next to me.

When it's in my presence, my heart pounds like a drum, my lungs constrict, cutting off my breath, and an icy chill runs over my body.

Memories flood my mind, playing on repeat. The haunting whispers of torment, my mother's belittlement over the years, hangs heavy in the surrounding air. A relentless soundtrack which is now part of the shadow demon.

Thorns as big as garden spades rip through my flesh as I sprint through them, leaving

a trail of blood down my arms.

Decaying fingers brush my cheek, their icy coldness raising goosebumps on my skin, and I bite back the scream that threatens to tear from my lips. My chest burns as the thunderous footsteps rush behind me. I brace for the impact that never comes.

“My dove. Run.”

Sebastian pushes me through the maze of our world. I know he can't see what's hurting me, but he doesn't stop being the armour I've always needed.

I glance back, and he's running toward me with his tattooed arms spread wide. The repetition of this familiar scene, the same song and dance we've been doing for decades, proves I will never learn from my mistakes. I am powerless against the temptation the other realms tease me with.

A chilling dread washes over me at the prospect of failure and hurting Sebastian. Even in death he deserves more than what I can provide. Shrouded in the shadows of this place has only proven how much he loves me, and I can't ever see it for what it is.

The tall demon, with sunken obsidian eyes and a bleeding mouth, represents the depression that lurks. The other, with its burning fingertips that scorch me at each opportunity, seems to be anxiety.

However, neither one can ever compare to the camouflaged creature which haunts my every waking moment.

The unease it puts over the land and the tricks it plays on my mind will eventually be the destruction of my psyche.

It chips away at me slowly, and I know over time I will be only a husk of my former self.

Soon we come to the shadowed tunnel which we have called home.

My knees give out, and I crumble forward into the dirt.

Turning, I gaze upward. The sky swirls with orange and red, and my demon stalks off, done with its games for now.

Sebastian stands above me, his beautiful face forever frozen in time.

“Marla, we’ve talked about this. You can’t go out whenever you want. It isn’t safe.”

I lean against the smooth rock and take a deep breath. “I just wanted to—”

“See the other realm, I know.” He walks around inspecting for any threats.

The decaying branches overhead create a canopy of shelter, and the rock walls offer a deceptive sense of safety.

Once he’s done checking the entrances, he settles down beside me, and I’m comforted by the warmth of his body.

“They’re unaware of my existence, yet I can observe them, happy and enjoying their afterlife,” I whisper.

Banishment to Cavum Terra, where our mental demons manifest physically to torment us eternally, wasn’t sufficient. The secret window I’ve found brings me slight comfort and I’ll do anything for a glimpse.

The sight of my grandparents and the familiar faces of old friends evokes a small glimmer of happiness. The feeling is indescribable. Except for the appearances my cunt of a mother makes; those times drain the energy from my essence.

Souls that didn't kill themselves dwell in a serene world, where every evening has breathtaking sunsets and flourishing branches, untouched by demons. Unlike the darkness we can never escape here, the grotesque trees and decaying grass are less than comforting.

"My dove, we can only go together. I can't protect you if you take off when I'm recovering." He traces his fingers through the blood, tasting me before he pulls his shirt off and holds it against my wounds. I lean against his chest as the tears fall. "Marla, do you regret it?"

"No. If it meant I couldn't be with you forever? I wouldn't change anything."

His hands coax me onto his lap, then tighten around me, pulling me close against him. The bleeding has ceased. The rapid recovery is taking over. Weirdly, our clothes always return to how they were when we got here, like being dirty wouldn't befit the Lords.

"I wish we'd never found the portal," I murmur.

"I think it's part of your torment only."

"What?" I rear my head back to stare at him.

"I can't see it, my dove. I wish I could enjoy the moments with you."

Anger rips through my body. Shaking, I pull away from him. Sebastian doesn't let go of my shirt and clutches me back to his chest.

For a moment I feel visible, as if everything broken inside me is exposed. Pain rolls under my skin like the shards are poking out of my flesh, and nothing could stop me from crumbling into another fucking mess.

“Why did you lie?” I hiss. He isn’t supposed to pretend to appease me, although I should be used to this by now. Sebastian has only tried to save me from myself since I met him.

“I never said I could.” He kisses the top of my head. “I skirted the truth, but I would do anything to make you feel even a fraction better.”

Twisting I glare at him. We’ve been over this so many times, his ears should bleed. “Please, don’t hide things from me—not even the things you think will break me. I’m already broken in so many ways, one more crack won’t kill me. But your lies? Those will.”

”I’m sorry, my dove. Pain I can handle, but seeing you in the arms of torture? Can’t do it.”

I slide my hand up his chest to grasp his chin with force. His intense stare, stripped of any pity, is laser-focused on my emotional state.

“Take it all away,” I whisper. “Make me forget. Remind me I’m yours.”

“You will always belong to me, but if you need a refresher, I gotchu.”

Sebastian smirks before inching forward and catching my lips with his. Warmth fills my being, and he grips a hand through my dark hair, briefly breaking our kiss before pulling me to the floor.

Once again, he kisses me fiercely. Sebastian lets go of my tresses and peels off my

clothes. Trailing the front of my body with his fingers, his lips travel from my mouth to the sensitive skin along my neck as the hard ground presses against my back.

The sound of human cries fills the air, like a morbid Spotify, only this playlist is distracting as fuck.

“Look at me. Only I exist right now.”

My gaze focuses on him. Sebastian’s brown hair falls across his forehead, and he wets his lips before dragging his tongue down my torso.

Snatching me up, he carries me further into the tunnel, but the faint echoes follow. When he lays me down on the moss, the damp earth chills my skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of his touch.

Sebastian lowers between my legs and nips along my inner thighs before exploring me with his mouth. Each lick makes me tremble as lust fills my body and need courses through my veins. His fingers enter and fuck me as I thrust my hips against him.

“Come for me. Get ready for my cock,” he rasps.

I’m out of reach mentally, and as he sucks on my clit, my thoughts cloud with memories. My mind works against me. The demons fill each crevice with every worry I’ve ever had. Not again. I can’t do this right now.

“Marla, focus on my tongue. Out of your head—they can’t have you now. Just enjoy the way your body responds to me.”

Struggling to drown out the demonic whispers, I concentrate on the physical sensations coursing through me.

Sebastian's touch lights a fire within me, but as I gaze at him, I know I can't be what he needs.

The folds of my brain won't let me relish this moment.

Everything jumbles as I try to focus. It becomes a blur of fog.

My gaze lingers on the vibrant colours and bold lines of the tattoos adorning his skin, my favourite pieces of art. His brown gaze locks with mine as he thrusts his fingers into me. I cry out, pretending the orgasm is racking me.

"Now who's lying?" He arches his eyebrow at me, lowering his jeans and ripping off his band tee as he moves to lie on his back. He strokes his hard cock.

My gaze runs over the barbells along his shaft.

Carefully, I position myself over his body before I lower onto his throbbing dick, savouring the sensation. I attempt to tease him, but he is determined and denies me the opportunity to play.

His grip is firm around my neck as he guides me onto him, and this time my body surrenders to the overwhelming pleasure.

"That's my girl. I knew you could do it," he whispers.

Sebastian brings his knees up and bounces me on his shaft as he cups my tits in his hands. I let him use me before collapsing forward. My body trembles, and I grip his face tight, needing to anchor myself.

Lust courses under my skin. He's everything to me. My lips find his and tenderly kiss him, using this moment to block out the battles filtering through our area.

“I’ve got you,” he growls into my ear. Sebastian pulls me off him and lowers me to the ground. The heat of his chest covers my back, and he penetrates me again. “Feel that? I’ll always be here to take away all your pain. Forever.”

His words soothe my soul like a salve on a deep cut. I can breathe with Sebastian’s hands gliding across my skin, with him behind me.

Lust rolls through me so raw I’m already on the edge. I slip my hand under our bodies and rub my clit as he thrusts into me. Nothing exists at this moment except the two of us and his intense growls against my neck.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper.

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Two

Sebastian

As if I would ever stop giving her the pleasure she needs.

I straddle her legs and slide into her from behind. Tight wetness grips me in the vise I've been given for all of eternity.

There is nowhere else I'd rather be. My dreams came true the day I ate the bullet. Her soft sounds centre me at this moment.

I entangle my fingers in her jet-black hair and tilt her head back to meet my gaze.

Her eyes fill with a mix of lust and longing, and I respond by slipping my hand beneath her, twisting her nipple to intensify the pleasure coursing through us.

"Come for me," I growl.

Her muscles tense, and she milks my cock until a strangled cry erupts from her throat. My fingers raise to her neck, and I thrust into her.

The tremors of her ecstasy squeeze me tight, my skin tingling with the heat of her body. Scrambling into a kneeling position and grabbing her hips, I slam into her once more and fill her with my release.

I remain inside, embracing her and pulling her close to me. With her in my arms,

everything is okay, if only for a few minutes, before we have to face the world we live in now.

The pain hasn't left her. It never does. She thinks I don't know how much she wants the realm to be real, but I'd be an idiot not to see it.

My dove needs those who loved her just as deeply as I need her. I would give up anything so that she could live a life with peace.

"Is everything okay?" Marla asks me. "You've been distant."

I kiss her shoulder and nuzzle into her. "How, my dove? I'm always with you."

The last thing I want is for her to think I'm pulling away when I've only been doing my best to save her. My dick throbs inside her, and she nudges me. A light giggle leaves her.

"I'm not sure. Just a feeling, I guess." She lets out a sigh. "We should get dressed. We have to do the walk-around."

"I hate the walks. We shouldn't have to welcome new people." I kiss her neck as I ease out of her. Marla grabs for her clothes as I struggle with my jeans.

"Who else will do it?" As she combs her tresses with her fingers, she reaches for a particular sweater, one we stumbled upon while exploring Cavum Terra.

When Marla first came here, she could get answers from the three Lords, but they've been reclusive and happy to let her take the initiative with new people since.

I think she does a better job, but I still worry about her. Each new group of new souls puts her in a low state and I can't pull her out of it. One day, I fear I'm going to lose

her within her own mind.

“If you say so, my dove.” I exhale and run my hand through my hair before putting my baseball cap back on. “No one was there for you. People couldn’t care less here. The Lords, or whatever the fuck they are, don’t care.”

She glares at me, crossing her arms over her chest before stalking off into the open spaces that hold all her demons.

I’ve been battling mine, but he’s an angry old bitch who’s easier to play with. I thought once I settled in, I would be given a demon worth my time, but compared to life, this seems like a cakewalk.

“Marla, wait!” I shout at her. As I jog to where she is, our hands interlock, and a sense of security washes over me. “I’ve told you not to go out on your own.”

Each day fills me with rage. Her demons rip her to shreds at every chance, but there’s not much I can do without being able to see them. I’m filled with bitter sorrow, knowing I can’t face them in battle.

We continue through the realm. The sky is a dark red and orange blend, and it’s always an eerie feeling when fresh bodies drop in. Terror is felt in ripples, and anguish from the new souls angers our own shadow demons.

“There’s been a rise in people,” she whispers.

“Earth was pretty shitty when we were there, and I suspect it hasn’t gotten any better.” I squeeze her hand.

She hoped that over time mental-health services would improve on the other side, but the reality is the government doesn’t give a shit about the people and never will.

With the higher-ups tracking the general population, they determine if someone is going to make a difference in society or if they should be put down. Those souls linger somewhere else though.

The heavy cloak of taking your own life burns through the ropes of meager support and it's been our option.

Since the mental-health epidemic on Earth, the health services took a backseat when they couldn't keep up with everyone. Life is hard enough when you can cope. It's impossible when the demons in your mind take up residence and drag you to the edge.

Walking through the broken chunks of grass, the trails grow over quickly like strolling around would be a crime. Everything here is an uphill battle, nature attacks us almost as much as the demons.

As we cross one of the many bridges, we find a trio looking in all directions with their mouths agape.

"What the fuck is this place? Why am I here?" a tall blonde asks, and the dark-haired man behind her shakes as his hands snake around her waist.

With narrowed eyes, the girl scans the area, every rustle and snap making her more alert.

"Last thing you remember?" Marla asks.

She's at least always straight to the point. This isn't the place for warm embraces and gentle whispers. Everyone thus far has not responded to a sweet welcome, although in the early years of being here, we tried that approach.

Tears build in the eyes of all three, and the mohawk girl falls to her knees.

“Right, well, this is Cavum Terra. You killed yourself and you’ll be here for the rest of eternity.”

The sounds of their weeping fill the air, a chorus of despair as Marla presses close, seeking comfort. I sigh, the sound barely audible. I try to comfort her as I place my arm around her shoulders.

“Whatever mental illness plagued you on Earth will now manifest as a physical shadow demon and you will have to fight it off. Be skeptical of everything you hear. They like to play games.”

“What do we do?” asks the dark-haired man.

“Form friendships. Stick together and run like hell,” Marla whispers. She offers them a sympathetic smile, and we lower our heads before walking away.

“You sure don’t sugarcoat it, my dove.” I glance back toward the three souls who didn’t scatter, only to see the one with the mohawk wrapping her arms around herself.

“Why would I? Nothing about this place is joke-worthy.”

I grip her hand, and we walk past the cabins of the Lords, or Gods. They’ve never given us any information on what they are.

Jerking her away from the large crowd forming of new spawns Marla glares at me, but I tilt my head to the one girl standing solo. With a deep sigh, she bears a sweet smile and lets go of my hand. We shuffle over to her, and fearful eyes stare at us like we’re the enemy.

“Come on, you can help us with the next batch,” Marla tells her before turning to walk toward the bustle of people in the large field.

I slow to fall in step with the new girl. “What’s your name?”

She pulls down her black-and-white striped long-sleeve and walks beside me. “Chloe, I’m sorry if I seem any kind of way. This is all a lot.”

“Don’t be sorry. Life is hard, and it doesn’t get better here.” I give her a tight smile and glance around for anyone else.

As much as I hate the walks and the way Marla has pushed me to be this way, we share an unspoken bond, a silent promise that no one gets left behind. When someone can’t handle the information, we pull them into our little world and help them until they are strong enough to branch out on their own.

Marla has done all of this while her demons play her trauma like a matinee. I’m proud of her, though I fear she may never grasp the extent of her achievements. However, I have the rest of eternity to prove it to her.

“Calm down, I know it seems futile, but I need everyone to shut up for a minute. Please.” Marla’s voice shouts at the crowd and I grab Chloe’s wrist before we jog to stand behind her.

“If you want information on why you are here and what to do next, I suggest you listen,” I tell them.

Wide-eyed, dishevelled individuals stare back at us, some already gazing around. Heart-wrenching sobs fill the area. A few have dropped to their knees and others are storming toward us.

The crowd recoils as a tall man barrels forward, his voice a raw, ragged snarl. "Are we in Hell? What the fuck is happening?" His words punch through the murmurs of the crowd, sharp and desperate.

Sweat glistens on his flushed skin, his muscles taut like wires about to snap.

Every step he takes is heavy, deliberate—his boots scuff against the ground as if he's fighting the earth itself.

His wild gaze darts between faces, searching for answers.

The people nearest him shrink back, some muttering excuses, others frozen in fear.

A woman stammers, "I—I don't know—"

The man cuts her off with a sharp jerk of his hand. "Bullshit!" he roars, spit flying. "You see this? You see what's out there? And you're just standing here?"

His chest heaves, fists trembling at his sides. The air reeks of sweat and panic. He's not just angry—he's terrified. And a terrified man with nothing left to lose is the most dangerous kind.

I step in front of Marla to block the man's progress, then raise my hand to warn him. Marla's gentle touch on my shoulder grounds me. The man slows his stride and I move beside Marla.

She clears her throat. "This is Cavum Terra. You're here because you took your own life.

It's now about surviving your mental illnesses on the outside, because they are going to play with you.

Rapid healing is in place, but you will bleed, beg, and plead to die.

Nothing can solve it. My best recommendation is to form groups.

Make friends and become a community. Run and fight and take care of each other. ”
Marla bows her head.

“I don’t deserve to be here. Suffering on Earth was enough!” a tiny shout raises from the back of the crowd. A woman with dark hair steps forward, wringing her hands.

“You can’t just leave us here. What are we supposed to do?” A man in a business suit steps forward and grabs Marla’s arm.

I dart between them, the scent of his cologne sharp in the air, and pull his hand away.

“All of you can become a group, or branch off into smaller ones. I know you’re angry,” I tell him and squeeze his shoulder.

“Will we die again?” the tall man asks, his face flushed, his fists uncurling.

“No, you’re able to heal from any damage. You don’t have to worry about bathing, eating or hydration. Small gifts, I guess. Take care of each other out there. No one should have to fight alone.” Marla grimaces before turning to grasp my hand.

“What the hell is that giant shadow?” The woman, her hands twisting in anguish, points a trembling finger toward the barren field.

I wish the Lords would do their fucking job here.

“Whatever mental illness you suffered from topside will now be here to fight you in person. Don’t listen to all the voices you hear, and don’t become attached to anything

tangible because they'll rip it away," I say.

"I see the strength in each of you," Marla tells them. "I know it's scary, trust me, I do. But you can do this. I believe in all of you." Her voice is strained but encouraging as she glances over her slumped shoulder.

"Let's go home my dove," I tell her, and she leans against me, exhausted.

We walk at a slow pace. I help both of them as they trip over the buckled grass and watch for any sign of demons coming to taunt them, but it's almost serene instead.

The old bitch I have sits in my peripheral vision. His burning skin is a deceptive mask for the frailty within, and I yearn for a more challenging opponent.

As we reach the tunnel, I move the branches to let the women in first. Marla talks to Chloe, and I case the rest of the stony encampment. No one has been here, and I'm surprised we've kept this home for as long as we have.

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Three

Marla

While Sebastian checks for any threats, I lead the new girl to our supplies. We're down on what we have, but it's better than nothing.

"Luckily we don't feel hungry here, and I haven't had to drink anything since arriving. We have clothing we've ripped into rags in case the bleeding doesn't stop as fast as you need to. I'd suggest bringing some of them with you."

"Thank you. I don't know how I'll repay you." Her bright blue eyes never meet mine and she spends most of the time staring at the ground.

I reach forward and grasp her shoulder. "It's okay, it's what we do."

A loud screech interrupts me, followed by a long wail, and Sebastian runs past us to the entrance. A man with black hair and ripped clothes stands with blood running from his face and scratches covering his muscular body.

"Sid?" I question as I run towards him. Sebastian tries to hold me back, but I shake from his grasp.

"Marla, I didn't think I'd find you again. Can I rest here for the night before heading out again? I haven't been able to heal in fucking weeks."

I nod before bringing him further into the tunnel. Chloe joins us with some of the rags

I showed her.

Sebastian moves some barricades over and pulls out more moss to cover the ground, turning it into a make-shift bed.

“Where have you been all this time?” I ask him as we wrap the fabric around his biceps and legs.

“Running. The girl I met when we first came here together made a group, but they didn’t like my humour or something and asked me to leave. I’ve tried to find you, but fuck if I know how time works around here.” He stares at the ground, kicking a few stones.

He’s right. No one can keep track of the amount of years we’ve been here.

“I’m sorry,” Sebastian says from behind me. “You’re welcome to join us. We’ve been a pair for the duration. New people come, and we always receive them and get everyone used to the realm before they branch off.”

“It’s true. I never thought I’d become like a pestering mother hen, but here I am.” I smile at Sid and Chloe.

The warmth of Sebastian’s hug around my waist fades, the comforting pressure leaving a hollowness that chills me to the bone.

“How many demons did you end up with?” Sid asks and tightens a bandage.

I settle on the ground with them leaning against the rock.

“Three. One has progressed over the years and it’s fucking terrifying.

Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally.

It bends me to its will at every chance.

If I wasn't focused on other people and didn't have Sebastian, I'd be a shell of a person. ”

Chloe's azure eyes fill with tears, and she runs a hand over her black and blue mohawk.

“New girl?” Sid stares at her.

“Yeah, the others broke from the pact, and we have rules. Leave no one behind. You remember how fucking scary it is when you first come here?? The fear never leaves, but you adjust.” I fiddle with the drawstrings on my hoodie.

“I'm sorry, I never meant to be a burden,” Chloe whispers. Her fidgeting and the despair in her eyes show the turmoil of her ruminating thoughts.

“Chloe, this is Sid. He was the first person I met here. You can remain here as long as you want. We might have to move eventually, but for now, you're right at home.” I squeeze her arm, and she gives a meek smile.

“Marla is pretty tough,” Sid says. “Crazy, but good shit. You aren't a burden, and I know I'm just some dude who's bleeding on the floor, but you make a difference, no matter how bad your thoughts and memories harm you.”

They chat, and I use the time to search for Sebastian. The tunnel curves in the middle where culverts run through with icy water. It gives us a private area at the back for when we take in others.

I find him near the rear entrance, fiddling with branches and rocks. “Weapons won’t work, my love,” I tell him.

“I’ll never stop trying, though. How’s it going over there?” He jerks his head toward the light laughter coming from the front.

“Sid can help her more than I am. He’s been doing this solo for a long time.”

“You do so good, Marla. I’m proud of you.” I sit on his knee and nuzzle against his chest.

The haunting sound of Jess’s voice calls out to me. Her voice curls through the darkness, a ghostly murmur riding the wind. My jaw locks tight, teeth grinding as I roll onto my side, pressing my palms hard against my ears. But it doesn’t matter—nothing drowns her out.

"Marla..." A whisper, soft as a breath against my neck. "I need you."

The words slither under my skin, cold and relentless. I squeeze my eyes shut.

She’s not here. She can’t be. Right?

I don’t know if it’s real or fake, and after I pull myself into a standing position, Sebastian mumbles in his sleep but rolls over. I creep toward the front of the tunnel where Sid and Chloe are asleep, not knowing if either of them will wake up.

I turn on my heels and head out the rear entrance.

Hazy air sits heavy against my muscles and as my chest tightens, it’s like an elephant is lying on me. Slipping through the long grass and around our home, I find the route I’ve taken many times.

Sebastian's disapproval is a small price to pay for the happiness of seeing Jess again.

"Marla."

The sorrowful sound makes my heart ache. I'll never forgive myself for not fighting for her more, or the goodbye I never got out.

Dark crimson clouds overhead swirl around. There shouldn't be another drop of souls today, unless Earth has gotten that bad. It's a wonder we all fit in this realm sometimes.

Fear pulsates through the atmosphere, and as much as I try to make it better for people, I know this will always remain a terrible place.

A large purple figure darts in and out of my peripheral vision, its beady orange eyes and fangs filling me with panic.

Dread courses through me and I pick up the pace, jogging toward the circle on the wall that I've found before. Crystal-clear glass greets me to stare through.

Tripping over a hole in the ground, I crash, the right side of my body entangled in a dense thicket of brambles, their scratchy leaves and thorns digging in.

The searing pain of being torn apart fades into blissful relief, a victory over the demons that had threatened me.

Despite its flaws, this coping mechanism has saved me from a complete emotional breakdown, where all that would be left is an empty shell.

As I stare into the other realm, I watch Jess rise from a comfy chair and wrap her arms around a man with dark hair. She's found someone to cherish, and it's all I've

ever wanted, a person to love her in every way she deserves.

Beyond my selfish wants, I'm fiercely protective of her and don't want her to journey through this dangerous realm.

Jess and I became the best of friends at a point and time when we needed each other the most. I don't know about her history or what life was like for her before me.

Similar to one of those projector toys from my childhood, the scene switches, and my mother fills the clear glass. Her deceitful mask was never replaced, and I hate that she is in this serene place with my grandparents and Jess.

She belongs in Hell for all the pain she has caused. I should have let nature run its course so she could take her rightful spot instead of killing her. Disappointment and hatred fill her face, and I stumble backwards.

My vision greys and the colours in this realm fade away. Dark tendrils cover my shoulder and as I shake them off, I look behind me.

Depression is always lurking, sky-high and thin as it stalks me at every turn. Anxiety has fangs, and misery has the longest fingers touching you from wherever it stands.

I've often wondered if it's different for everyone, as they have said. I can't help but question if it's our perceptions, life-altering moments that formed us into who we are. Or maybe they are different and we're all fucked.

A light blue giant leaps after me, changing with its surroundings as it nears. This is the one I'll never understand. A quick look over my shoulder shows the window is gone, leaving me alone.

I inhale a shaky breath as the claws reach me. Blackness clouds my mind and

memories of abuse skate through the folds in my brain. A fog surrounds us, pillowing around in an eerie fashion. Each scratch opens my flesh, and blood runs down my arm.

Smiling, I stare into its black eyes and wait for more, euphoria coursing through me, something I can never explain to anyone. Harming myself is useless here because of the rapid healing, delaying my gratitude for the damage inflicted.

However, when the demons get carried away and I need the release, I relish in it if only for a moment before running away. This time I crave it like a cigarette, a drink that's out of reach, and as the claws grip me again I can only close my eyes and sigh.

Within seconds the sharp talons retract, and loud sudden noises fill my soul, startling me with its erraticism. Fog turns into dark shadows and Sebastian's face peeks through.

The demon slits his throat calculatingly and my stomach clenches, twisting knots through my body and as I try to run, I'm held in place to watch the demon kill him.

A thick blackness swallows the world, and I'm adrift, a sense of despair washing over me, knowing I can't live without Sebastian.

I find myself swimming through the chaos that was my life, good memories flashing by like a thought I'm not allowed to have, the bad ones sluggishly passing to remind me I wasn't worth anything other than being the burden my mother always told me I was.

"MARLA." Sebastian is close, but that's impossible. I watched him die.

Perhaps this is the stop where I've lost my mind, and the husk of a person will lie in the dead grass surrounding me.

“My dove, wake up.” Strong arms cradle me and as I force my eyes open, I am held close to his body, the familiar scar of my initials carved into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper.

“Just stay with me, alright?” He hums a song we used to play during our drives and I focus on the sound.

He is my anchor, a steadying presence when fear threatens to consume me. I put everything in jeopardy each time I do these things.

We reach a secluded area, the place where he spawned when he first came here. I’ve looked for this location before and have always fallen short. Sebastian sits against a tree with me in his arms, pulling me closer again as he kisses my forehead.

“I…”

“No, you don’t get to say sorry. You are safe now. Let’s rest for a bit before heading back.”

“Sorry doesn’t cover it, because I’ll forever be putting you and the others in danger to see a glimpse of something that might not even be real. You should let me go. I’ve always been a burden, and I doubt it’s ever going to change,” I whisper.

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Four

Sebastian

Each word acts like a sharp knife twisting in my chest. If she thinks I'd leave because she chases dreams in a toxic world, she's wrong.

I'd never want her to change. Marla has always been my symbol to do better and become a man she could be proud of.

"If you change, I'll be coming after you myself. You are perfectly mine, and that's all I need. What happened?"

She curls her fingers in my shirt, her touch settling the rage under my skin.

"You know already. I heard her voice, came to find it, saw my cunt mother, and got attacked. It's the same thing I always do."

Marla doesn't look at me and I press her harder against my body. She shakes like a leaf, and I know something bigger happened.

One of her demons, a creature of pure shadow and malice, destroys her body, mind, and spirit, but an unusual event has occurred.

As her hazel, red-rimmed eyes peer at me, my heart clenches. "They took you from me," she says.

“That’ll never fucking happen. I’ll claw my way back to you in every world we have to end up in.” I clench my jaw and lean my head to the side, hearing the tension pop before staring at her.

“But what if—”

“Never, my dove. My chest still bears your initials, as does yours of mine. We’re bound for eternity, body and souls forever.”

She doesn’t look convinced, and while her bleeding has slowed, I lower my lips to her arm and lick up the crimson staining her skin.

“You are mine,” I whisper before kissing her intensely.

A shiver runs down my spine as Marla’s hand slides beneath my shirt, her sharp nails grazing my skin. I’m already hard and ready for her.

With her chin in my grasp, I pull away from her and undress her.

I unzip myself and feel her hands on my shoulders as I guide her to straddle me. When I tease her clit with my thumb and insert a finger, she responds by grinding against me and fluttering her eyes before planting a kiss on my lips.

“Just like that, Sebastian, don’t stop,” she mumbles.

“Never. Get ready for my hard cock.”

After she clenches around my fingers and wetness drips into my palm, I stroke myself and stare into her lust-filled eyes.

Breathless, she leans down and grips the base of my dick as she slides down at her

own rhythm.

Marla's nails grip into my shoulder and I realize we need to make time for more intimacy. My dove depends on me more than ever and I should cater to her needs as she's being attacked more.

"So fucking tight, always perfect for me."

I grip her dark hair and expose her skin, whimpers fill our space as I raise my knees to stop her from full penetration. I tease her slowly with the bars on my cock and latch onto her neck, sucking and biting her sensitive flesh as she bucks against me.

"Sebastian, please," she begs.

"What, my dove?"

"Let me go."

Pulling back to gaze at her beauty, I'm entranced by this moment. My demon flocks in my peripheral vision and the surrounding air is heavy, but nothing matters except her.

Letting her hair go, I wrap my hand around her neck and squeeze as she clenches on my length. I use her like my personal fuck toy and slam her on my cock.

With our eyes locked it's a different type of bliss. As I fill her she clamps down on me and screams out her ecstasy.

"I love you, Sebastian," she whispers and leans against me.

"I've never loved anyone in my entire life more than you, Marla. There is nothing

you could ever do to deter me from us.”

With care, I let her go as I zip up my pants, grabbing her clothes to aid her, smoothing the hair away from her face before leaning in for one more kiss.

“It’s like everything is so fucking broken.

I’m only going to hurt us more. I’ve masked for so long I hate having to do it here, and the bloody blue monster will never leave me alone.

Sebastian, I’m afraid that you won’t recognize me after time, that I’ll become a husk of the person you love and then what’s even the point?

” Tears fall over her cheeks, and my heart shatters.

“This quiet we have right now means you can let go. I’ve got you, Marla, it’s us and I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

“But what if—” she starts.

“Relax, baby, and hold on to me until the tears pass. You deserve so much better than this and I’m sorry I can’t get you into that realm for real. I’d sacrifice anything to move you into the sunshine, surrounded by your loved ones.”

Marla presses against me harder, her body trembling, tears streaming down her face, wetting my shirt as she releases me after what feels like forever.

The quivering of her small form intensifies as the sobs wrack her, the sounds choked and raw with the weight of past traumas, and I hold her close, feeling the intensity of her grief.

At this moment I decide I will do whatever it takes to make her life more bearable.

There are other people here with demons as bad but none of them are my dove. I'd cut myself into pieces and offer them to the Lords if it meant she could live a day with peace.

"I can't live without you. When I say I want to go there, it isn't because I love you less."

Her words pack a punch, but not the one she thinks it does. I'm a selfish prick. I crave her eternal companionship, but the profound tranquillity she's gifted me would make me move heaven and earth for her.

"One doesn't negate the other. You're allowed to want two different things at the same time. To heal in a place of hope and to stay here in this world of deranged damage with me. Emotions are a funny thing, you know. Are you ready?"

Marla pulls away from me and nods as I brush the tears from her skin. We both stand. I hold her hand as we walk home.

"What will we tell the others?"

"Nothing. We went for a stroll. No one needs to know your business unless you want them to."

Thunder booms around us, the skies swirl a deep orange and red colour and fear pulsates through the air. Something bad has happened. It nudges at my stomach and twists it into knots.

Rushing over the broken pathway, I shield her from the branches as we reach the lovely tunnel we've had for centuries, only to find it torn apart.

Cracked rocks topple over, tree parts have been decimated into sawdust, and our few belongings are long gone. Grief grips me in a tight fist, and my breathing slows, but I squeeze Marla's hand and walk toward the wreckage.

"SID, CHLOE!" I shout and toss chunks of rock away from the entrance.

"We're here," Sid whispers. He emerges from behind the boulder, crushing the dead grass beneath his feet and gripping Chloe's hand.

"What happened?" I ask, running my fingers through my hair.

They join us, and I scan the surroundings, looking for any indicator.

"We woke up to a colossal bang and ran out of the tunnel to watch it fall apart. I don't know if it was one of our demons or not," Chloe says and wrings her hands together.

"Grabbed a bag of rags, but couldn't do much else. I wanted to get her out, and when shards of rock fell, I figured it was best to bounce." Sid gives me the sack.

"You did good. Don't worry about who caused it, but now we have to hustle and find another place to hide," I tell them.

It seemed like an eternity before we stumble upon a small, dilapidated hut, a long-abandoned past, the air heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay. We are sitting on top of each other in a cramped space, but it'll do for now.

The mud floor is squishy, scratchy straw lining the structure for walls. Marla and Chloe lie on a bed of yellowed grass and use each other as pillows.

"The girls are exhausted. Walking about killed them," Sid jokes, but my smile has disappeared for a while.

“Sid, I need you to protect both of them. There is something I must deal with right away. Guard them with your life and when I return, I’ll let you sleep while I watch over all of you.”

I stick out my hand and he grips it tight before pulling me in for a light hug.

“You have my word. Where are you going?”

“Best not to ask questions. Marla will torture it out of you.”

With a sharp turn, I follow the well-worn path, the rough texture of the stone under my shoes until I reach a main road and run as fast as I can to the Lords’ cabins.

I haven’t dealt with intimidation in the past. I’ve never been afraid of anything before, but everything to do with Marla holds me in a grasp of constant worry. This is the only thing I can do to ease the hell she’s living through.

Though as I walk the overgrown pathway to Berimund’s cabin, a cold sweat prickles my skin, and I pull myself up straight as I rap on the dark wood of the door.

“Sebastian, interesting to see you here.”

“Berimund, I was hoping we could strike a deal.” To the point seems like the best course of action.

“What’s going on, son? This is an unforgiving place, and I’m unsure what you could offer me.”

Tanca and Giso slip out of their cabins, moving along the grass.

“Marla’s blue demon is going to gut her as a person. Give it to me to free her, and in

return we'll continue to do your job.”

They all cross their arms, and Berimund's green gaze bores into mine. “Our job?”

“Yes. If you haven't noticed, ever since we've made it here, we greet each soul and explain what is happening and how to cope. Without Marla's attention, I believe it would be chaos. We always take the stragglers along and find them companions to keep a balance in this realm.”

Giso looks to Berimund, and Tanca uncrosses his arms. “He's right. The awful twists of terror don't last as long. The souls' drops have been better since they've gotten here.”

“We'll discuss it and get back to you. Go on now.”

Berimund never breaks eye contact, and I nod before taking off toward the hut my dove is sleeping in.

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Five

Marla

Sebastian isn't here, and my heart feels hollow. I wonder if his words were lies. I want to believe everything he utters, because he's the closest I've ever had to a normal life, and he sees me as I am.

My mind is a labyrinth, twisting and turning, playing cruel games.

One day, I'm swallowed by a suffocating sense of worthlessness, the world dull and muted, and the next, it's like a switch flips, and I'm alive with a renewed, invigorating perspective.

Nothing ever seems rational, and I hate the highs and lows.

Shifting on the scratchy dead grass, Chloe holds my hand, and I find comfort in her touch.

"It's going to be alright, Marla. You're so strong."

I bite my lip. "Strength is a double-edged sword. Whenever someone states that, it's comparable to a temporary bandage which doesn't help anything but the person saying those words.

Being strong is the only thing we can be.

Living with mental illness inside and out like here, what other choice do we have? ”

Chloe shifts until she’s sitting upright, and I do the same, leaning against the hard straw. “I’m sorry, that’s true.”

“Nah, don’t apologize. I bet you’ve heard the same phrase ten million times while you walked on Earth. It’s our reality, isn’t it?”

“Did you want to talk about the past?” Her mohawk is messy, and she twists her fingers, a nervous habit I’ve noticed.

I lean against my knees and remember my friendship with Jess, but I know it’s over and I have to find comfort in others.

“It’s best to meet people where they are now. We aren’t who we were. Our history has molded us into the person we are, but dwelling on it won’t change the outcome. Our minds do that enough for us, eh?”

“I’m thankful I met you.” Chloe’s voice is meek. I wish I could transfer what I see in her to her mind to boost her confidence and become a better version of herself.

“Of course. Let’s check where the guys are. How do you feel about Sid?”

We both stand and I stretch the muscles in my back. I’ll never get used to resting on the hard ground.

Simple things I miss from Earth- pillows and comfort. That first invigorating cup of coffee, the satisfying drag of a cigarette—mundane moments you don’t appreciate until they’re gone.

“He’s a good guy. I really like him. I’m so grateful I found a circle of people who

care, you know?”

I squeeze her hand because she'll never know how much I understand. While helping souls benefits them, over the years it's given me a sense of humanity again and fills me with purpose. On Earth, I could aid no one and although it seems pointless at times here, at least I try.

We walk out of the hut together. Sid is lounging against the front of it and stares at Chloe with a smirk. Despite the horrors around them, I believe they can find love. I hope their hearts discover solace in each other.

Scanning the ruins of the forest, I note the damp scent of decay and the eerie quiet that hangs in the air. Branches reach out at grotesque angles and the sky is a burnt orange swirl.

I don't see Sebastian and I swallow the lump in my throat, turning toward Sid to ask where he is, but I'm interrupted by footsteps. I brace for the impact of a demon coming to hurt me, but instead the smell of tobacco and Sebastian fills my senses. Glancing over my shoulder, I see him.

“My dove,” he chuckles, a low rumble in his chest, “Up early, are we?” Dark shaggy hair covers his forehead, and light shines over his tongue ring. I take in his appearance. No injuries. Sebastian's skin is covered with the tattoos I've touched a million times and he's here instead of my mind.

“Where were you?”

With a weary sigh, Sebastian glances at Sid, then his gaze returns to mine, intense and unwavering. “Exploring alternative places. I decided to start early. How'd you sleep?”

“Short, almost like I was stuck on the muddy floor of a hut without you.”

I walk away from them. My limbs throb with a restless energy, my skin stretched and taut, as if a drum about to burst.

Heavy footsteps run behind me, and Sebastian grabs my elbow. “Marla, what’s going on?”

I try to shake from his grasp, but his fingers only tighten as he turns me toward him and grips my chin roughly.

“Nothing... I feel like you’re lying.”

A wave of terror floods me. Trusting someone means being vulnerable enough to ask them hard questions, even if the answers might sting.

When you spend your entire life as a punching bag, enduring relentless, unwarranted abuse, your survival hinges on your ability to suppress your insecurities, to bury them deep within.

“I promise—I was checking. I believe I have a few ideas that will hold us for some years at least.”

We all head out to see what he has found.

My muscles scream in protest after a while.

The exhaustion is as though we’ve walked for a decade, each step a lead weight.

I don’t think anyone grasps the intense fatigue of inactivity, a weariness that settles in like a heavy fog.

Boredom and fear are the main staples of Cavum Terra, and sometimes it's more life draining than being alive.

We come to a dilapidated structure that's rotting and its roof gone. It appears to be an old treehouse on the ground, intertwined with limbs that someone turned into a home. Massive, moss-covered rocks are scattered across the front, and weathered, grey logs form the outside walls.

"This?" I ask, and he nods as we stand in front of it.

"I think this is doable. I saw it this morning and although I didn't check the inside, together we can fix it up." Sebastian grabs my hand before pulling me toward the makeshift door.

Eerie quietness fills the space as we all go in. Musky dampness surrounds me, but it's nicer than our tunnel. After Sebastian moves the wooden panel across the opening, I glance around.

The roof, a haphazard weave of branches and interwoven trees, offers little protection should the demons choose to attack.

There are a handful of chairs made from branches and covered in bark and as I continue over the yellowed-grass floor, I find a large table which stretches the entire side of the wall.

"Two bedrooms, convenient. This is someone's home. No one puts this much effort and then abandons it. We should go," I say and open the back door, which leads to a ravine surrounded by boulders.

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Six

Sebastian

This entire place was a fluke, but I couldn't tell Marla I was meeting with the Lords instead.

I rake my fingers through my messy hair before peeking into the bedrooms. Each contains a makeshift bed, with hoodies scattered around, giving a sense of comfortable habitation. She's right. People made this a home and lived comfortably for a while.

"We won't mess anything up, only fix the few things we can see broken. If they return, we'll leave. Otherwise, it's ours. Think that's fair?"

"Agreed. Let's tackle those rocks, because someone is going to get hurt. Maybe you two can work in here?" Sid glances at the women before heading toward the front door.

"Fine, but we'll have to go out and welcome new souls soon. The air has shifted and they're coming," Marla says.

"Deal. I promise we'll leave if they come back."

She grins at me, and it fills my heart with warmth.

I join Sid in the front yard, and together we heave the massive boulders, creating a

rocky barrier, the scent of turned earth thick in the air.

“It works. The logs hold the house, and these are more decorative. We know we can’t keep anything out if it wants in bad enough,” Sid mutters. He grunts as we lift another large rock and set it next to the others.

“True. I’ll be happy to have a space again.

Even if people were here before, they aren’t coming back.

It’s too overgrown. Our tunnel will be reclaimed in time by others as well.

It’s the circle of life here.” I stand and stretch out my spine.

As much as I keep active chasing after everyone, it seems like I’m always sore.

After we finish, Sid stares at me, then shakes his head, indecisive, it appears.

“What?”

“Just wondered where you went all night. I don’t mind keeping watch, but being held in the dark isn’t a good time.”

I sigh and sit on one boulder. “Do you know what it’s like to want to do anything for the one you love? As if you’d offer yourself as a sacrifice to keep them safe?”

Sid leans against the rock opposite me and scratches his ear. “I have a sense, similar to how I’d protect Chloe with my life if it came to it.”

A grin spreads across my face—I am so happy they found each other. Being alone here is soul-crushing. It quickly reduces people to empty shells.

“Yeah, so I was doing what I must. I’ll tell you when I know more, because if I have to disappoint her because you blabbed? I’ll kill you myself.”

“Thankfully, we rapidly heal,” he chuckles.

My bitch demon raises its hackles. My anger is a white-hot current, and I clench my jaw as I fight to keep my temper from exploding like a shattered vase.

Rage burns at the unfairness of it all—her unjust imprisonment, the Lords’ callous indifference, and my frustration at their slow response.

“If I cut you into small pieces, do you think they’ll find themselves back together?” I whisper into Sid’s ear as I go to collect the women.

Walking out, Marla sinks into my arms. “Ready?” she asks. The sparkle has returned to her eyes.

“Let’s go welcome the new souls,” I say.

We head out of the pathway, Sid and Chloe trailing behind us. It’s always the same song and dance. I’m glad to help where we can, though.

Welcoming newcomers is exhausting. Each interaction depletes me, as if I’ve been squeezed dry. Dragging my feet, Marla’s hand in mine as we shuffle along the dusty path toward our new home.

Passing the cabins of the Lords, I glance around, but they don’t step out and I slowly exhale. I want answers, and even though it hasn’t been long, she deserves this request.

Marla stares up at me, and it’s then I realize I had stopped walking.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired. I don’t understand it,” I tell her. Sid and Chloe are in the distance, strolling ahead of us.

“Being nice drains the life out of you.” Marla giggles, and I nudge her playfully as we continue to walk.

“Sebastian,” a deep voice calls from behind me.

I square my shoulders, straighten my posture, and turn back to face Berimund. His dark robe brushes against the red dirt road of his laneway, leaving a faint mark in his wake.

“Sir.”

“We’ve discussed amongst ourselves the deal you have brought to us.”

Marla tenses beside me. I couldn’t have told her anything.

“And?”

I stare into his eyes, and he nods his head.

“When will it start?”

Giso walks along the path until she’s at his side, her long blonde hair coiffed. She offers me a small smile.

“When will what start?” Marla asks in a soft voice next to me, touching her fingers to her lips. “What did you do, Sebastian?”

“A few days at most,” Berimund says. “We’ve redirected the camouflage shadow demon to train his sights on you. She’ll be free from it within a week. I hope you know what you’re doing, son.”

“Thank you, sir, ma’am.” I tip my head at both of them before guiding Marla away.

She bombards me with questions, her words a relentless volley. I continue our walk home.

“What the fuck did you do?” she asks, tears well in her eyes. My dove’s grip tightens on my shirt.

I grasp her shoulders, the warmth of her skin searing through my fingertips, pulling her close. “The best I could,” I whisper.

“Sebastian?”

“I pled our case. This place is unfair as it is. However, I barely qualify with the sad-ass demon that chases me. I visited the Lords to demand they give me one of yours, but also to ask about the portal and how other realms work.”

Marla pulls back, her eyes wide with an anguish that chills me to the bone, and I can’t bear to look.

“The window I watch the other realm from?”

“It’s not real. It has never existed. Your shadow demon devised the sick joke. There are alternate realms, but none you can see from Cavum Terra,” I tell her.

We’ve reached the outside of the treehouse. Footprints in the dust leading inside confirm that Sid and Chloe must have gone in. I pull Marla’s hand to enter.

Orange and red light, like stained glass, streams through the canopy, illuminating the makeshift house in warm hues.

I swing the door open for her to the first bedroom and see how she's created cozy spaces for us with old hoodies and bark.

She lays her head on my chest as we lie against the soft clothing. I would, without a second thought, carve a space inside my body, a sanctuary within my skin, to keep her safe from the world.

"What did they mean by the camouflage demon?" Marla pulls at a loose string on my collar, a nervous tic of hers.

"I took him on. You'll be free from it in about a week, I guess." I stroke her hair as sobs wrack her body, and the warm tears soak my shirt.

The decision was effortless for me. I've always had tunnel vision with her. If easing one of her demons after decades of torment means she might breathe a little easier again, at least I can save her a small amount, even if it has to be in the afterlife.

"Why?"

"I told you, pain doesn't mean shit to me. Witnessing you in the grips of torture day in and day out? I can't do it."

"How will I ever repay you?"

A humourless chuckle escapes my lips, a dry, rustling sound in the room. However, I'm not able to go back and kill the people who tainted her mind again. The family whose love seemed conditional, laced with criticism and expectations. I shake my head.

No, she deserves to know, deep in her heart, that she is enough, capable and worthy of devotion and happiness.

“Your affection has always been abundant, my dove. The way you look past my flaws and choose the soul attached to my body is all I need.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs against my chest.

“My dove, I’d do anything for you. Forever, you are mine to protect, love, and cherish.” I hold her closer before exhaustion takes over.

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Seven

Marla

Despite being somewhere new, the unsettling voice of Jess still finds me, a phantom sound that seems to scratch at my sanity, carries on the wind through the trees.

I know it's a lie, another way for the demon to control me, but as I turn toward Sebastian, the deafening roar continues, a relentless assault on my ears.

Against my conscious decision, an unseen force compels me to pursue the ghost, leaving me feeling like a mere observer in my body, a shiver running down my spine.

The floor's chill seeps through my socks as I stoop to grab my shoes.

Terror fills her voice, and I know she needs me. Heart pounding, I stand and creep toward the threshold, doing my best to escape the room without waking him.

Glancing over my shoulder, Sebastian is still, and I scoot out through the door before covering it again.

Instead of the boisterous front entrance, I choose the back path, the air thick with the damp smell of the ravine as I make my way toward the immense boulders, their size making me regret my choice of route.

The hairs on the nape of my neck stand. Being watched is a normal thing, but sensing it like this is new. With a shaky grip on the dewy, cold rock, I pull myself over the

fence.

Dampness clings to everything, even the usually bright sky, blurring its edges, mirroring the desperate, hopeless emotion inside. The voices swirl around me, a frigid wind whispering secrets and threats in my ear.

Breathless and determined, I push through the thorny branches, their scratches stinging my skin, the unsettling feeling of being watched intensifying as I run toward the murmurs that seem to beckon from the dark woods ahead.

Before I can get very far, something wraps around my elbow and halts me. I almost stumble forward and fall flat, but it holds me upright. With a jerk, I whip my head back, prepared for a battle, but stare at Sebastian's face instead, the air thick with tension.

His features twist into a feral grimace, eyes narrow before a slow, sly smirk stretches across his lips, his dark eyebrows furrowing. The muscles in his jaw clench.

"Running away again, my dove?"

"I wasn't. I didn't. I can explain..." I glance toward the woods again, but only silence greets me.

"The voices again? It's been a few days. This should simmer down." His tone calms the anxiety zipping through my body, and I lower my shoulders.

"Might've been a dream," I whisper. We both know that's a lie. No one dreams here, not even nightmares.

He pulls me in close, his embrace warm and strong, but a sudden chill runs down my spine—a fleeting feeling of unease before he releases me.

“I was awake when you left and followed you. At first it was to keep you safe, but I can’t help that the chase turned me on,” Sebastian says.

“That’s creepy.” I give him a scrunched face smirk and place my arm on the crook of his elbow before walking back toward the new house.

I wonder what will happen after the blue demon leaves me. Sebastian shouldn’t be subjected to the pain it’ll cause.

“Get out of your head. It’s a scary place in there.”

His favourite phrase makes me smile, and I slow my gait to match his stroll.

“What fun would that be?”

“You want excitement? Need me to pull you away from your thoughts?” He raises an eyebrow when I glance at him.

“Sebastian, did you even think about the harm you’re going to endure? I’m grateful, but at what cost did you save me?” My worries bubble in my stomach, questions ache to climb out of my throat and word vomit everywhere.

He doesn’t answer and pulls me toward the ravine behind the new house. Towering trees line the area, their shadows stretching across the trail, and as we duck through the branches, Sebastian detours to a path concealed by a large, imposing boulder.

It’s almost serene, a pristine space untouched by darkness, the air still and clean. Bright green moss, soft and yielding to the touch, covers the smooth, grey rocks, and crystal-clear water babbles over the cool, wet pebbles.

“This might be the most beautiful part of Cavum Terra we’ve ever found.”

“Nope, I look at the most beautiful part of Cavum Terra every fucking day, and it certainly isn’t some mossy rocks. I’d save you at any cost. There’s nothing I wouldn’t endure for you.”

I lower myself to the ground, the rough bark of the tree scratching against my arm as I lean against it, my gaze falling to the smooth pebbles. Tears well as I hide my face from him, the man who knows me better than anyone, my forever person, the soul I’ve waited my whole life for.

“But what if—“

His fingers grasp my chin and tighten, bringing my sight to his. Lowering his lips, he kisses me with an unhinged passion. Sebastian’s tongue dances with mine and his other hand wraps around my hair, seizing me tightly.

Using my tresses, he pulls me back to stare into my eyes. The warmth of his fingers brush across my bottom lip and he lets go of my chin.

“You are mine. What part of that don’t you get?”

I bite my lip, thinking while my nerves cramp my stomach. “It’s not that I don’t get it,” I whisper.

“If I could take away every fucking illness so you could see what I see, I would do it in a heartbeat. I’m a monster without you. There isn’t a reason for me to exist if you aren’t by my side.” He lowers me to the ground and straddles my legs, bracing his hands on either side of my head.

“I’m sorry.”

My past trauma casts a long shadow, tainting even the happiest moments with

suspicion. A persistent voice in the back of my mind challenges my trust, leaving a bitter taste of doubt despite my best efforts to believe.

“Marla, I’ll spend the rest of our lives proving it to you. So, you never have to have an ounce of uncertainty.”

His lips meet mine, and he grinds himself against me. The cries in the wind start again and I just want peace, something I’ll never truly find.

I focus on his dark brown hair, the tattoos that climb his neck and the sensations running through my body, but the wails don’t stop.

“Seb—”

“They can’t have you now. Look at me. You belong to only me.” He continues his kisses over my skin, taking off my shirt and trailing his tongue over my pebbled nipples.

As my attention is stolen again, the sharp pain of his bite on my flesh brings me back to the present. Sebastian’s dark eyes stare up at me as he moves down my body before he takes off my pants and props my calves against his shoulders.

Lifting his shirt, he holds the hem between his teeth and undoes his jeans. Gripping my hips, he lines himself up and slams into me, leaning forward to wrap his hand around my neck.

“Mine,” he growls.

“Yours,” I whimper.

Letting me go, he moves my legs over his hips and lowers his head to my throat and

kisses the sensitive skin, caressing me until he reaches my breasts and runs his tongue over each nipple.

Biting me until I bleed, he licks me clean and brushes his lips along my sternum, feathering me in touch to block out the world.

When our gaze locks, he pumps into me and rubs my clit with his other hand. Need courses through me as my nerves react to his attention. I arch my hips, and he meets my desire with rough movements until I scream out from the orgasm.

“So fucking perfect, my girl,” Sebastian groans as he fills me.

He lays his head on my chest for a moment before pulling out and getting us both dressed.

Tugging me close, his arms envelop me in a warm embrace as we lean against the ancient oak, gazing out at the tranquil scene below, a hush falling over the peaceful spot.

Sebastian moves his fingers through my hair and kisses my cheek.

After a few minutes, with his help, I’m pieced back together after he’d torn me apart, leaving me breathless and shaken.

“We should go home and check on them,” I say, not wanting to leave this space, but knowing we have things to do.

When we stand, the clear water running over the pebbles turns red, and the little rocks become sharp daggers.

The illusion is gone, and gloom returns.

Branches curl into misshapen claws and as I inhale, sulphur fills my senses.

In this harsh, unforgiving land, only my relationship with Sebastian remains a constant source of comfort.

I roll over onto the hard ground. Cool air leaks through the room and Sebastian's warmth is gone. It's been like this for weeks, or months. Keeping track of time here is tough. Each day melts into the next, the struggle for sanity so consuming that passing moments hold no significance.

Grabbing a hoodie, I put it on and push open the closed door. Standing in the hallway of our abandoned treehouse, I wonder which direction I should go first. Without the blue monster stalking me at every turn, I've felt lighter, and my past doesn't haunt me.

"He left again?" Chloe asks. Padding out of the bedroom with Sid behind her, their locked hands make me smile. I'm so thankful they've found their peace in each other.

"Yeah, I shouldn't sleep this heavy. It's my fault."

"Don't do that. You know he'd take anything for you. Besides, without the monster destroying you, healing takes time and drains you," Sid says.

He's right, but it doesn't make the burn in my stomach pass. Nerves dance in my belly and leave a sour taste of bile in the back of my throat.

"We'll go out the rear and look for him. You go the way. You always do." Chloe smiles and they stalk out the door.

I jog out the front and through the beaten path where I've been finding Sebastian regularly.

The weight that's been lifted has been a miracle. I could have survived life on Earth if it wasn't for the one demon. Depression and Anxiety still watch me and play with my mind, but I can handle it.

Sebastian did the most selfless thing, and as much as I take care of him, I don't think I can ever repay him.

Running through the forest, the branches cut through the heavy sweater. Side-stepping a hole in the ground, I catch my shoe on a buckle in the grass and fall in the undergrowth.

Raising my head, I see him thrashing about, his face contorting in soundless screams, a silent film of desperate struggle. He's been fighting flashbacks, the horrors of his past resurfacing, clawing their way to the top from the depths of his buried memories.

"Fuck you, you can't hurt me anymore. I killed you! You aren't real," he shouts.

I crawl across the dirt to reach him. "Sebastian, come back to me."

Dodging his wild fists, I launch myself onto his body, the impact jarring, and pin him to the ground. Darkness clouds his brown eyes and blood drips from his neck, staining his shirt red. Lowering my tongue to clean him, I taste the metallic crimson and the salty sting of sweat.

"Marla?"

Clenching my thighs around his torso, I stare into his eyes. "Sebastian, I'm here. It's me," I whisper.

We've been doing this dance for some time and I'd take back the demon if it meant he could be free again. Sebastian didn't have the luxury of dealing with it through

life, and now is tortured beyond what he could have ever imagined.

“He’s not real. I know I killed him. That motherfucker can’t hurt us anymore,” he spits.

“You did so well. I’m proud of you.” I stroke his hair and lay my head on his chest. His arms tighten around my back, and he shudders before swallowing a whimper. “Let’s go home. I’ll make it up to you, okay?”

Sebastian pulls away from me and scrambles to standing before gripping my hand as we walk towards the house.

As happy as I want to be about losing the demon, it’s overshadowed by whatever he’s going through. I’ve never felt this possessive over him, and all I crave is to keep him safe.

“I’m clueless about how you did this, my dove. It is the worst thing I’ve ever dealt with.”

With his hand in mine, I squeeze it, because words can’t heal the wounds this demon causes.

“Sebastian, what if we went to the Lords and tried to switch it back? You don’t deserve this, and I know how to handle it better.”

He stops walking and rips me backward towards him. “Never. I’ll endure this for the rest of eternity, because you sure as fuck didn’t deserve it. Trauma caused by others is a ruthless tragedy. They’re not even here anymore to blame or question why, and I can’t watch you suffer.”

It’s like he thinks I can witness the undoing of the person who has my heart outside

my body.

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Eight

Sebastian

I don't understand in the slightest how Marla could handle this demon.

Every single morning, I'm lured out to the forest and taken down. A wisp of a memory, the gentle sway of my mother's voice, plays on the edges of my mind. A sound I shouldn't remember, yet it lingers. Her words, like a relentless tide of scorn and hatred, wash over me, shattering my will to fight.

Daggers cut me with each thought, every word uttered by my fucking father who used to beat me senseless.

The ghosts of the people I killed lurk in the shadows, ready to tear me to shreds, and I fall for it each time.

With a sigh, I stand at the back door.

"Sebastian?"

Marla is the only thing that prevents me from completely falling apart. Without her, I'd crumble into a cracked statue of the man I once was, the sharp edges of my grief cutting into my soul like shards of stone.

"My dove, did you sleep well?"

Of course, I've noticed how much she's needed to rest—the dark circles under her eyes speak volumes. After the first week of having the demon removed, she didn't even move from the bed.

Chloe and Sid took care of the new souls that time and I'm grateful they found each other, but also they've become pillars to our operation.

“Yes, I'm glad you could stay in. Not like I don't love looking for you every morning.” Marla smirks, and it's beautiful to see joy cross her features, even when she's teasing me.

When she slips her arms around my waist, the tension leaves my muscles, and I feel a sense of calm, if only for a moment.

“New souls are arriving today. Are we ready for this?” Sid asks as he strolls out into the hall.

My hands tremble, and a cold sweat slicks my palms, the overwhelming fear making me question my ability to continue.

Marla's description of the brain fog was a light haze, but the experience is far more debilitating.

The reality is a relentless drowning of memories, a suffocating imprisonment within my mind. It's unbelievable to me what she faced every day. Though I'm thankful for her peace now, I'm left grappling with a profound sense of loss and a fear for my well-being.

“We're always ready. Same plan as last time?” Marla asks, tilting her head as she crosses her arms and leans against me.

“Actually, Chloe and I wanted to talk to you guys about something.” Sid doesn’t make eye contact and toes the ground with his shoe.

My chest is tight, constricting my breath as a cacophony of angry whispers assaults my ears, the air thick with volatile energy.

“Stay with me, Sebastian, it’s not real, my love,” Marla murmurs, gripping my hand.

“What do you guys want to talk about?” I ask, and walk away from the back door.

At the front, unfinished wooden chairs sit, a testament to the little time we have for leisure. Sid eases down on one, and Marla curls in my lap. Chloe walks out from the bedroom and glances around the room before meeting Sid’s gaze.

“Well, we’ve thought about this and talked a lot, but we have an idea,” Chloe says.

I arch my eyebrow and observe Sid.

“We’re going to branch out, if that’s something you both are okay with.”

Marla pulls away from me, leaning forward to glance at both of them. The absence of her safety is a gaping wound in my chest, a constant, agonizing ache.

These days, a minor event can shatter my composure and leave me in pieces. My weakness with this demon was never greater, even though you need all the strength in the world to endure its curse.

“What do you mean?” my dove asks.

“Listen, you are both great, but we figured if we went out on our own, we could help more people. While we’ve been out on the last few welcomes and exploring, we

found an entire area on the other side that drops off souls.”

Shock surges through me. Somehow, I was convinced that we were including every single individual.

“We want to build a community of folks that desire to help the new souls. Although some may resist, we are ready to pass on what we’ve learned to all those receptive and expand this aid to a much larger group.

No one left behind. The lost become found until they’re willing to break off onto their own,” Sid says and reclines in his chair.

“I’m so proud of you both. It’ll be different without you, but it makes sense. Where will you live, though?” Marla asks. I stroke her back, needing to feel her under my fingertips.

Chloe shrugs and rakes her hand through her mohawk. “We’ve found a couple of dug-out tunnels that could make do until we find something else. You know how it is, always moving and fighting.”

“When will you leave?” I ask.

“Figured we’d head out this morning to the other side and set up our place before welcoming the new souls. Seemed like the best time to start fresh.” Sid smiles at me.

“Way to go, guys. I’m happy you’re going to carry on this mission. It’s important for the realm to keep the fear and tension down a bit.” Marla jumps and gives them each a hug.

I shake Sid’s hand, feeling his firm grip, and embrace Chloe before they both nod and head out the door.

A warm smile spreads across my face as I glance at Marla.

“Back to the two of us. What will we ever do?” I ask and raise an eyebrow. Her giggle fills the space and restores my heart rate to normal.

As she walks toward my chair, the ground shakes, and large black eyes peer through the branches of our roof. I know he’s here again and is angry that I didn’t succumb to the dreadful music earlier.

Marla’s face blurs, a whirlwind of emotions washing over me as my mind races. I was made to protect her, and now I’m the vulnerable one, unable to keep her safe from everything.

Hands of the past reach through our canopy and grasp at my clothes. My father’s words reverberate within me, and I close my eyes, waiting for the next assault.

“Sebastian, stay here with me,” Marla begs.

As much as I want to meet her wishes, I’m taken deeper into my mind and the house of nightmares replaces our treehouse. Old décor covers the walls, and a door slams.

He’s coming for me once more, and this time I’m not even a man. I’m the little boy who couldn’t ever be enough. My body trembles with fear as the heavy tread of his boots pound the old wooden floor, and I rack my brain trying to remember my mistake.

“You no-good piece of shit. I’ve told you time and time again to keep your toys off the front lawn.” My father stands before me, shaking his finger at me, and as he gets closer, it’s jammed into my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I whisper.

His deep chuckle fills my ears, and I swallow the lump in my throat. My vision blurs, the unshed tears burning my eyes like acid rain, but I understand crying won't change anything. Even at my young age, that one tear will bring terrible consequences.

"You're gonna be sorry, boy," he grunts.

Snapping off his belt, I anticipate what's coming and as his large hand wraps around my tiny shoulder; I brace for the impact. Every day he does this despite my best efforts, and I don't know why.

"My love," Marla screams.

The past dissipates, like a storm passing through, and I look into her hazel eyes. She grips my thighs and launches herself into my lap, squashing the darkness.

I grip her neck and bring her closer. Kissing her fiercely, I pull back to gaze into her irises before I press my lips tenderly to hers again. "I love you so fucking much, my dove."

"I adore you, Sebastian. There is no one I'd rather spend eternity with than you. You're doing so well. I know it feels impossible, but you are handling things."

She's crazy. These days, the past I thought I'd killed and buried returns like a relentless tide of guilt and dread, its crushing weight suffocating me and threatening to destroy my very being. The memories, sharp and vivid, claw at my mind.

"Let's go, we'll welcome the new souls, get our minds off things, alright?" She grasps my hand and as we link fingers, I know I chose this to protect her from the torture. I'm unsure if I'll make it, but I will do my best for her.

As we walk out into the realm, I glance around at the deep crimson sky. Every time

new souls are coming, it's always darker than normal. Usually a red and orange blend becomes shrouded in terror and rage.

"I'm glad they went off on their own. The other areas didn't occur to me. I don't know why I feel bad," I tell her as we walk.

"We can't know everything, but I agree. I wonder how many people I let down, although maybe it's for the best. If we were everywhere, we might have never met Sid and Chloe and showed them the way." Marla has a pep to her I've never seen, and I love it.

As we reach the crowd, they are bickering amongst themselves and my dove whistles loudly. Most turn to look at her, and with a deep sigh she does the speech she always does. Cries fill the air, and she hugs people before pairing some of them up who don't run.

After a while we're left alone again, and she turns and shrugs before grabbing my hand, and we head back.

Once we reach the trail to our home, I notice the branches of the roof caved in. The angry red bitch of my old demon leers at me before stumbling away.

Long, skeletal shadows stretch across the lawn as I envision the camouflage monster tearing the house apart, its actions echoing in the silence of my mind. We can never have a moment of peace.

"Sebastian, it's okay. Just some branches. Come on."

I stare at her, mesmerized for a few minutes before looking away, then notice the house is fine except for the damaged roof. Shaking my head, I walk in with her and kneel once we've crossed the front entrance.

The sting of defeat settles in, and I wonder what our future might have held.

Marla drops before me, grasping my face with both hands as she stares into my eyes.

“You’ve got this, my love. We’re going to go to the Lords and switch this. I’ve been able to live my life this way, and I refuse to watch you break in front of me.”

Her words anger me, but as the tears drop, I can’t do anything to stop them. She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me close. I sob into her shoulder.

Breaking the disguise of being dead inside might be the final straw. Growing up in a world where emotions were fuel for the fire is a scary thing now.

“You’re doing so good. I’m so proud of you, Sebastian. Look at me, we can do this, okay?”

Our eyes lock, and we don’t break contact until the bedroom door, where I lie down and feel her warm body against mine.

The thought of returning it to her makes my stomach twist, a desperate plea for strength to return to my soul.

“I can’t watch you be tortured. I’ve just got to get used to this.”

With a slight shake of her head, her touch remains, fingers weaving through my hair, her strokes soft against my skin, a silent reassurance.

Marla’s acceptance of my emotions, a stark contrast to others, offered a glimmer of hope that we could overcome this. My past is not a reflection of our future. She differs from those people from years ago who caused me such deep emotional wounds, although the scars remain.

The ache inside threatens to split me in two. As much as I love her and want everything to work out, the walls of my mind are closing in on me.

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Nine

Marla

Decades have drifted by, leaving their mark on everything. I do what I can to help him, even as he falls further into the past.

Sebastian never let me take the demon back. He forbade me from ever seeing the Lords.

In between the constant threat, there were moments of unexpected peace, brief respites where his spirit shone with a quiet joy, but these tranquil interludes were far too short-lived to offer lasting solace.

Whenever I find him, I clean him and return him to the present, but he's becoming a shell of the man he was.

I've broken his rules, pounding on the Lords' doors, but to no avail. The silence is deafening, and I'm at a loss.

After getting back from welcoming new souls, I have to rest, but I fear what will become of Sebastian when I wake. My love for him is boundless, but an overwhelming fatigue weighs me down like never before.

Lying beside him, his arm wraps around me, a familiar warmth, and I feel at home.

Even as his mind tears him to shreds and the demons lurk, he'll always be my place,

the one I need more than anything else in this realm or another.

I rest my head against the moss and am wrapped in his heat. My eyelids are heavy and as the chaos reigns around us, I fall into a deep sleep.

Each morning, for several years, we wake nestled together, a quiet defiance against his inner turmoil.

I wouldn't wish the camouflaging blue demon, with its sinister, unseen presence, upon my worst enemy. Its chilling effect is an experience I'd only reserve for my abusers.

This morning, I feel cold after waking. He's run off again, and tears well and sting my eyes. A heavy weight presses down on my stomach, screaming that something is terribly wrong.

Running out of the house, I trace the trail he always takes. Large, grey boulders, worn smooth by time and weather, mark the path, poking out from the brittle, brown grass.

I duck and weave, avoiding the thorny branches that scratch at my flesh. This pain—a searing, exquisite torment—beckons to me, but duty calls louder.

All my focus, all my energy, is directed towards Sebastian. I need only think of him. He needs me to rescue him, just as he's pulled me from the depths so many times before. A cold sweat clings to my skin, and I don't know how I'll keep bringing him back to the present.

Trampled brush in front of me is where I should find him, but Sebastian is nowhere to be seen. I continue trekking through the forest as I search for signs he went this way, but come up empty. Fear chills me. I've always found him before.

Panic seizes me, my heart races, and I am rooted to the spot, my gaze frantically searching the dense, ominous woods.

My instincts are stupid. Fighting or fleeing might help, but the sickening feeling of helplessness when you fawn or freeze makes any battle feel pointless.

Climbing over the fallen logs and twigs, heavy black vines snake around my ankles, pulling me down to the cold, hard ground with a thud. With a quick twist away from the barrier, I risk a look behind me.

The sight of the tall demon fills me with dread. The air itself seems to crackle with its dark energy. Tendrils slither through the forest floor and I hold back my screams. I've learned they love the sound. Each time I've failed, they seem to be filled with glee and become stronger.

I swallow the emotions bubbling on my tongue and kick out at the sinister fingers reaching for me. I don't have the leisure to fight my own demons right now when I need to find Sebastian.

Glancing back at the edge of the forest, his tattoos stand out against the dark branches, and I know I have to reach him. Crawling, I shake off the tendrils that try to keep me in place. Out of the corner of my vision, I see my purple demon's fangs smile, and my breath catches in my lungs.

"STOP," I shout, although it is futile.

Ignoring Depression and Anxiety will never be the answer, but right now, it might be the only thing to save us. I inhale as deep as I can and focus only on the sight ahead of me.

Painful hands run over my back as I scamper across the debris and reach the edge of

the forest.

Sebastian isn't fighting. He leans against a gnarled, ancient tree, its wood soft with decay, eyes unfocused, oblivious to my noisy struggle to stand, the sound of snapping twigs filling the air. He has lost to the claws of the blue monster, stuck in his memories.

"Sebastian?"

It's as if he can't hear me. I creep toward him, lowering myself to his level.

"Seb?" My voice is shaky while I walk to him on my knees.

Thunder crashes everywhere. He's still zoned out even through the kaleidoscope of sounds around us. I place my palm on his knee, squeezing his muscle, but he remains lost. My heart thumps in my ribcage, dizziness spins my world, and I shuffle a touch closer to reach for him again.

In a heartbeat, his dark eyes lock onto mine, and his hand shoots out a forceful grip on my wrist. A low growl rumbles in Sebastian's chest as he keeps me back. His grasp feels like a vise, and the thought of separation crushes my soul with despair.

Living in eternity without him isn't possible. I'd crawl through whatever Cavum Terra has for me to reach him. He's the only constant in my life, the only thing that makes sense in the ever-changing world.

"Go," he hisses, the words laced with venom, "you're not wanted here."

He twists my wrist the wrong way, and a sharp, stabbing agony shoots up to my elbow. I cry out in distress.

“Leave, Marla,” he spits, “love will never be enough. You know that.”

As he looks into my eyes again, his gaze is cold, not the familiar look I remember. The torment is unbearable, and he uses force to push me, which sends me crashing to the forest floor.

When he doesn't catch me, it cements the idea that we're done. I'll love him forever, but without his devotion in return, my heart will wither and die.

“Sebastian, this isn't you. Let's go home. We can...”

“Do what, Marla? Play house and pretend everything is fine? You could never love someone like me. Everything's ruined, and love has no place here anymore.”

He glances back at me one last time before sprinting into the shadowy depths of the forest, the sound of his footsteps fading, and I press my injured wrist against my side.

It's just as my mother told me for years. An icy dread settles in my bones, whispering of failure and inadequacy. The eternal tie we were supposed to have feels like a cruel joke, a love I don't deserve, a bond forever out of reach.

Standing, I glance into the woods, but I've lost track of him. Wandering back to our home seems stupid, but I have nowhere else to go. I'm alone again, likely how I should be.

The agonizing pain I carry has ripped through the lives of everyone around me, but as long as I'm by myself, my suffering will be contained.

I want to believe it's the demon tearing us apart, but the rumination of my own thoughts strips that theory to shreds.

Reaching the treehouse, a flicker of hope ignites in my chest—maybe Sebastian is waiting behind this familiar door.

When I enter, the silence is deafening, but I still look around for him. Everything is meaningless if we're not together. It's all too much, and my body shakes. Tears pour from my eyes. I crumple to the ground, a raw, animalistic sob escaping my lips.

All of my childhood fears have become reality. Everything I've lived through and fixed is all for nothing without Sebastian. He'll hold my soul in his hands until the end of time. There is no hope that could save me from myself now.

The pressure on my chest flows throughout my body, limbs tense under the devastation crashing against the jagged pieces of my heart. My home, my anchor, has been stolen from me. The tears falling aren't enough, and my skin becomes too tight as waves of sorrow torment me.

My muscles scream as I pull myself off the floor, each movement a monumental effort, but I rise and walk to the table, my fingertips tracing the cool wood before finding my hidden weapon.

The rock's sharp edge bites into my fingers as I grip it, a gratefulness washing over me for Sebastian's persistence in mastering this craft.

I pull up my shirt and glance at my skin. Marked by a lifetime of emotions, a landscape of pain is etched onto my flesh. A network of scars, each a pale, raised line whispering tales of torment. It's astonishing how he tolerated my flaws for so long.

As I press the jagged piece of rock against my arm, it takes force, but soon the blissful agony fills me. Blood drips, and for a moment I am able to breathe.

For a few minutes, I can pretend my world hasn't broken, that my other half hasn't

been overtaken by the demons.

A world without Sebastian isn't for me. My mother would call me a weak, worthless person, needing someone else to be whole. Her words don't ring in my ears anymore since his selfless act, but the sorrow that has followed me my entire life will haunt me more than anything.

I vowed to love him for all time, a promise etched into my soul, unshakeable and true. For the rest of my days, I'll hold on to the need for him. The nickname, a sweet whisper that I long to hear again.

Just as I approach the chair to continue slicing my skin, a loud bang on the door shatters the silence. I shove the tool in my pocket and wrap a rag around my arm. Cuts and gashes are a gruesome, familiar sight here in Cavum Terra.

With hesitation, I reach the weathered wood, its grain rough beneath my fingertips as I pull it back. The three Lords, imposing figures in their rich velvet robes, stand before me.

“Hello.”

“Marla,” Berimund says, “we have an offer. I know you’ve been trying to reach us, and I apologize for our lack of communication.”

I push my hand through my tresses before gesturing toward the house, inviting them in. They all walk forward and take a seat. Their existence seems too powerful in our rickety dwelling.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Giso smiles at me, her long blonde hair braided. “You’ve done marvelous work here

in the realm. Throughout the millennia of our presence here, never have we seen someone working with others to provide comfort and community.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do, no one left behind. Chloe and Sid have taken the responsibility on the other side of the realm,” I say.

“We’re aware. They’ve trained more teams to do the same. You’ve created a legacy. Sebastian, too. Treating everyone who took their own life with respect and compassion. It is endearing, it’s something we admire,” Tanca says.

The mention of Sebastian’s name clenches my heart with a familiar ache, but I must listen to this offer. If it will restore him, I’ll give them anything they desire, no matter the cost.

“Also, you’ve served a millennium here. It’s not in the rule book, but once a soul has proven they have what it takes not only to be resistant, but resilient against everything thrown at them, they are rewarded.” Berimund leans back in the chair and smiles at me.

“If you lead with that, people might actually try harder,” I say.

“Well, maybe. However, not everyone can be like you two. Showing the path to others, making sure no one is alone and letting individuals grow the way they needed to on Earth is a rarity.”

“And?” I’m impatient, but I need to find out what to do in order to save us both.

“There is another realm. It’s better. You’ll both be free of your demons and able to live out the rest of your eternity in Karus Anima,” Berimund tells me.

“Karus Anima?” I arch an eyebrow and wonder how I’ll even get Seb somewhere

else.

“It means precious soul. You’ve proven over and over you belong there. Some people you might recognize, but no one who has hurt you in any lifetime will be there,” Giso says.

“Sebastian is lost. He took on my burden, and it consumed him, leaving him a shell of his former self. I don’t know how I’ll get him there. He wants nothing to do with me.” My voice trembles, and a sob escapes.

Giso’s hand wraps around my shoulder. I didn’t even see her rise from the chair. She strokes my arm and stares into my eyes. “It’ll work out if it’s meant to be. For now, this is limited, and we must go.”

Faced with the decision of leaving Sebastian in this hell he stole from me, I stand and follow the Lords.

I pray to any entity listening that he forgives my selfishness and that somehow, somewhere, he finds me again. The weight of my actions is heavy on my chest.

“I’m ready.”

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Ten

Sebastian

The world has dissolved into a meaningless blur, and I'm trapped within the confines of my own shattered thoughts. I struggle toward the surface, only to be ripped apart once more.

"Son," a deep voice says.

I tear my gaze from the abyss of my flashbacks and stare at Berimund.

"Yes?"

"It's time. Let's go."

I don't ask where. I assume they have to dispose of broken souls because we're useless now, and if it means I'm put out of my misery, it's the least I could do.

Marla hasn't been back to the forest since that day, and her absence weighs heavily on me. I hate that I caused her pain. I wanted her to find solace away from the harsh, unforgiving world I'm trapped in.

We walk through the terrain in silence until we reach a green wall wrapped with foliage. Tanca and Giso stand next to a tinted glass door I'm not able to see beyond.

Screams fill the air behind us, and an urge to turn back tugs at my heart. It feels like

Marla is in danger, and I can't tell if that is real or part of the demon.

I thought after so many years I would get used to him, but it's the most torturous thing I've ever experienced.

"What's happening?"

Berimund wraps his arm around my shoulder. With a squeeze, he smiles. We stand in front of the glass.

Tanca nods at me, "it's time for a new adventure. It doesn't happen often, but after the years, you've survived, and with the resiliency you've shown Cavum Terra, it's the right moment to move on."

His words whirl in my head. I can't make sense of what's next, but I know there has to be a place better than this depressing wasteland. Although I've abandoned Marla, I should find her first.

"What about Marla?"

"The leadership you both had in building communities is unlike anything I've ever seen," Giso says, her voice filled with admiration. "You left no one behind, and the compassion you and Marla showed to those with mental struggles was remarkable."

I glance at the route we came through. The path is gone, and it's covered with overgrowth. Looking back at the Lords, I don't know what anything means.

"What do I need to do?"

"Nothing. Karus Anima is the reward for the people who don't succumb to their demons.

Although other spirits are there, it is more than fighting forever.

Across Cavum Terra, the communities you and Marla built hum with the tireless work of those who continue to protect souls.

You both created a legacy of selflessness, and we couldn't be more proud of you two," Berimund says before pushing me toward the door.

"Marla? I need to go save her. I fucked things up."

"If it's meant to be, you will know it," Giso says. She squeezes my hand before opening the door and shoving me through.

The path stretching ahead consists of varied gravel and stones, some worn smooth, others sharp. Large branches, their leaves a deep, lush green, shade the entrance.

I turn, ready to ask more questions, but the opening is gone, swallowed by a thick wall of leafy growth that smells of damp earth.

Missing the fresh air, I inhale deeply, the cool breeze carrying the scent of wildflowers, and walk down the path.

With a glance upward at the breathtaking royal-blue sky, the clouds look like fluffy cotton candy.

The grass here is green, unlike the yellowing scrub of Cavum Terra where the broken ground is always reaching for you to fall.

Everything here is tranquil so far, the trails clear and stable. I wander along the greenery to a flowing river. The water is pristine, and I see coloured rocks and darting fish.

I should have asked the Lords what the fuck Karus Anima stood for. I could be in a realm of deception for all I know. Though as I pause and glance around, the only sounds are the birds chirping, and I don't see any of my demons.

The weight has been lifted from my chest since I took on the blue one from Marla, and I wonder if our efforts have been rewarded with something good.

Although I learned to be a better person because of Marla, it didn't seem like a big deal to provide souls with compassion in their afterlife.

Everyone has their own experiences with mental health and lack of care on Earth.

Each of us carries the scars of our own battles, the chilling presence of our inner demons a constant companion, especially in Cavum Terra, where they tortured so many for so long.

I don't understand who could treat anyone any differently for their choices to escape mental illness.

Continuing along the riverbank, I take in the rich colours of the forests and sky.

People pass by with smiles on their face, and I nod as I continue looking for the only reason I care to breathe air.

Not being assaulted by nefarious smells or the sudden march of thunder is a different pace, as if this place is meant to be enjoyed.

After I cross over a bridge, I come to an area filled with small identical homes. The smell of cut grass is in the air.

Fading behind a row of trees, I walk on until I see her. Long black hair cascades

down her back. Marla is wearing dark pants and a crimson sweater.

With a glance at myself, I realize new clothes adorn my body. Jeans and a band tee were always my go-to, and it's the same.

The sound of her carefree laughter reaches me through the trees, a stark contrast to the usual seriousness I'd seen on her face. I love her in any condition, embracing all her flaws and imperfections. Her spirit is my compass.

My dove talks rapidly. I can't hear every word, but the girl opposite her beams with the conversation. They walk toward a big circle. Many cushioned chairs surround a large table, and a tall man with dark hair joins them.

Green envy runs through my veins, but he doesn't touch my dove, instead clasping the hand of the girl.

Marla sits across from them, a smile on her lips as they chat, and I question if my presence is necessary. Leaving her with the ghost of a man who hurt her deeply shouldn't be the last memory she has of me, and I'd be a coward if I walked away and lived in this rich environment without her.

Wiping my palms on my jeans, I inhale the fresh air and stalk towards them.

"Well, it's been amazing to see your face again. It's wonderful that you found someone, and your trauma from Earth has been wiped. I'll see you soon. Okay, Jess. I love you," Marla says to the blonde woman.

Finally, after searching for so long, she was reunited with the friend she had avenged at the mental-health centre.

I wonder if I have anyone worth finding in this beautiful place other than her, and

fear I'll have to face the wrath of those who did me wrong and on whom I've inflicted too much pain.

Stalking from behind the treeline, I drift through the shadows like I always used to before and follow her to a home away from all the cookie-cutter ones.

She climbs the steps to a large patio that wraps around a medium-sized brick house. Comfortable-looking furniture sits beside a small table. Marla glances over her shoulder before she disappears within the home.

Fear has never stopped me from anything in my life, but after my battle with the demons in Cavum I'm a different man, knowing our love will endure every challenge thrown at us.

I stand straighter and walk around the house, the cool air brushing my skin, until I find a side door, the wood weathered and worn.

As I enter, I notice the warm light illuminating the small yet inviting kitchen and dining area. Fresh purple flowers, their fragrance sweet and subtle, fill delicate glass vases on the dark table, their colour a vivid splash against the deep grain.

"Jess, is that you?" My dove's voice floats through the hallway. Footsteps follow, and as she enters the room, my gaze locks with hers. Red lips, hazel eyes, and a face that's been etched across my mind forever.

"My dove." I smile at her. Emotions bubble under the surface of my skin, clenching my jaw, waiting for the worst. Rejection, abandonment and whatever else the world might throw at me.

Marla's eyes mist over as she stares at me, but she runs at me with excitement. I capture her in my arms and let out a sigh of relief as her legs wrap around my hips.

“You found me.”

“Always, my dove. You should know that by now.”

I hold her with one hand and grip her chin with the other as I kiss her lips, needing to consume her but knowing she might need time. Marla will forever be mine, even if she doesn't want me.

The only sound is my footsteps on the long hallway's polished floor as I peer into each shadowy room, searching for a bedroom. Not as if I wouldn't take her across the kitchen table, but I want to worship every inch of her and prove myself.

“I've missed you. Sorry I failed to find you before I left Cavum. I had to leave immediately, unless I wanted to stay there,” she says.

“Never be sorry. I'd have hated it if you stayed for me. You deserve this peace, Marla. I would crawl from the ashes to be with you. I'm devastated because of what the demon did to me.” I'll never forgive myself for the way I spoke to her.

“Mental illness is a bitter disease that will take all you have, strip you of everything safe and kind, and shred you until you can't cope anymore.

Sebastian, you don't need to apologize. You took the hardest battle for me, and while it twisted you into something you hated, I loved you through it all. ”

She's my entire world. I feel I deserve her freely given love, a love that feels like coming home.

I walk to the bedside and lower her to the soft covers. Everything here is comfort and beauty opposed to the trenches we lived in before. I undo her jeans and pull them off her legs as she rips off her top, eager for my touch.

Kneeling before her, I wrap my hands around her thighs and tug her to the edge of the bed.

“Sebastian, I love you. I’ve always loved you.” Her words dance on the folds of my mind like the sweetest song.

“There was never a doubt, my dove, but let me prove to you how much you mean to me,” I whisper.

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Marla's hand in my hair sends chills down my spine as I lower to kiss her flesh, trailing my lips up her sensitive skin as I nip her. She arches off the bed against my strength and I grin before licking her wetness, circling her clit as I continue to tease her until her grip tightens.

Letting go of one of her thighs, I insert two fingers and suck on her clit until she clenches around me and fills the room with her delicious moans. I keep on licking and stroking, forcing her to come undone again.

When she pushes on my head and does her best to wiggle out of my grasp, I laugh before pulling away.

Standing, I stare into her lust-filled eyes as I peel off my shirt and unzip my jeans.

"You don't need to prove it to me. I already know."

"Did you want me to stop?" I question her as I stroke my hard cock. I tilt my head, eyebrow arched, awaiting a reply.

"Never." She giggles and flips over to crawl away, but I grasp her ankle and yank her back to me, her pert ass mine for the taking. I straddle her in a flash.

Marla looks over her shoulder at me, and I slide into her tight wet cunt. It's an element I've missed. Sex hasn't been the same since we were fighting for our lives. It's something that took a backseat, but as my eyes roll back, I relish the feeling.

Intimacy comes in so many forms, a touch or a stare. Taking care of people at their

lowest, and celebrating their highs, has all led us to this moment. I hold her and pump into her. Marla moans as I take her and she tightens around my dick.

“Fuck, it’s so good.”

“You’re so fucking beautiful, my dove,” I growl.

Leaning forward, I kneel one leg down and the other up, slamming into her deeper than ever.

I use one hand to grip her throat and stare into her eyes as her muscles tense and she shatters on my cock.

“So fucking perfect.”

I won’t last. As much as I want to cherish this moment, there are going to be many more times where I can take more time.

Gripping her, I slam into her, filling her with my cock until the tight wet heat becomes too much and I almost lose control. I release her, pull out, and grip her hair, curling it into a fist as I move her head to thrust into her mouth.

Marla swirls her tongue around my shaft, and I fill her throat with my come. Losing my grasp on her tresses, I stare at her as I catch my breath.

“Amazing,” I say. Stroking her locks, I trail my fingers to her face and rub my thumb over her swollen lips.

After we get dressed, we lay in bed with my arms embracing her. I’m home again. Nothing could keep me from my dove. I’ll always reach her.

“What does Karus Anima mean?” I ask.

“You failed to question anything? You just left?” Her chuckle rattles against my chest, and I tighten my hold on her.

“Sorta. They didn’t give me an opportunity.”

With a playful twist, Marla escapes my grasp, rolling onto her back, her bright eyes meeting mine.

“It means Precious Soul. They said we belonged here after so much effort there. It’s beautiful here, I haven’t found anything bad yet. I’ve met up with Jess and been able to see my grandparents.” Tears spill from her eyes, and I wipe them away.

“So this is forever? Eternally bound together?”

“I guess. We made it through hell on Earth in a societal sense, crossed through Cavum Terra and left a legacy with the way we built communities, and the final destination is here.” She tells me, stroking my face and smiling.

Lowering my head, I kiss her. No one could ever understand our journey, and in some ways I’m glad, but also wished I could have made it easier for her.

“Is our mental stuff gone?” I ask, wondering if time moves differently here too.

“Maybe. I haven’t felt anything since I’ve arrived. I’m sorry I failed, Sebastian. The day you sent me away, I didn’t know how to recover from it.”

Her gaze drifts, but I tap her chin to bring her back to me.

“My dove, love doesn’t come with conditions. You didn’t leave me because you wanted to. I believe you’d have tried again. Nothing can stop the right people from falling in love. If it’s supposed to happen, it will.”

“I adore you, my love,” she whispers, and closes her eyes.

That sweet nickname, a balm to my soul, has rescued me from the brink more times than she could ever imagine. It came at a cost when I took on the demon for her. Marla will never know how much I cherish her.

“I’d never change a thing, except for meeting you sooner—would’ve done that in a heartbeat. My only goal has been to have you and save the precious soul within.”

Marla opens her eyes and squeezes my fingers. “If you’d have met me sooner, it would have changed the direction of fate, and we might have missed each other.”

She has no idea I’d find her in any realm, no matter what the world or timeline. Marla has always been mine, and nothing could ever change that.

“Wanna go meet Jess? She found someone here, and although the blue demon could tempt me with the vision of her, it was a twisted truth of reality. The sunsets here are amazing, and everything is peaceful.”

“Sharing you with others? Ugh, the worst.” I grin wickedly.

Marla slaps my shoulder and laughs. “We have all of eternity, and I’m never leaving you again. Promise.”

“Alright, let’s go meet your friends. It’ll almost be like being normal—the horrors. What have we become?” I stretch before getting off the bed.

Marla brushes out her hair and grabs a hoodie from a circle chair in the room's corner. After putting it on, she clasps my hand, and I squeeze before she leads me out to the porch and down the pathway.

There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her. Marla is all that is good in my world, and we

survived all of it together.

“Get out of your head. It’s a scary place in there.” She giggles and shoves into my side.

Using my own words against me, my dove is light and free now, and that’s all I’ve ever wanted, other than for her to mine.

“Always and forever?” I ask, and glance into her eyes.

“Duh. It’s not even a question.”

She holds out her hand and I notice the tooth ring I made her. Marla hasn’t had it for so long.

“Found it in the house. I’m yours forever, Sebastian.”