



# The Demon and the Broken Girl

**Author:** *Wynter Raven, Celeste King*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** They called me a curse. A relic locked in the dark to be forgotten. But she touched the mirror—she woke me.

Now I'm free. And she's mine.

Calla, the broken girl with fire still burning in her eyes. They used her. Hurt her. Branded her as nothing.

I'll show them what it means to take from me.

I was forged in torment, born again in shadow. I don't save people. I destroy what tries to break them.

And I swear on every mark carved into my flesh—

I will ruin this world before I let it take her again.

Because they didn't just hurt her. They made her kneel.

Now I'll make gods bleed. I'll rip kingdoms down brick by brick.

And when the smoke clears, the last thing they'll see is me, on my knees before her—

not in defeat, but in devotion.

Because she's not just mine to protect.

She's mine to worship.

And to avenge.

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

I wake before first light, curled on a straw pallet in the narrow dormitory that houses the Vaerathis slaves. My back aches from yesterday's labor, and my forearms are stiff with bruises that have not yet had time to fade. Still, I push myself upright without a sound. If anyone catches me lazing in bed when the overseer comes by, the punishment will be swift. And loud.

I try not to make noise as I rise, for the other slaves are still sleeping, each locked in their own silent world of fear and exhaustion. The dormitory's stale air, laced with the acrid scent of unwashed bodies and old sweat, invades my lungs. I yearn for even a moment of fresh, untainted air. Sometimes I dream of open fields or a wide blue sky I can call my own, but then I remember: I don't really have a "own" anything. Not in Protheka, and certainly not in House Vaerathis.

I step carefully around Silas, my only friend in this damned place. He's younger than I am—eighteen, with a lean body barely strong enough for the grueling demands the dark elves place upon us. Yet his spirit refuses to bow, and that spirit has kept me afloat more times than I can count. He stirs when I pass, his eyelids fluttering. In the gloom, I see his eyes crack open, just enough to register my shape. "Calla," he murmurs, voice thick with sleep, "you're already up?"

"Shh," I whisper back. "Go back to sleep, if you can. I'll see if I can bring you water."

He gives a mute nod, turning onto his side. I suspect he won't drift off again—Silas is never truly at peace here—but there's no harm in trying.

Outside the dormitory, a single torch hisses in its bracket, casting dancing shadows

on the stone walls. The corridor is cramped, the ceiling just high enough that a tall dark elf would have to stoop. By design, they rarely wander into this part of the estate unless they're searching for a slave or planning a punishment.

At this quiet hour, the overseer has not yet begun prowling the corridors, so I keep my footsteps light, moving silently through the space that is both my prison and my entire world. House Vaerathis is a fortress as much as it is a mansion—composed of sprawling halls, austere courtyards, and countless locked doors. The marble floors in the elves' private quarters are polished to a perfect sheen, but here, in the slave quarters, the stones under my feet are rough, chipped with age and neglect.

A distant clang of metal on metal startles me, and I almost drop the small bucket I carry. My heart lurches. Sometimes it's just a guard adjusting armor or an accidental noise of service doors clapping shut. Other times it's a warning that a punishment is about to be doled out in the courtyard. The dark elves do not believe in subtlety or second chances. The swirling chaos that is my existence can shift on a single misstep.

I find the washroom at the end of the corridor. It's more a disused closet with a single leaky faucet that drips brackish water into a stone basin. I fill the bucket, the splashes echoing in the cramped space. My breath catches the faint stench of sulfur that comes from some subterranean aquifer beneath the estate.

The memory of the rumor surfaces: beneath House Vaerathis lie catacombs older than the city itself, catacombs that reek of unnatural energies. I've heard dark whispers among the slaves, half-remembered legends that those tunnels hold arcane artifacts from a time when the Vaerathis line practiced rites to prolong life or conjure nightmares.

I don't believe half the rumors that pass from slave to slave—most are born of desperation. But the fear in their eyes is real. I've seen it. And in this world, fear often speaks truths.

I dip a rag into the bucket and clean my face, though I'm aware this is the best I'll feel all day. The clang of metal has subsided, replaced by a hush so thick I can hear my own heart drumming. I drag a coarse cloth across my cheeks and consider the reflection in the water's rippling surface. A slim, tired face stares back: dark brown hair that's seen neither comb nor kindness in days, hazel eyes that flicker with the faint gold color I used to find pretty. These days, I'm never sure who I am beyond "Calla, the slave."

I recall a single memory from my childhood—before I was sold to House Vaerathis—my mother braiding my hair, murmuring stories about humans who once roamed the continents freely. Now, our kind is property. We have no voice in this world. Any illusions otherwise are shattered by the scars on my back.

I push the memory away, stepping back out into the corridor. Several other slaves are stirring, their expressions vacant as they emerge from the dormitory. Some share the same dead-eyed look that I fear one day might consume me. At least Silas still has that spark. And maybe, buried deep, I have one too.

My morning's assignment is to scrub the east wing floors, the ones the highborn dark elves walk upon. A dreaded chore, but it's better than being the personal plaything for someone like Lord Kaelith. I lower my eyes, reminding myself to display the deference the elves demand, as I pass a pair of female dark elves in the hall. They're swathed in black-and-crimson robes, runic patterns embroidered along the hems. I hear snatches of their conversation:

"—the catacombs cause a chill in the wards?—"

"—probably nothing. The matron will handle it?—"

At the mention of "catacombs," my blood stills. It's nothing I can act on, no real information to glean. But it's enough to affirm the rumors that something stirs

beneath the estate.

When I reach the east wing, I dip a stiff-bristled brush into soapy water and begin scrubbing the marble floors. My muscles scream with every motion, the repetitive drudgery wearing me down. The hall is lined with tall windows of stained glass, each depicting vainglorious scenes of dark elf history—wars, victories, ceremonies. I have no illusions that humans appear anywhere in those mosaics, unless it's in the background as corpses or kneeling figures.

Halfway through my chore, a door at the far end of the corridor swings open. I freeze, brush clutched in my hand. The figure stepping out is Lord Kaelith Vaerathis himself, clad in a polished black cuirass and matching gauntlets. He stands tall, broad-shouldered for a dark elf, with slanted violet eyes that never fail to send a cold wave of fear through me. His hair, bone-white, is braided in a style that underscores his status.

He notices me immediately, his lips curving into a cruel approximation of a smile. "You there. Slave," he snaps.

I scramble to my feet, dropping the brush and staring at the floor to avoid meeting his gaze. "My lord."

He approaches, boots clicking ominously on the damp marble, until he's near enough that I can sense his breath. "The floors are not nearly as pristine as they should be."

I know better than to defend myself; the water bucket is half empty, the brush worn to its bristles. No matter how thoroughly I scrub, it'll never be enough to satisfy him. His cruelty finds fault in every corner.

He lifts the toe of his boot, flicking it at my pail so it sloshes water across my ankles. "See to it that this corridor gleams by midday or you'll be whipped again," he says,

voice as cold as the marble beneath us.

“Yes, my lord,” I manage, forcing the words out through clenched teeth.

“Good.” He eyes me another moment, as though savoring my subservience, then strides away.

My breath stutters in my chest. I gather my brush and kneel once more, ignoring the trembling in my limbs. If I let rage surface, I’ll only hurt myself. Still, a tiny flame flickers behind my ribs. A single, dangerous thought: Someday, I want to walk away from him without fear.

I push the brush over the tiles until my nails splinter, determined to finish the task before midday.

Hours crawl by. My arms are shaking, my hair plastered to my forehead. I don’t stop even as my stomach growls from missing breakfast. I can’t risk tardiness. Lord Kaelith could return at any moment to check on me.

When I’m nearly done, another figure looms over me—not Kaelith but a short, wiry dark elf guard named Arhen. His lip curls as he scans my sweat-slick face. “You’re to report to Overseer Tovel,” he says.

I pick myself up, forcing my knees to straighten. “Did I?—”

“Don’t ask questions,” he snaps, turning on his heel to lead me away.

I stifle a sigh and follow him. My immediate dread is that Tovel will order me to do some humiliating or painful chore. Overseer Tovel is the iron fist that enforces Vaerathis rules on us humans. She’s a slight dark elf with an angular face and perpetually narrowed eyes, but her capacity for cruelty dwarfs that of many of the

male soldiers.

Arhen directs me down a twisting corridor to a small antechamber. There, Tovel stands by a wide desk scattered with scrolls. Her posture is rigid, hands clasped behind her back, expression unreadable.

The door shuts behind me. I keep my eyes averted, shoulders tense.

“You took your time with those floors,” Tovel remarks, voice as soft as a cat’s paw.

“Lord Kaelith—he—” I hesitate, unsure if blaming him for my pace is wise.

She waves a hand, cutting off my explanation. “I don’t care about your excuses. You have a new assignment.”

My heart flutters, uncertain if this is better or worse. “Yes, Overseer.”

She paces around the desk and picks up a short baton, tapping it against her palm. It’s a gesture I’ve come to associate with incoming punishment. “We’ve had an...incident of sorts in the lower levels.”

“Lower levels?” My voice catches.

Tovel’s eyes bore into me. “The catacombs,” she says, letting the word hang in the air with ominous weight. I stiffen. Very few slaves are sent there, and those who return often come back pale, jittery—refusing to speak of what they saw.

“You will clean them,” she continues. “The older storerooms on the first sub-level. House Vaerathis is hosting certain...important figures next week, and the catacombs must be in acceptable condition.” Her lips twist as though even she finds the notion absurd.

I want to scream that this is a suicide mission, that she might as well fling me to the Gilak demons. Instead, I swallow. “Yes, Overseer,” I say, forcing my voice not to shake.

She smiles, a slow, humorless curve of her thin lips. “Good. You’ll start at dawn tomorrow. A guard will escort you. Dismissed.”

I wait for a moment, uncertain if I’m meant to bow or speak further. Tovel’s baton taps her palm in a measured rhythm, and I realize she’s finished with me. Turning stiffly, I exit the chamber, breathing with shallow caution until I’m out of earshot.

The catacombs. The chill that creeps up my spine is impossible to ignore. Despite the swirl of rumors, no slave is foolish enough to speak openly about them for long. I know of two who ventured there months ago. They came back silent, eyes haunted, and within a week, they were sold off to a traveling dark elf merchant.

My only solace is that Tovel said storerooms on the first sub-level. Perhaps that area isn’t as cursed or dangerous as the deeper catacombs. Then again, House Vaerathis has plenty of secrets, and none of them bode well for humans.

I make my way back to the slave dormitory after finishing the floor-scrubbing. My arms feel like lead, my legs shaky from hours of kneeling. Silas is there, perched on an upturned crate along the wall, nibbling on a stale crust of bread.

“You look awful,” he says by way of greeting. Though his voice is teasing, there’s concern in his eyes.

I slump beside him. “Thanks. I feel worse than I look.”

He offers me a piece of bread. It’s dry and crumbly, but my stomach rumbles too loudly for me to refuse. “What happened?”



I chew slowly, letting the coarse lumps dissolve on my tongue. “They’re sending me...downstairs tomorrow,” I say at last.

His eyes widen. “The catacombs?”

“Yes.”

He lowers his voice, glancing around to ensure no guards are near. “Gods, Calla. I’ve heard the stories. They say the walls move down there, that there’s black mold that seeps into your lungs and makes you hallucinate. And something worse...”

I understand the unspoken words: Magic, perhaps something demonic or monstrous. “I don’t have a choice,” I murmur. “Tovel’s orders. I either go, or I face punishment.”

We sit in tense silence for a moment before Silas shakes his head. “I’ll come with you. I’ll beg Overseer Tovel.”

My heart clenches. As comforting as the offer is, I know Tovel. She won’t allow it. “No. You’ll only get yourself in trouble.”

He sets his jaw. “I don’t want to see you vanish like the others.”

“I know. But I can do this.” My voice tries to sound certain, though a tremor betrays my fear.

He opens his mouth to argue but stops at the sound of approaching footsteps. A pair of elves in black armor appear, scanning us with the bored disdain they reserve for humans. Silas and I both drop our gazes. The guards pass by without comment, continuing down the corridor.

When they’re gone, I place a hand on Silas’s forearm. “Stay safe,” I whisper. “I’ll

need someone to tell me jokes when I get back.”

He forces a grin. “Deal. But you owe me if you pull through this.”

“I’ll owe you everything,” I say softly. Because, truly, his friendship has been my anchor in this sea of cruelty.

That night, sleep is elusive. Every time I shut my eyes, I imagine creeping through dank corridors, hearing the drip of water echo in the darkness. I imagine ghostly shapes flickering in torchlight, walls that shift like living flesh. I think of the rumors that the Vaerathis family once performed rites of necromancy, summoning things that defy explanation.

My exhaustion eventually triumphs over my anxiety, and I have a restless dream—shadows swirl, taking on forms that lunge at me. A tall silhouette with white hair and violet eyes laughs, telling me I’m worthless. Chains coil around my wrists. The floor cracks open into a yawning pit, and I plummet.

I jerk awake, covered in cold sweat. The dormitory is silent, the other slaves’ breathing steady in the gloom. Through the narrow window near the ceiling, I see the faint glow of predawn sky. It’s time.

The guard assigned to me is a grim-faced elf named Sathrin. He’s lean, with a perpetual sneer. “Move,” he orders, jabbing me lightly in the back with the butt of his spear. I walk ahead of him down a descending spiral staircase, deeper and deeper into the bowels of House Vaerathis.

Stone passages give way to narrower tunnels. The temperature plummets. My breath mists before me, and goosebumps crawl over my arms despite my coarse tunic. Sathrin holds a torch that flickers, casting elongated shadows on the walls. Occasionally, a torch in a bracket lights the corridor, but many are unlit, leaving

pockets of inky blackness.

We pass doors of varying shapes and sizes—some sealed with iron bars, others boarded shut. The scent of decay hangs in the stale air, intensifying as we descend. Eventually, Sathrin halts in front of an archway carved with runic symbols. My stomach twists at the sight.

He hands me a rag and a bucket of pungent cleaning solution. “You’ll scrub this hallway. The storerooms beyond, too. You have until midday. If you’re not at the top of the staircase by then, I’ll assume you’ve died.”

My voice cracks. “Alone?”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

He raises one brow. “You want me to hold your hand, little human?”

“No, sir. I just—never mind.”

Sathrin snorts. “I’ll be upstairs, enjoying a warm meal. Don’t get lost.” He turns on his heel, taking the torch with him, and marches back the way we came.

His footsteps fade into silence, leaving me with only the dim glow of a single wall sconce. My pulse pounds as I turn to face the archway. The runes etched into the stone look unnaturally dark, like old stains that seeped into the rock.

I steel myself, stepping under the arch. Immediately, a chill washes over me, and the tiny hairs on my nape rise. Something about the air feels...wrong, as if it’s denser, clinging to my skin.

The corridor is narrow, the walls damp. I hold the bucket in one hand, the rag in the other, stepping forward cautiously. There’s no sound but the drip of water echoing somewhere unseen. The corridor extends about thirty feet before curving to the right. Along the walls, a few ancient tapestries hang in tatters. A thick layer of dust and cobwebs coats everything.

I want to race back to Sathrin, to beg for any other assignment, but I know that’s pointless. He’ll mock me and force me down anyway. Better to finish my chore and leave as quickly as possible.

I drop to one knee and begin scrubbing the floor where the mold is thickest, near the base of the wall. My rag soaks up dark stains that look alarmingly like old blood,

though I refuse to dwell on that. I focus on the mechanical motions: dip the rag, scrub in a circular motion, rinse, repeat.

Minutes pass, perhaps hours. My fingers go numb from the cold. The flickering scone behind me doesn't do much to chase away the darkness. I move farther down the corridor, approaching the bend.

As I turn the corner, the sight before me makes my throat tighten. The corridor opens up into a broader chamber with three passageways branching off. Unlabeled doors, some made of heavy iron, some of rotting wood, line the walls. This must be the "storerooms" Tovel spoke of, though it feels more like a labyrinth.

I step into the chamber's center, searching for some sign of which route I'm supposed to clean. The bucket sloshes at my hip, my own heartbeat thunderous in my ears. A low wind moans through the corridor, though I'm unsure where it comes from—there's no visible window or opening.

The leftmost passageway beckons, perhaps because it's partially lit by a single torch bracket. I inch toward it, refusing to think about how easy it would be to get lost here.

Just as I cross the threshold, something skitters across the floor behind me. I whirl, heart in my throat, but see only a flicker in the shadows. My mind conjures images of monstrous rats or twisted creatures living in the catacombs. My body tenses.

"Get a hold of yourself," I whisper, though the sound of my own voice in this silent place is anything but reassuring.

Forcing myself to continue, I approach a door at the end of the corridor. It's slightly ajar. Yellowish mold creeps along the wooden panels, and the hinges are rusted. I push it open with my foot, lifting the bucket in case something lunges out.

Inside is a small chamber stacked with crates and sacks—storeroom indeed. The stench of rot hits me. From the look of it, none of these supplies have been touched in years, if not decades. Cobwebs dangle from the ceiling like ghostly drapes.

I kneel to scrub patches of black-green mold creeping along the stone floor. My every breath is shallow. Each scrape of the rag reveals more questionable stains, cracked floor tiles, and signs of water damage. If Tovel expects me to make this place “acceptable,” she’s delusional. But I have no choice.

As I work, my mind drifts to Silas, to the small flicker of hope he always carries. He’s the one who insists humans aren’t doomed, that somewhere in Protheka there might be a safe haven. Some city or stronghold that looks on our kind with pity instead of disdain. I’ve never believed such a place could exist, but I cling to the thought all the same.

A sudden chill scuttles up my spine. It’s not the usual coldness of this underground space; it feels sharper, almost electric. I drop the rag and stand.

It’s then I notice a faint glow pulsing beneath a crate in the far corner, like a thread of pale light shining through a crack. My heart thuds. Does the floor have a gap? Or is there some hidden compartment?

Curiosity and dread war within me, but before I can think better of it, I set the bucket aside and tiptoe closer. The crate is half rotted, easy enough to push aside. As I do, I reveal a hidden trapdoor set into the floor. A seam in the stone frames a recessed handle.

That glow flickers from the crack where the trapdoor doesn’t quite meet the threshold. A prickle of apprehension warns me to ignore it. Yet I kneel, brushing away dirt and mold to get a better look. My fingertips run over runes etched around the trapdoor’s edge. They’re unlike the ones in the archway—these look older, the

lines more jagged, carved with a shaky hand.

I exhale a tremulous breath. In the stories told among slaves, I've heard mention of hidden rituals and cursed relics. Is that what's down there? Something best left alone?

But if I don't report this, will I be punished for "concealing" valuable property of House Vaerathis? Tovel might decide I'm lying or incompetent. My gut twists, and I glance at the open doorway, half expecting Sathrin or Tovel themselves to appear and see me meddling.

Silence.

Steeling my nerves, I slide my fingers under the handle, tugging at the trapdoor. It's heavier than I expect, but I manage to lift it enough to peer into the darkness below. That strange glow increases, like white phosphorescence. It paints dancing shadows on my face.

A short ladder descends into a cramped space. The air that wafts up is shockingly cold, making me shiver from head to toe. My instincts scream danger, but another voice inside me whispers that knowledge is power, and power is my best shot at survival.

I set a foot on the ladder and climb down. My entire body trembles. I keep imagining rats or monstrous shapes waiting below, but I can't turn back. My curiosity overpowers my fear.

At the bottom, my boots hit stone. The glow emanates from a circular pattern etched on the wall—a swirl of runes forming a ring around a polished black surface. It's...a mirror? I step closer, hardly believing what I see. The frame is carved directly into the stone, but the mirror's surface looks liquid, like oil shimmering under moonlight.

My reflection there is warped, ghostly. I raise a hand, and the reflection lags, as though it's not just a mirror but something deeper. I hear a faint humming, a pulse that resonates in my chest. My heart pounds, matching that rhythm.

For an instant, I think I catch a flicker of movement behind my reflection—like a shape drifting in dark water. That's impossible. I want to back away, to scramble up the ladder and seal this place forever.

But then I recall everything that's been taken from me: my freedom, my dignity, Silas's safety. If there's even a shred of power here, something to tip the scales, shouldn't I at least look?

Swallowing hard, I whisper, "What are you?"

The mirror ripples, and a faint wind stirs the hair around my face, though there's no earthly source for it. That flicker behind the glass grows more defined—something tall, angular, with eyes like pale flames.

My stomach knots. Is that a figure? A demon? A spirit?

A compulsion seizes me, urging me to touch the surface. I can't explain it; it's as though the mirror is calling to me, its power reaching out in silent invitation.

Before I lose my nerve, I press my palm to the glass. It's cold as ice, jolting me with a sensation akin to grabbing a live wire. A pain lances up my arm. The runes carved in the frame flare white. My vision wavers.

I gasp, trying to pull away, but some invisible force holds my hand in place. My reflection distorts, and within it, I see eyes—glowing silver-blue, inhuman, staring at me from behind the glass.



A soft voice echoes in my head, not in any language I know. It resonates with an undercurrent of hunger, despair, and longing. The trapped figure stirs behind the reflection, forcing me to question whether I'm hallucinating from the catacombs' rumored toxins. But no—this feels far too real.

A wave of dizziness hits me, and I sink to one knee. The mirror's surface ripples again, and I feel something push against my palm from the other side, like a hand pressing into mine. Then, with a muted roar—like distant thunder—the glass cracks from the inside.

I yank my hand free at last, stumbling back against the damp wall. My breathing is ragged, my skin clammy. The black mirror pulses, spiderweb fractures glowing with eldritch light. Then the reflection darkens, and I'm left staring into a void.

A single heartbeat passes in silence. Two. Three.

Then a shape emerges from the mirror. Tall, lean, half-wreathed in shadows that swirl around him like living smoke. My entire body seizes with terror. This is impossible. Yet here he stands, stepping onto the stone floor with unnatural grace.

His pale skin is almost luminescent in the gloom, his hair a soft white that falls just past his ears. And his eyes...flickering silver-blue, an impossible color. He looks too beautiful to be a monster, yet something about his presence screams danger. My mind reels.

He surveys me as though I'm something unexpected but not unwelcome. The mirror behind him dulls, the cracks still glowing faintly. I can't find the words to speak. I can barely breathe.

He opens his mouth, and his voice comes out softly, almost curiously. "Who...summoned me?"

I want to run, but my legs refuse to move. My lips part, and I manage to whisper, “I...didn’t mean to.”

His head cants to the side, eyes narrowing as he studies me. “You touched the mirror. You spoke words?—”

I shake my head frantically. “I said nothing!”

He goes silent for a beat, as if listening to some internal echo. Then his gaze drifts around the cramped chamber, to the runes on the walls, the half-rotten ladder. A new tension lines his shoulders. “House...Vaerathis,” he breathes, as though naming an ancient enemy. His tone trembles with suppressed rage.

I flinch at that name spoken aloud in such venom. “Yes. You know it?”

His eyes meet mine again, luminous in the dark. “All too well.”

My entire body trembles. Even if I don’t understand what he is exactly, it’s clear he’s a demon or something similar to it. The catacombs are rumored to house malignant secrets. And I’ve just unleashed one.

He exhales slowly, almost like a sigh of relief. “I’ve waited centuries,” he murmurs, lifting a hand to inspect the cracks across his pale skin—like black tattoos or markings that stir under his flesh.

A hundred questions spin in my mind. Who is he? Is he going to kill me? But more pressingly, Will the Vaerathis family sense his release?

I push myself upright, clutching at the stone wall. “I—I shouldn’t be here,” I manage.

He turns that eerie gaze on me, and I see something akin to pity or fascination. “Nor

should I.”

I swallow hard. My heart pounds so loudly it nearly drowns out my thoughts. “Please...don’t kill me,” I blurt. Shame heats my cheeks that I’ve resorted to begging, but I can’t face the notion of dying down here, alone in the dark.

He arcs a brow, stepping closer in a way that feels both graceful and predatory. “Kill you?” A slight tilt of his head. “You are but a mortal in chains, yes? House Vaerathis enslaves you. Perhaps you and I share an enemy.”

That flicker of possibility ignites a kernel of hope in my chest. Could this strange, beautiful horror be an ally? It seems impossible, yet my life is a tapestry of impossible horrors. Maybe I’ve found an impossible salvation.

My voice shakes. “If you hate them, can you—can you help me get out of here? Who are you?”

He says nothing at first, searching my face with those spectral eyes. Then, quietly, “Daeva and I can get you out. But everything comes with a price.”

Despite the fear roiling inside, I force myself to meet his stare. If this is my one chance to break free of House Vaerathis, I have to take it. “Name it,” I whisper.

A slow, almost delicate smile tugs at his lips, though it carries a note of sadness. “We’ll discuss that soon. For now, I suggest we leave these corridors before your captors realize I’ve returned.”

At that, he lifts a hand toward me. The mirror behind him flickers ominously, the runes on the wall faintly glowing like watchful eyes. My pulse pounds in my ears. I know I’m making a bargain with something far more dangerous than any dark elf. And yet...my desire for freedom, for revenge, for anything beyond these chains,

overrides my terror.

I nod, swallowing hard. “Lead the way,” I manage, my voice surprisingly firm for someone whose entire world has just turned upside down.

And with that, we ascend the ladder together, leaving the hidden chamber—and the black mirror behind, never realizing how profoundly this moment will alter both our destinies.

### DAEVA

I exhale a slow breath and step off the final rung of the ladder, feeling the bone-deep chill of the catacombs ease—just enough for me to straighten my spine. I keep a measured distance behind the mortal girl, my gaze falling on the tense line of her shoulders. She stands at the threshold of this cramped storeroom, a wooden bucket left abandoned on the floor. I notice how her hand hovers near it, as though she's torn between retrieving the bucket and fleeing for her life.

She turns, eyes flicking toward me with a mix of awe and fear. For a moment, I'm struck by the rawness in her hazel gaze—like she never expected to stand in the presence of something like me and remain alive. Neither did I, once, so long ago that my memories blur into half-remembered nightmares.

I shouldn't linger on that. Not now.

“Which way?” I ask quietly. It's a simple question, but I want to gauge her sense of direction. If she's half as resourceful as she appears, she might know the path out of this subterranean maze without attracting too much attention.

She bites her lower lip and points back through the door she came from. A rag lies in a puddle of murky water, evidence of her menial tasks. “We go through that corridor—there's a staircase leading up.” Her voice is unsteady, but not broken. “It's guarded, though. At least, it was.”

Her mention of a guard doesn't concern me as much as it should. I've dealt with far worse than a single elf or two. Yet I keep my expression neutral. "Then we'll deal with the guard if we must," I say. I walk forward, and she yields space, pressing her back against the stone wall to let me pass.

She smells of stale sweat and fear, but beneath that I detect something subtle—resilience. A will that sets her apart from the quivering, helpless mortal I might have expected to find in a place like this. It intrigues me.

"Come," I say, voice low. "We don't have much time."

The corridor beyond is narrow, lit by only a single sconce flickering with weak, orange light. The shadows dance in the corners, and the moist stone underfoot makes each step slightly perilous. I tread without sound, my senses on high alert. This entire place brims with an undercurrent of energy that reminds me of the rituals performed here long ago, rituals that shaped me into what I am now. The walls practically hum with residual power, yet it's stale, half-awake, not the living chaos I remember.

I glance behind me and see the girl—Calla, if I recall her name from the whispers in the mirror's half-life. She follows, knuckles tight around the handle of her cleaning bucket. Why does she still carry that worthless thing? Perhaps it's the only semblance of security she has. The idea almost makes me laugh, but there's no humor in it.

We edge down the passage. I keep to the right, scanning each recess. From behind a boarded-up doorway, I sense movement or perhaps just the shift of stale air. Calla's breath catches, and she lifts the bucket like a shield. I hold up one hand in a silent gesture to wait. The boards are covered in rot, but nothing emerges. After a few heartbeats, we continue.

My mind churns with questions: how long have I languished in that mirror, locked away from the mortal realm? Centuries, certainly. But it felt like an endless cycle,

time coiling in on itself until I forgot my own voice. And now, here I am, awoken by this slip of a girl who has no idea what she's unleashed.

I also wonder why I don't sense his presence—the one whose name I dare not speak just yet. The bond is still there, distant and loathsome, but it feels muted compared to what I remember. Perhaps time has drained his power. Or perhaps he's only begun to stir.

Ahead, a faint glow suggests a larger intersection or chamber. Calla stops me with a light tug on my sleeve. I stiffen, not accustomed to being touched uninvited, but I don't snap at her. Instead, I tilt my head, a silent question.

She leans in close, voice barely above a whisper. "There might be a guard posted. He left me here earlier. Sathrin—he's cruel, even for a dark elf."

The mention of cruelty from her perspective interests me. Mortals often speak of the elves' malice, but I recall a time when their cruelty was tempered by arrogance—a sense that they were above the rest of the world. Now, hearing her, it sounds more personal, more brutal than the distant memories I harbor.

"I'll handle him," I say softly, then pause. "Unless you'd rather not see...what I might do."

Her eyes go wide, flecks of gold catching the faint light. She swallows, as though imagining the horror that might come next. "No. I just—I don't want him sounding an alarm. There are more elves up there."

"I understand." And I do. Confrontation is inevitable, but stealth might preserve her life a little longer. "Stay behind me."

We round the corner, and sure enough, there's a flight of stone steps leading up to a

landing. The guard—Sathrin, presumably—stands partway up, leaning against the wall with a torch in one hand and a bored sneer on his face. He shifts his weight, scanning the darkness below. Even from this distance, I see the contempt etched in his features, as if he believes the occupant of these catacombs isn't worth caution.

In a moment, I weigh my options: I can rush him, silence him before he yells. Or I can employ subtler methods. My power is still stirring, not at full strength, but enough.

I slip into the shadows, guiding Calla with a gentle push to keep her behind me. Each footstep is perfectly silent, a trick I learned in a life I can barely recall. The torchlight wavers, and Sathrin's eyes drift across the corridor. I sense his mild unease—perhaps the catacombs are rumored to be haunted.

He doesn't see me until I'm nearly upon him. His gaze snaps to mine, and in that instant, I unleash a whisper of my darkness.

My hand darts out and clamps around his wrist. He inhales sharply, shock widening his eyes. I can feel the faint thrum of his lifeblood under his skin, the rush of adrenaline as he realizes a predator has found him. Before he can shout, I channel the dark energy coiled in my veins—just enough to sap his strength.

Sathrin sputters, dropping the torch. It lands on the stone with a dull clatter, rolling toward Calla's feet. She flinches away, fear in her expression, but no scream escapes her throat. Good.

The guard tries to jerk free, but I tighten my grip. He's bigger than a typical elf guard I remember, but that strength means little against demonic power. My lips curve into a cold smile. "Scream and you die."

He glares, lips trembling. "W-what the?—"



I press a wave of paralyzing cold into his arm, and he stiffens from head to toe. He can't even open his mouth now. Gently, I guide him to sit on the step so he won't collapse and make a racket. His eyes plead, but I maintain the hold.

Calla steps closer, bucket clutched to her chest. "Is he...dead?" she whispers.

"No. But he's helpless." I release a fraction of my hold, and he sucks in a ragged breath, able to speak again.

His voice shakes. "Y-you—What are you?"

"Does it matter?" I reply, letting venom thread my words. My gaze flicks to Calla, and I notice the way her features twist with conflict. She's afraid, but she also hates this guard. She hates everything he represents.

She meets my stare, and I see the question in her eyes. Are you going to kill him? The curious side of me wants to see her reaction. If I do kill him, would she be horrified or relieved?

But caution wins out. A dead guard might raise more suspicion than one who's been subdued. Perhaps it's better to leave him here, incapacitated. I shift my hand to his throat, ignoring his frantic attempts to move. "We're going to walk up those stairs," I tell him quietly. "And you're not going to make a sound."

He winces as the cold intensifies. "I—yes, yes, anything."

I let go and stand, beckoning Calla to follow. The guard remains seated, body trembling. She nudges the torch aside and slides past him, giving him a fearful glance. He remains silent, unwilling to provoke me.

At the top of the stairs, the corridor broadens, and I feel the dryness of artificially

warmed air. It indicates we're closer to the main levels of House Vaerathis, a place that should reek of elven arrogance. My own memories—ancient as they are—suggest that the architecture above might feature tall arches, black marble, the Vaerathis crest molded into iron gates.

Calla tries to keep her footsteps quiet. The hallway ahead is lined with half-burned torches, their smoke swirling toward the vaulted ceiling. Each step I take resonates with an odd sense of *déjà vu*, as if I've walked these corridors in another life. But that's impossible. The best explanation is that all dark elf fortresses share a certain stifling grandeur.

We reach a junction where the hallway diverges. To the left, I sense open space, perhaps an atrium or courtyard. To the right, a narrower corridor with closed doors. Calla hovers at my side, uncertain.

"This way," she whispers, gesturing to the left. "It leads to the slave quarters, then out to the main yard. If we can reach the outer walls..."

She doesn't finish, probably because the idea of actually escaping House Vaerathis is madness. Still, I give a curt nod and let her lead.

Her shoulders tense with every footstep, as if she expects a swarm of guards to appear. The corridor is strangely empty, though. I find that ominous—it could mean the elves sense something is off and are gathering to hunt us. My jaw tightens. Let them come.

Before we reach the archway at the corridor's end, Calla halts abruptly, pressing herself back against the wall and signaling me to do the same. I step closer, half into an alcove.

Voices echo from around the corner. I close my eyes, focusing on each syllable.

“...the overseer said the slave girl—Calla—went down to the catacombs with Sathrin.”

“And you trust that idiot? He’s probably napping. Either that, or something worse. You know the stories.”

Two distinct voices, both male, both draped in that casual darkness typical of House Vaerathis. My fingers twitch with impatience.

Calla casts me a questioning look, and I grasp the meaning: Do we hide or fight? I don’t mind a fight. In fact, some part of me itches for violence, for the release that comes from punishing these elves. Yet a direct confrontation might draw too much attention. We still have no guarantee we can leave these halls freely.

“We can slip past,” I mouth, gesturing to the shadows along the far side of the corridor. She nods, face set with grim determination.

We move in tandem, hugging the wall. The voices continue around the corner. I catch glimpses of movement: two elves, backlit by the glow of an unseen brazier. They seem distracted, discussing the catacombs, Tovel, something about an upcoming gathering.

Then one says, “Lord Kaelith will be furious if?—”

A sudden hush.

One of them must have heard or sensed us, even with our careful steps. I tense. Calla sucks in a sharp breath. The second elf murmurs, “What was that?”

I see their silhouettes shift. One steps forward, scanning the corridor. I press my body tight against the stone, hoping the darkness masks me, but I’m acutely aware of

Calla's ragged breathing.

Slowly, the elf advances. I weigh my options: if I use my powers again, it'll be a matter of seconds before he's subdued. But can I do it quietly enough so the other doesn't raise the alarm?

Just as I gather a sliver of power, a muffled shout echoes from behind us—the direction of the catacombs. Likely Sathrin has regained enough mobility to call for help. The elf in front of us jerks at the sound, turning halfway around. The second elf curses.

“This way, hurry!” the second elf orders, pivoting to respond to the cry.

In that tiny window, I whisper to Calla, “Go!” and push her forward. We dart across the corridor, slipping behind a tall drapery and into the next hall. The elves' footsteps rush in the opposite direction, and I'm left with the frantic pounding of my own heart.

We emerge into a narrower passage that bears the unmistakable scent of unwashed bodies—humans, more than likely. Calla's expression falters at the familiar smell. “This leads to the slave dormitory,” she says, hushed. “But if they find me here...”

Her fear is warranted. If these dark elves locate her in the dormitory, it'll be a death sentence—or worse. But she's right about the layout. I can sense the press of many living souls in that direction. She must be thinking of the friend she mentioned. Silas, I recall.

I brush an errant curl of white hair from my forehead, frustration simmering. Time is not on our side. If Sathrin has regained enough voice to call for reinforcements, half the household could be alerted. The thought of slaughtering them all is tempting, but that would likely result in our demise—or at least hers.

I nod curtly. “We need to move fast.”

She hesitates. “I—Silas is in the dormitory. He’d help us. I can’t just vanish without telling him.”

The flicker of earnest devotion in her eyes surprises me. Humans often cling to each other in adversity, but her determination is fierce. “You risk everything for one mortal?”

She lifts her chin. “He’s my friend. My only friend. Yes, I risk it.”

I exhale, recalling echoes of a time when I, too, had friends. Or at least acquaintances—fellow humans who dared dream of freedom. That was before... No. I push the memory away. “Very well. Lead the way.”

The corridor soon opens into a cramped, low-ceilinged hall. A thick wooden door stands at the end, battered from use. Calla gestures for me to wait in the shadows while she creeps forward. With one ear to the door, she listens, then eases it open.

I slip in after her. The dormitory is a long, narrow room lined with rickety bunks, maybe two dozen or more. The stench of sweat and hopelessness clings to the air. Weak light filters through high windows. It’s quieter than I’d expect, likely because most slaves are out performing morning tasks. The few who remain look up, startled to see Calla, then more startled to see me.

At once, fear ripples through them, eyes going wide with the comprehension that I am not one of them, nor an elf. The faint swirl of darkness that seems to trail in my wake must set them on edge. One older woman covers her mouth, tears in her eyes.

A young man—likely Silas—bounds up from a low cot in the corner, nearly tripping over a stool. His hair is a shaggy mess, and his frame is thinner than I expected.

“Calla?” he says, voice laced with panic. “They said you were— Are you all right?”

She nods, though tears pool in her eyes. “I’m fine for now.” Her voice quavers. She glances at me. “We’re leaving. Really leaving.”

Silas’s gaze rakes over me, alarm warring with confusion. He takes a slight step in front of Calla, protective. “Who...what is that?”

I don’t respond, letting Calla speak for me. “He’s helping us escape. I can’t explain right now, but we have to go before Tovel or Kaelith come.”

Murmurs break out among the few slaves left in the room. Their expressions are a mix of jealousy, longing, and terror. They all want to flee, but the risk is too great. They have no illusions about the cost if they’re caught.

Silas rubs his palms on his tattered trousers, glancing at the door we just came through. “I want to come, obviously, but how? The yard is crawling with guards. We can’t just stroll out.”

Calla opens her mouth, uncertain. She looks at me expectantly, as if I have the answers. And perhaps I do. My mind ticks through possibilities: illusions, brute force, infiltration. My power has been dormant for so long, I’m not sure how it will behave under such stress. But one thing is certain—we can’t wait here for the entire fortress to descend upon us.

“Is there another way out?” I ask, scanning the dormitory. “A servant’s passage, an unused corridor?”

A middle-aged man on a bunk near the back raises his head. “Th-there’s an old tunnel that leads beyond the walls,” he stammers. “Not many know about it. But it’s blocked.”

I turn to him. “Blocked how?”

He flinches under my gaze. “Collapsed years ago. Rumor says the Soz’garoth sealed it. Something about smuggling contraband.”

I grit my teeth. If powerful demon sorcerers—Soz’garoth—are involved, their wards might be tricky to bypass. But not impossible. Perhaps my own demonic energy can counter it.

Calla catches the thread of my plan. “If we can get to that tunnel, maybe we can break through? Even if it’s partially collapsed, we could slip out?”

Silas shakes his head. “That’s on the west side of the estate, near the stables. Guards patrol that area regularly.”

I consider the alternative: forging a direct route through the main gates. It would be suicide for any human alone, but with me...maybe not. Yet the risk remains sky high. We’ll be outnumbered. And if the entire household mobilizes, even my power might be pushed to its limit.

A ripple of tension moves through the gathered slaves. They’re clearly torn between the possibility of following us and the fear of harsh reprisals. I can sense their desperation. My eyes sweep over them, and though a small, cruel part of me suggests leaving them to their fate, I recall that it was a mortal who freed me from the mirror. A mortal who dared to risk her life.

With a short exhale, I speak: “Whoever wishes to come should do so now. We may not get another chance.”

At that, chaos erupts—soft cries, frantic shuffling. Some cast glances around, as though the walls themselves have ears. One or two stand, fists clenched, prepared to

take the gamble. Others sink back, shaking their heads. It's a personal choice, and I can't blame them if they choose fear over certain punishment if caught.

Silas clenches Calla's hand. "We'll come with you," he says. "Wherever you're going."

Calla nods, relief coloring her features. She looks at me. "So, which route?"

Before I can answer, the door to the corridor slams open. A breathless young elf stands there, not a guard but a messenger or scribe by the look of his simple garb. His eyes sweep over the dormitory, then land on me. The shock on his face is instantaneous.

He inhales to shout an alarm, but I'm faster. My power lashes out in a swift wave, hooking into the torch by the door and flinging it, still lit, straight toward the elf's chest. He yelps and flinches backward, giving me precious seconds. I cross the distance and grab his tunic, clamping my other hand over his mouth.

He kicks wildly, but I hold firm. A surge of cold seeps from my fingertips into his body, sapping his strength. He stiffens, eyes rolling back, and crumples to the ground, only half-conscious.

Behind me, several slaves stifle gasps or avert their eyes. I sense their growing terror of me. That's unavoidable. The sound of the scuffle, though brief, might have carried. We have no time left for quiet plans.

"Out the main gate, then," I say quickly. "Now. All who dare." I look to Calla. "I'll handle any who stand in our way."

She exchanges a glance with Silas, whose face is pale but resolute. Then she steels herself. "Okay," she breathes. "Let's go."



Three other slaves get to their feet, trembling yet determined. The rest remain behind, either too fearful or convinced this is a suicidal mission. We can't wait for them to debate further. I let Calla lead, guiding us back out into the corridor.

My senses prickle with incoming danger. Shouts echo from somewhere in the estate—Sathrin must have found help, or that messenger's presence was part of a larger sweep. We move at a jog, passing lines of closed doors. At each intersection, I extend my awareness, trying to detect elf guards ahead of us. In my partially recovered state, I can sense the sparks of life around me, but not as precisely as I'd like.

We reach a pair of grand double doors carved with the Vaerathis crest: a twisted serpent devouring its own tail, signifying their endless pursuit of power. Beyond is a wide hallway, its walls lined with tall windows that overlook an inner courtyard. A swirl of cold morning air slips through the cracks, and I notice that the courtyard is dotted with armed patrols.

"How do we cross that?" Silas asks under his breath, peering through the glass. More than a dozen guards stand posted, some at gates, others on balconies.

I take a breath, feeling my demonic essence churn. "Be ready to run. I'll create a distraction."

Calla's eyes widen, but she doesn't protest. The slaves behind her shift anxiously, hugging the walls.

I push open the doors to the hallway and step inside. The corridor is large enough to echo with each footstep on polished stone. To the left, open archways lead into the courtyard. Immediately, a pair of guards notices me. One of them barks a question in Elvish, presumably demanding my identity.

I stay silent. Adrenaline floods my veins. My mind sharpens to a single point of focus: break through, or die.

With a sharp motion of my arm, I summon a brief swirl of black energy that crackles around my forearm. The nearest guard's confidence falters—he obviously wasn't expecting a demon. The second guard draws his sword and advances.

I flick my wrist, sending a pulse of force that knocks him off his feet, sliding him across the polished floor. The first guard shouts in alarm, and at once the courtyard comes alive with chaos. The other elves scramble, some raising crossbows, others rushing into the hallway, intent on subduing me.

Behind me, Calla and the slaves huddle, uncertain. I raise my voice, “Stay close to the wall. Move when I say.”

She nods, face tense with fear.

Two crossbow-wielding elves appear in the archway. I lunge forward, my steps leaving faint wisps of darkness in my wake. One fires, the bolt whizzing past my ear. The other tries to reload in time, but I'm on him before he can so much as level his aim. I smash the crossbow from his hands and send a knee into his gut, watching him crumple.

A third guard rushes me from the left. The clang of steel resonates when his sword glances off my shoulder armor—armor that remains invisible except for the black markings that shift across my skin. With a snarl, I twist away and slam my palm against his chest, releasing a burst of chilling energy that leaves him gasping for air. He collapses.

“Now!” I yell to Calla. “Go!”

Calla and the others sprint along the wall, heading for a side corridor that likely leads to the main gates. More guards converge from ahead, forming a blockade. I exhale a hiss between my teeth. I need a bigger distraction.

I press my hand against the closest marble pillar and channel a wave of darkness. Fine cracks appear in the stone, spiderwebbing outward with each beat of my heart. With a final push, the pillar snaps and topples, crashing into the courtyard. Dust plumes upward in a suffocating cloud, and the elves scatter, shouting.

That should buy us precious seconds. I race after Calla, leaping over fallen rubble and skirting unconscious guards. She's halfway down the corridor, Silas clutching her hand. The other three slaves follow, terror fueling their speed.

We're close to an immense set of iron doors barred from the inside. That must be the main gate. We slow to a stop, confronted by three heavily armored soldiers, each with halberds leveled at us. Their faces are set in grim determination.

One speaks. "You are trespassing in House Vaerathis, demon." His voice trembles just enough for me to sense his uncertainty. "Surrender, or?—"

I don't let him finish. My impatience flares, and a whip of black smoke coils around my arm. He lunges, trying to impale me, but I sidestep with inhuman speed. The weapon clangs off the stone floor. In a single fluid motion, I grasp the halberd shaft and jerk it free, ramming the butt into his gut. He staggers, gasping.

The second soldier slashes at me from behind, but I twist away, letting his swing pass harmlessly by. Then I slam my heel into his knee, sending him down hard. The third soldier braces, going for a powerful overhead strike. I narrow my eyes, flipping the halberd in my grip to parry.

The resounding clash reverberates through my arms. He's strong, but I have centuries

of pent-up power fueling me. I force him back, step by step. Finally, he falters, and I knock the weapon aside, delivering a punch to his jaw. He collapses, unconscious.

Calla rushes up, scanning the iron doors. There's a thick bar across them, secured by reinforced locks. "It's sealed," she breathes. "We need a key."

Or we force it open. I take a moment to sense the wards. There's a slight magical barrier here, presumably to keep intruders out. But from inside, it's weaker. I place both hands on the iron and let my power flow. Sparks of dark energy dance across the surface, reacting to some embedded spell. The door vibrates, metal protesting under my unnatural assault.

With a resounding groan, the bar snaps, and the doors swing outward, letting in a rush of icy air. Beyond them lies a stone courtyard leading to a massive outer gate. And beyond that, a glimpse of overcast sky. Freedom.

"Go!" I snap, glancing over my shoulder to ensure more guards aren't upon us. Calla, Silas, and the three others dart forward. We emerge into the crisp morning, the smell of dew and ever-present gloom of Protheke's sky confronting us. My entire body tenses, half expecting a volley of arrows or a troop of soldiers waiting.

But for the moment, it's clear. The fortress's outer gate is open, probably to allow merchant wagons or messengers. I sense a few guards stationed near the walls, but they haven't yet realized the scale of the chaos. Not fully.

We dash across the courtyard, footsteps echoing on cobblestones. A startled watchman at the gate shouts something, but we don't slow. He fumbles for a horn at his belt. I grimace, summoning one final burst of power. A coil of dark magic snaps through the air and knocks the horn from his hand. He yelps and backs away, not daring to engage me directly.

We slip through the gate, hearts pounding, out onto the winding road that leads away from House Vaerathis. The estate's looming walls stretch behind us like the spines of a great beast. Even from here, I can hear shouts, the clang of alarms. They'll send pursuers. But we've bought ourselves a head start.

Calla gasps, doubling over to catch her breath, tears of relief or shock trailing down her cheeks. Silas steadies her, wide-eyed. The other three slaves circle a few paces away, uncertain what to do next.

I look back at the fortress. A heavy sensation weighs in my gut. This was too easy—or perhaps just the beginning.

When I face Calla again, I see her lips parted, about to thank me, or maybe question me. But I speak first. "We're not safe yet. There will be riders. They'll chase us."

She nods, voice shaky. "Then we run."

I realize she expects me to lead. She knows nothing about traveling beyond these walls, nothing about the horrors lurking in Protheka. But she has no choice now—she's cast her lot with a demon.

"We need shelter," I say, scanning the horizon. Grey skies bruise the distance, promising a storm. A forest lies to the south, its edges faintly visible. I sense no immediate magic there. "This way."

Together, we set off, ignoring the burning in our lungs and the fatigue in our limbs. The road winds ahead, and behind us, House Vaerathis recedes—a place of cruelty, old secrets, and a hatred that's not quite done with me.

As we hurry onward, my mind churns with possibilities. I've reclaimed my freedom, yes, but I also carry the burden of the curse that tethered me to these elves in the first

place. The question remains: how much time do we have before that ancient bond snaps tight once more? And what will I do when confronted with the one who cursed me?

For now, I ignore the ache in my chest. The future holds answers, but the present requires focus. Each step forward is a step away from that cursed mirror and the catacombs of House Vaerathis. Each heartbeat is a reminder that, despite centuries of near oblivion, I'm alive—and so is she.

Whatever fate awaits us, I can almost taste the tension in the wind: conflict, danger, and the relentless pull of vengeance. If I'm to walk the mortal realm again, I'll do it on my own terms. And if the Vaerathis family dares to drag me back?

I let out a cold smile, lethal, curve across my lips.

They will regret ever binding me in the first place.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

I run until my lungs burn and the edges of my vision flicker with stars. The cold wind whips against my cheeks, tangling my sweat-damp hair, and every labored breath feels like a small victory—at least I’m still breathing. Around me, the others tear across the muddy ground, faces twisted with urgency and fear. We’ve broken free of House Vaerathis. I can barely believe we made it out.

Daeva leads our ragged group. His form glides more than runs, as though the earth simply bends beneath his steps. There’s a lethal grace in him, a quietly contained fury. The black tattoos—or markings, or whatever they are—that coil across his pale skin pulse with faint luminescence under the steel-gray sky. I try not to stare.

At my side, Silas pants with exertion, his grip on my arm tighter than it needs to be, but I don’t pull away. His fingers tremble. “Calla,” he rasps between gulps of air, “we can’t keep...this pace. Not forever.”

I can’t argue. My legs are shaking, threatening to buckle if I push them any further. The other three slaves—Jenna, Ryn, and Cole—huddle behind us, their eyes glazed with exhaustion. They’re gaunt from the years of servitude, and this mad dash has likely stretched them to the brink.

Daeva slows, scanning the horizon. For the first time, I notice the rolling hills to our left and the dense forest rising in the distance to our right—dark pines and craggy spruce, their tops swaying in the stiff wind. There’s a faint path cutting through the tall grass, but it’s less a road and more a game trail.

We’ve already put half a mile between ourselves and the looming walls of House Vaerathis, which stand like some twisted sentinel on the hill behind us. Shouts carry

over the wind—distant, but not nearly distant enough. It won't be long before they send riders. My stomach clenches at the thought of armed elves closing in.

Daeva finally halts at a small outcrop of rock. He turns, eyes raking over us. I collapse onto my knees, fighting the urge to retch from exertion. Jenna groans, dropping beside me to clutch her side. Ryn and Cole drag themselves a few paces away, breathing like wounded animals.

Silas doubles over, hands braced on his thighs, chest heaving. "We can't... outrun them... if they chase us with beasts and horses," he gasps, voice raw.

I raise my head. "We need to hide," I say, in little more than a whisper. There's no energy left to speak louder.

Daeva's expression remains composed, but his silver-blue eyes flash with concern—or annoyance. Maybe both. "Then we press on into the forest," he says quietly. "It's our best chance."

Jenna flinches, looking at the dark line of trees warily. "That forest is rumored to be cursed," she mutters. "Even the dark elves avoid it."

Silas emits a shaky laugh, as if the notion of a curse is almost comforting after what we've endured. "They'll avoid it less than they'll avoid capturing us."

A flicker of determination crosses my mind. "Better the forest than going back," I say. My voice sounds steadier than I feel.

Without further debate, Daeva sets off across the tall grass. We follow in a huddled knot, each step slow and agonizing now. The ground slopes downward, slick with recent rain, threatening to send us tumbling. The sharp wind carries a tang of wet pine, and the sky overhead is a bleak, pale gray.



Behind us, a horn blares—one long, piercing note that makes my heart clench. It echoes off the hills and sweeps across the open land. I can't see who sounds it, but I know it's meant for pursuit.

Jenna whimpers, hugging her arms around herself. Cole and Ryn exchange fearful glances. Silas's eyes widen, and he clutches my wrist. "They've set out."

I nod, swallowing hard. Fear crackles in the back of my throat. "We have to keep going. We're almost at the treeline."

My calves scream with every step, but I force my body forward. We crest a slight ridge, and below us lies the outskirts of the forest—a tangled spread of gnarled trunks and bristling needles. Dark patches of wet earth pool between the trees, and a low mist snakes around the base of the trunks.

Daeva veers toward a spot where the undergrowth is thickest. I catch the faintest whiff of something metallic in the air—magic, perhaps? The memory of how he subdued the guards back in the fortress is still fresh in my mind: how his eyes glowed, how he channeled that chilling darkness.

I don't have time to dwell on it. We plunge into the treeline, branches scraping my arms, the damp mulch squelching underfoot. For several seconds, we trudge in silence, weaving around ancient trunks. Then Daeva halts abruptly, holding up a hand for us to stop.

We freeze, breathing raggedly. My pulse thrums in my ears. He glances over his shoulder, gaze piercing. "They'll fan out across the hills," he murmurs. "But if they have trackers or beasts of their own, they may venture inside."

"How far do we go?" Cole asks, trying to keep his voice from quivering. He's older than Silas but smaller, with pinched features etched by years of slave labor.

Daeva turns back to the forest ahead, scanning the gloom. “Far enough that they can’t see us from the perimeter. Then we find shelter.”

None of us argue. We move deeper into the forest, pushing past brambles and sliding down small embankments where moss and muddy water gather. Pine needles cling to my hair, and my clothes soak through at the knees. The chill of the environment seeps into my bones, making me shiver uncontrollably.

At last, we stumble upon a shallow ravine with a collapsed log bridging it. Daeva nods, leading us down into the gully. The sides are steep, but the brush is thick, forming a sort of natural hiding place.

“Rest here,” he says softly.

Gratefully, I sink to the ground against a mossy rock. My heart is pounding so hard I can hardly catch my breath. Silas drops beside me, placing a trembling hand on my shoulder. Neither of us speaks, but the relief in his eyes mirrors mine: we’re alive... for now.

Cole, Jenna, and Ryn gather around, each too exhausted to think about anything but the next breath. A hush settles, broken only by our panting and the distant caw of crows overhead.

He stands guard a few paces away, partially hidden by pine boughs. I watch him, trying to make sense of this strange creature who looks so much like a man—an otherworldly man, but a man nonetheless—and yet wields powers that defy reason. We share an enemy, he said. House Vaerathis. But what else does he share with us, if anything?

A rustle overhead snaps my attention back to the present. A low branch shakes, sending droplets of rainwater plinking onto the leaves below. Instantly, my pulse

spikes; I imagine an elven archer perched there, ready to skewer us. But the figure that appears is only a crow, feathers shiny black, tilting its head at us with mild curiosity. My exhale trembles with relief.

Silas forces a tiny smile at the sight. “It’s just a bird.”

“It’s still better company than an elf,” Jenna murmurs. She tries to laugh, but it comes out as a choked cough.

I lean forward, letting my hair fall around my face, inhaling the damp, earthy scent of the forest. My muscles are in knots, and every bruise from House Vaerathis throbs like a fresh wound. But fear is the worst pain of all. Because the truth is, we’re not safe. We won’t be safe for a long time—maybe ever.

I sense movement at my side. Daeva crouches beside me, his presence unsettlingly quiet. Those silver-blue eyes flick over my features. “You need rest,” he says, the words softer than expected.

“And you?” I ask, surprising myself. “You don’t seem tired.”

He offers a half-smile, almost rueful. “I’ve gone centuries without rest. A few more days won’t kill me.”

The statement twists something in my stomach. Centuries. He didn’t say it in jest. A shiver crawls over me that isn’t because of the cold. Who is he truly? He once said House Vaerathis cursed him, or is it something else? Is he immortal? A demon? But demons in Protheke are rumored to look monstrous—horned giants, leathery wings. Yet Daeva is... different.

I swallow my questions, focusing on the immediate threat. “They’ll come looking,” I whisper. “We heard the horn.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “We can’t stay here too long.”

My gaze roams to Silas, who’s huddled with Jenna, Ryn, and Cole. They’re all so worn, skin drawn tight over cheeks, eyes ringed by shadows. Even in desperation, I can’t imagine pushing them onward immediately. “We just need a little time to breathe. Then we’ll figure out how to keep going.”

“Agreed.” Daeva straightens, scanning the ravine’s rim. His stance is poised, muscles coiled like a predator waiting to pounce.

I lower my head onto my folded arms, letting a wave of fatigue roll through me. My eyelids flutter. Maybe if I rest for just a few minutes, I can find the strength to keep moving.

I must drift off because the next thing I remember is Jenna shaking my shoulder, eyes wide with alarm. “Calla,” she whispers urgently, “someone’s coming.”

The forest sounds sharper now: wind creaking through branches, the rustle of pine needles. My heart jolts from slumber to hammering panic. Silas is already on his feet, eyes scanning the ridge above. Cole and Ryn crouch nearby, faces pale.

Daeva stands at the base of the ravine, half hidden by a fallen tree trunk. He gestures sharply for silence. My pulse thrums in my throat as I scramble up onto my knees.

Then I hear it, hoofbeats, faint but unmistakable, clattering over rocky ground. They’re closing in from the direction we came, presumably fanning out along the forest’s edge. My stomach twists. The Vaerathis riders are here.

Daeva signals for us to stay low. I clutch Silas’s arm and press my back against the damp earth of the ravine wall. A few battered ferns partially obscure my silhouette. My breaths come in shallow bursts, each one carrying a silent prayer that we remain

unseen.

Up on the ridge, figures flicker between the trees—dark elves in black-and-red riding gear, crossbows slung over their backs. My heart thunders. There are at least three of them, maybe more. One holds a chain leash, at the end of which a hulking hound-like creature strains, its snout sweeping the ground. My blood goes cold at the sight.

Jenna stifles a gasp. I clamp my hand over her mouth, trying to keep her quiet. We exchange terrified glances: the dog is some breed I don't recognize—sleek, obsidian fur with glowing red eyes. A demon hound? Or something close to it.

The lead rider reins in, surveying the forest. His voice resonates above us. "They can't have gone far. The tracks lead into the trees here."

Another rider responds, "Then we spread out. The Overseer wants them alive, or at least able to speak. One of them has secrets Tovel needs to know." A small pause. "And that demon... She wants him captured or killed."

Hearing that word—demon—applied to Daeva cements the truth, if there'd been any doubt. Daeva stiffens, eyes narrowed. The dog on the chain barks, an eerie, hollow sound that makes my stomach lurch. It's smelling us.

I see Daeva clench his jaw. He steps quietly around the log, looking at me with an intensity that says be ready. I realize, with dawning horror, that we might not avoid a confrontation.

The hound's nose twitches, then it lunges toward the ravine, dragging its handler forward. The elf curses, fighting to keep hold of the chain. "Something's down there!"

My heart seizes. We have no cover if they come down. The only way out is the way

we came, or up the other side, but that would expose us to the archers.

Daeva lifts a hand, dark energy coiling around his fingers. My mind flashes back to the catacombs, how he subdued that guard with terrifying ease. But can he handle multiple armed elves and a demon hound at once?

We're about to find out.

The lead rider barks a command, urging the group to dismount. Within seconds, three elves and the hound creep toward the ravine's lip, crossbows ready. The hound whines, sniffing the air frantically.

Jenna trembles so badly I fear she'll scream. Cole looks ready to bolt. Ryn clutches a broken tree branch, as if it could do any good against a crossbow.

I glance at Silas, and his eyes shine with determination. "We fight or we die," he mouths, and I nod. My trembling hand gropes at the forest floor for a rock or anything that can serve as a weapon. My fingers close on a fist-sized stone, and I grip it so hard my knuckles ache.

A final shuffle of boots on dirt—then an elf peeks his head over the ridge, crossbow at the ready. His eyes land on me, widening. "Down there!"

He fires immediately, and I shriek, throwing myself sideways. The bolt whistles past my ear, splintering against rock. Chaos erupts as the hound leaps down the slope, snapping its jaws, red eyes fixed on us. Silas hurls himself in front of me, arms raised, but the creature is enormous.

A blur of white hair and black markings slams into the hound: Daeva. He moves faster than I can track, driving a wave of darkness into the beast. The hound howls, momentarily stunned, but not dead. Its eyes flare with fury as it snaps at his arm.

Another crossbow bolt whizzes into the ravine, striking the log near Daeva's shoulder. Splinters burst into the air. He hisses and unleashes a surge of power that crackles like black lightning along the forest floor. The hound's legs buckle, foam spraying from its maw as it thrashes.

Then the elves scramble down, swords drawn. My chest tightens as I realize how outnumbered we are. Ryn lunges at one elf with a desperate roar, brandishing his branch. The elf sidesteps easily, delivering a ruthless kick to Ryn's ribs. He topples with a grunt of pain.

Silas picks up a fallen crossbow bolt and charges another elf, brandishing it like a dagger. It's a wild move, lacking technique, but the elf is momentarily shocked. Silas manages to scratch the elf's cheek, drawing blood before he's knocked aside.

I heft my stone. Adrenaline surges, clearing my head. I dart forward, swinging at the sword-wielding elf before he can strike Ryn again. The stone slams into the side of his helm with a sickening crunch. He staggers, cursing, and whirls on me, blade raised.

Time slows. I see the sword arcing downward—no chance to dodge. I squeeze my eyes shut, expecting agony. But a flash of black intercepts him—Daeva's arm collides with the elf's sword, bare-handed, and somehow he deflects it. Sparks dance where metal meets demonic power.

He shoves the elf away with a scowl. The man skids across the muddy ground, boots digging a furrow. The forest echoes with the clamor of steel and panicked yells. The hound tries to stand again, shaking off the dark lightning, its eyes rolling with murderous intent.

Jenna and Cole, both unarmed, back away, attempting to evade the chaos, but one elf notices them. He levels a crossbow at Jenna, eyes narrowed. There's no time for me

to warn her. The bowstring twangs.

She drops with a wail, clutching her shoulder. Blood stains her ragged tunic. Cole kneels, shouting her name. Dread hammers in my chest—I have to help, but I’m practically defenseless.

Daeva sees this, and something cold and merciless flares in his gaze. He raises a hand toward the crossbowman. A surge of black energy crackles from his palm, hitting the elf dead-on. The man screams, voice cutting through the air as the darkness envelops him. I can’t see exactly what happens—there’s a swirl of inky mist, and then the elf collapses, frosted with ice crystals that rapidly melt to water. He does not rise again.

In that moment, the hound lunges at Daeva from behind, jaws aimed at the back of his neck. My breath catches. But Daeva pivots at the last second, driving a knee into the hound’s flank and gripping its fur with inhuman strength. He channels darkness into the beast’s body, and it spasms violently before going limp, eyes rolling back.

Breathing hard, Daeva drops the creature. The second elf tries to rally, but a combination of Silas’s frantic assault and a savage blow from Ryn’s branch knocks him to the ground. I scramble over to Jenna, who’s whimpering in pain, and press a hand against her bleeding shoulder.

“Stay still,” I mutter. My heart is racing, but at least she’s alive. Cole tears a strip of cloth from her tunic to form a makeshift bandage.

Moments later, silence settles in the ravine—broken only by Jenna’s choked sobs and the wet cough from the elf Ryn struck. We stand, battered and breathless, over the carnage: two elves presumably dead, one groaning in the mud, the hound lying motionless.

My limbs shake uncontrollably. I’ve never seen a demon hound, never seen a creature



so fearsome taken down like that. And I've certainly never seen so many dead elves—by our hands, or more accurately, by Daeva's.

Daeva's shoulders rise and fall with each breath. A faint tremor passes through him, as though the exertion has strained even his formidable powers. He steps away from the hound's corpse, glancing at Jenna. "Can she walk?"

Cole nods vehemently, though worry lines his forehead. "We'll manage."

Daeva's gaze flicks to the slope. "We need to leave. Reinforcements will come."

I swallow. My mind whirls, trying to process the savage violence I just witnessed. "Where do we go?"

Without hesitation, Daeva points deeper into the forest. "Farther in. We can't return to open ground now, or we'll be caught in the next wave of riders."

Silas helps me lift Jenna. She cries out as we jostle her wounded shoulder, and a fresh wave of guilt washes over me. She made a desperate gamble to escape, and this is her reward—an arrow in the flesh.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

We limp up the slope on the opposite side of the ravine, avoiding the twitching elf who remains alive. Daeva glances at him, and for a moment I wonder if he'll deliver a final blow. But the demon simply turns away, letting the survivor wallow in defeat.

The trees close around us once more, dense and disorienting. My legs threaten to buckle with each step, but fear compels me onward. The distant pounding of more hooves resonates somewhere behind us, and though the forest muffles the sound, it sends my heart racing anew. We're a band of half-starved, injured slaves—how much more can we endure?

Eventually, we reach a stretch of forest where the undergrowth grows taller, the pine trunks thicker. Daeva guides us beneath a canopy of ancient branches that block out much of the weak daylight. The ground here is carpeted with centuries of fallen needles, giving it a spongy texture that silences our footfalls.

We pause by a stony outcropping draped with emerald moss, ringed by stunted bushes. Here, Daeva crouches to examine Jenna's wound more carefully. I kneel beside him, ignoring the chill that seeps into my bones.

"She needs proper care," Daeva remarks, sliding a hand near the injury without touching it. "The bolt likely tore muscle. She'll be feverish if it's not cleaned."

I nod, glancing at Jenna's pale face. She's biting back tears, trying to remain brave. "We can't exactly walk into a dark elf healer's clinic," I say softly.

He doesn't respond to my bitterness, only sets his jaw. "I can do something to stave off infection. But it will hurt."

Jenna looks at him. Her pupils shrink with fear, but she presses her lips into a tight line and nods. “Do it.”

Daeva closes his eyes for a moment, black tattoos shivering across his collarbones. Then he presses two fingertips to the bloody hole in her tunic. A hiss of steam and an acrid smell of burned flesh hits my nose, making me gag. Jenna screams, arching her back. Silas and Ryn struggle to hold her down.

After a few seconds, Daeva pulls away. The wound still looks raw, but the immediate bleeding has clotted, and there’s an odd sheen of frost or crystallized energy around the edges, sealing it. Jenna gasps, tears streaking her cheeks.

“What did you do?” Cole demands, half in awe, half in horror.

Daeva exhales. “Sealed the wound with cold. It’s not a cure, but it should keep her alive until we find real medicine.”

Jenna’s eyes flutter. She sucks in shallow breaths. “Th-thank you...”

He inclines his head, silent.

All around, tension coils. The others exchange wary looks, as though uncertain whether to be grateful for his power or terrified of it. Perhaps both.

I shift closer, keeping my voice low. “We need to keep moving, but she can’t walk far in this state.”

He studies me for a moment before answering. “I’ll carry her if necessary.”

“Can you?” Silas asks, not quite hiding the suspicion in his tone.

Daeva's gaze cuts to Silas, and I tense. But after a heartbeat, he simply nods. "I can."

"Let's not linger," I say softly. I glance at the canopy overhead. The forest is already dim, but I sense the sun's progression overhead, dipping toward afternoon. If the elves search these woods systematically, it's only a matter of time before we're discovered again.

Daeva scoops Jenna into his arms with surprising gentleness. Her lips press together, pain etched in her features, but she allows it. The rest of us stand, each grimacing at our own aches and bruises.

We set off once more. The forest's silence feels oppressive now. Every twig snap makes me jump, every rustle in the bushes sends my heartbeat skyrocketing. The adrenaline has left me shaky and lightheaded. Silas walks close, occasionally touching my elbow to reassure me—or maybe himself.

Ryn trudges behind, wincing with each breath from where that elf kicked him. Cole stays near Daeva, glancing at Jenna's closed eyes. She's half-conscious, but alive.

Time stretches. We pass trickling streams half choked with leaves. We maneuver around a fallen tree trunk that forms a precarious bridge over a stagnant pond. My stomach growls, reminding me we've had nothing but scraps in days.

At last, as dusk approaches, we come across a small clearing where a massive pine has fallen against two others, forming a sort of triangular shelter. Moss drapes the trunk, and the space underneath is dry.

"This should do for tonight," Daeva says. He crouches and sets Jenna down carefully, bracing her head against a rise of roots.

Ryn and Cole begin gathering branches to form a makeshift barrier. Silas finds some

relatively dry moss that might serve as bedding or tinder. I'm too tired to do anything but sink onto the spongy ground, arms wrapped around my knees.

I watch Daeva as he moves along the perimeter of the clearing, running his fingertips across the bark of various trees. He pauses, then presses a palm to the ground, eyes half-lidded in concentration.

"Are you...doing something magical?" I ask, voice rasping.

He glances at me. "I'm setting a ward, of sorts. It may mask our presence from casual scouts."

Relief flutters in my chest. "Thank you," I say, because I don't know what else to say.

He stands, brushing pine needles from his hands. "Don't thank me yet. It's a weak ward, given my state. But it's better than nothing."

I swallow. "Your state?"

He gives me a long, inscrutable look. "I'm not at my full strength. I was in the mirror for a long time."

I want to press him for details, but the lines of exhaustion etched in his face stop me. A heavy sadness weighs in his eyes. It reminds me of someone who's been carrying grief for far too long.

Instead, I say quietly, "You should rest too. Even if it's just for a little while."

He doesn't respond immediately. Then he nods once and walks back toward Jenna, crouching to check her wound. I exhale shakily, leaning my head back against the pine trunk. My gaze drifts over the clearing. Silas and Cole finish stacking branches

to block a clear line of sight from outside. The temperature is dropping, and clouds gather above, hinting at a storm.

Ryn returns from the boundary of the clearing, carrying a handful of mushrooms and a few scrawny roots. He eyes them warily. “Not sure if these are edible, but it’s all I could find.”

A spark of memory surfaces: stories my mother once told me about safe and poisonous forest foods. But it’s been so long, and the details are fuzzy. “I can’t say,” I admit. “We should test them carefully.”

Desperation claws at us. We’re starving, wounded, hunted, and our only ally is a being of unimaginable power who was imprisoned in a mirror. Yet there’s a certain dark relief in simply not being behind the walls of House Vaerathis. The open sky overhead—though threatening rain—feels like a blessing compared to those stone corridors.

The last rays of daylight fade, leaving us in a twilight gloom. No one dares start a fire in case it draws attention. We huddle in the partial shelter of the fallen pine. Silas tries to lighten the mood by mentioning how “at least we don’t have to scrub floors in the morning,” but it falls flat. Jenna moans in pain, clutching her shoulder. The rest of us exchange uneasy glances.

At length, Daeva rises. “I’ll do a quick sweep around. Stay here. Don’t wander.”

Without waiting for a reply, he slips into the darkness. His form melds with the shadows so completely that I blink, wondering if I imagined him. A hush falls among us.

When he’s gone, I sense the group breathe differently—some mix of relief and nervousness. Ryn edges closer, lowering his voice. “That demon... can we trust

him?”

Cole bows his head. “We have no choice,” he mutters.

Silas speaks up, “He got us out, didn’t he? If it wasn’t for him, we’d be locked in chains or dead.”

Ryn’s jaw clenches. “Or maybe we’ll end up worse off with him. Demons aren’t exactly known for mercy.”

They all turn to me, as though I have answers. After all, I was the one who apparently summoned him from the catacombs. My stomach twists. “He saved us when he could’ve left us behind. He’s had plenty of chances to kill us if that’s what he wanted.”

Cole rubs his arms, as if warding off a chill. “Could be part of some bigger plan,” he says darkly.

I swallow. “Maybe. But for now, we’re safer with him than without.”

That’s all I can offer. A tense quiet hangs in the air. Eventually, exhaustion wins out, and we try to rest. I press myself against Silas for warmth, my eyes drifting shut despite the swirling fear in my mind.

Sometime later, I wake to the sound of distant thunder. My neck is stiff, and my side aches from lying on the uneven ground. Rain patters through the pine canopy, dripping onto my threadbare clothes. Jenna dozes fitfully, cheeks pale and clammy. Ryn snores softly, while Cole sits upright, blinking in the gloom.

A flicker of white catches my eye at the clearing’s edge: Daeva has returned. He stands at the perimeter, hair damp from the drizzle, arms folded. I shuffle toward him,

feeling the soggy pine needles squish under my knees.

He senses my approach and tilts his head, acknowledging me without speaking. Lightning flashes far off, illuminating the black clouds overhead. In that brief glow, I see sorrow etched into his features.

“Did you find anything?” I ask quietly.

He exhales, gaze distant. “Only more signs that the elves are combing the forest. Their scouts are systematic, though they haven’t reached this sector yet.”

My stomach twists. “How long until they do?”

“A day, maybe two, if they persist.”

Nodding, I turn to look at the makeshift shelter where my friends huddle. “We can’t stay here. But Jenna can barely move. Where do we go?”

He doesn’t answer right away, as if weighing options. “There’s a possibility,” he finally says, voice low. “We could head south, into the deeper wilds. The land is harsh, but the elves rarely patrol so far from their holdings.”

I bite my lip. “Is it safe?”

“Safe is relative,” he replies, almost gently. “But it gives us a chance.”

The rain picks up, and I feel droplets winding down my collar. My clothes cling to my skin, gooseflesh covering my arms. “You said you were cursed... by House Vaerathis. What are you exactly?” My voice trembles at my own boldness. “Will they track you specifically?”



A tension coils in his jaw, and I think he won't answer. Then he speaks, measured. "Yes. They have methods, bonds of blood and magic that were forged long ago. But time has weakened them. And I believe my emergence from the mirror has broken some of those chains."

"So if the bonds are weakened... does that mean they'll do anything to reforge them?"

He looks away, rain tracing rivulets down his pale cheeks. "Likely."

An uneasy dread settles in me. "Then we have more reason to keep going."

A faint nod. He's about to turn away when I blurt, "You mentioned centuries. How... old are you?"

He closes his eyes. The thunder rumbles again. "Old enough that I barely remember what it felt like to be human."

My breath catches. There it is, the truth I sensed all along—he wasn't always a demon. "House Vaerathis did this to you?"

Something like anguish flickers across his features. "Yes."

I want to ask more, to demand the whole story, but the pain in his voice stops me. Instead, I step closer, peering up into his face. The rain-soaked gloom doesn't hide the mixture of rage and sorrow in his eyes. "I'm sorry," I whisper, though the words feel woefully inadequate.

His lips quirk in a sad smile. "You've done nothing to cause it."

"No, but—I set you free. And now you're stuck saving me and my friends. It wasn't

your fight.”

He lifts a hand, as if wanting to brush a strand of wet hair from my face, but stops himself. “You didn’t force me. I made a choice.”

My chest tightens, and I nod. Silence stretches between us, broken only by the steady drum of rain on leaves. Then a flicker of movement draws our attention back toward the shelter—Jenna moans. Cole’s trying to prop her up, but she’s shivering violently, her face pale as death.

I rush over, kneeling at her side. Ryn shifts to let me see. Her skin is hot to the touch, beads of sweat dotting her brow despite the cold. “We have to move her,” I say, voice thick with worry. “She’s getting worse.”

Daeva stands above us, brow furrowed. “We’ll leave at first light.”

“She might not last until then,” Cole mutters, tears brimming in his eyes. “She needs real healing.”

I recall that Ter, one of the dark elf sister cities, is said to have more lenient policies toward humans—somewhere in Kaynvu, presumably reachable if we travel far enough. But can we risk going to any dark elf city at all? That could be walking right into chains again.

Daeva kneels, placing his hand gently on Jenna’s forehead. She stirs, whimpering. “We travel south,” he says firmly. “Now, if you wish. I can carry her. The rest of you must manage on your own.”

Silas exchanges a glance with me, then sets his jaw. “We have no other choice. If we stay here, we’ll be cornered by the morning.”

A nervous energy crackles through the group as we begin to gather ourselves. It's dark, we're soaked, and Jenna's wound threatens to fester, but the alternative is certain doom.

Daeva lifts Jenna once more, her head lolling weakly against his chest. Ryn and Cole shuffle beside him, arms braced around each other for support. Silas places a hand on my arm. His grip is steady, if trembling with fatigue.

We set off, deeper into the forest. Rain slides in rivulets over branches, droplets splattering our faces. The ground is a slick carpet of pine needles and hidden roots that threaten to trip us with every step. Now and then, I glance at Daeva. He moves with uncanny grace, even carrying an injured person, as though the storm and darkness are mere inconveniences.

Trees loom overhead, silent witnesses to our desperate flight. I can't help but feel as though each trunk, each bent branch, is a spectator in a grand, terrible game: the hunted humans and the demon guide, pitted against the merciless forces of House Vaerathis.

The storm intensifies, lightning flashing in distant forks across the sky. I wrap an arm around my torso, suppressing shivers. My thoughts spin with possibilities—perhaps we'll slip away to safety, or perhaps the elves will descend upon us at dawn. Perhaps we'll find help in some hidden pocket of Protheke. Perhaps we'll perish in these woods.

Through it all, one fact burns bright in my mind: we're out of the fortress. There's no going back now. Freed or cursed, living or dead, we've stepped into a new world, guided by a demon who once was human. And with each thunderclap, I sense we're edging closer to secrets I'm not ready to face—secrets about Daeva, about the dark elves' unholy rituals, and about what I might become if I keep clinging to his power for my salvation.

Still, I set my jaw and force one foot in front of the other, letting the rain wash away any lingering hesitation. Tomorrow might bring more terror, but tonight, we survive. We survive, and that has to be enough.

### DAEVA

I stand beneath the dripping canopy of black pines, Jenna's weight slumped against my chest, and force one ragged breath after another. The rain has turned the forest floor to a swamp of rotted needles and slick mud, and each of my footfalls sinks deeper than I'd like. But no matter the exhaustion gnawing at me, I don't relent. This mortal woman clings to life by a tenuous thread, and despite the dull ache that's started to spread through my limbs, I bear her without complaint.

Calla, Silas, Ryn, and Cole trudge close behind, their hushed voices drowned out by the wind and patter of raindrops. In the shifting shadows, I detect their furtive glances, the way they look at me as if I am both their savior and a threat. Perhaps I am. My powers are not at full strength, yet I've displayed enough to unsettle them. I catch the occasional flicker in Calla's gaze—equal parts dread and wonder. It almost makes me smile.

Almost. These emotions... it reminds me that I was once human, too.

I push aside a curtain of wet branches and step into a small clearing choked with waist-high ferns. The pungent smell of rain-soaked earth hits me. A massive pine trunk lies uprooted on one side, torn from the ground by some past storm. Beyond it, the terrain slopes downward into thicker darkness. We have walked for hours now, and the others are reaching their limits. Even Silas, whose spirit still burns bright, sways on his feet.

“We’ll pause,” I say over my shoulder, my voice low. “Just long enough to see to Jenna’s wound and to make certain no one is following us.”

I set Jenna down gently against the fallen trunk. She groans, forehead clammy, her face ashen. Calla kneels beside her at once, brow creased with worry, while Silas and the others collapse into the wet ferns.

In a single stride, I move a short distance away, scanning the perimeter. The forest drips and creaks, pockets of rain pooling in low places, forming murky puddles. I sense no immediate presence of dark elves, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there. My connection to my own powers has been tenuous since I woke in that cursed mirror, and my awareness isn’t as precise as I’d like. The bond I share—shared—with my ancient enemy remains a distant ache, a warning that I haven’t truly severed him from my life. He is out there, waiting.

My lip curls at the thought. For now, I have no intention of letting him recapture me.

Returning to the others, I find them in dismal spirits. Ryn hovers near Jenna, picking fretfully at dead pine needles, while Cole and Silas argue over which direction we should travel once dawn breaks. Rain dribbles down Calla’s temple, but she seems too focused on Jenna’s wound to notice the cold.

I crouch beside Calla, letting the dampness soak through the knees of my trousers. My eyes flick to Jenna’s shoulder. The dark patch of blood stands out against the improvised frost scar I created earlier—a temporary closure that may not hold through infection and fever.

“Her breathing is shallow,” Calla says, voice tight with worry. “She’s burning up.”

“We need real healing,” Cole says through chattering teeth. “Isn’t there some...some herb or something you can do?” He looks at me with a curious mixture of hope and

distrust.

I close my eyes, searching my memory for scraps of mortal life. Once, I knew something about healing herbs—feverfew, meadowsweet, blackroot. But those memories are centuries old, from a time when I was still human. Now they're dim shadows in the recesses of my mind.

"There may be a plant called silverleaf," I say after a moment, voice low. "If it grows here, its leaves can be brewed to fight infection. I'm...not certain I'd recognize it immediately."

Calla's gaze locks on me. Something in her eyes suggests she hears the hesitance in my tone. I look away, uneasy. I hate the weakness that creeps in when I remember the past. But I allow the vulnerability—briefly—because the alternative is letting Jenna die.

Silas, overhearing, breaks in. "I've seen silverleaf in the undergroves near Kantor. Maybe it grows this far south, too. Should I go look?"

The hair on my nape prickles. "Not alone," I warn. "This forest is uncharted territory for you, and the elves may have set trackers on our trail. I'll go."

Silas looks torn between caution and the desire to help. He nods reluctantly. "All right. But be careful."

I rise, ignoring the throbbing heaviness in my own limbs. The cold presses in, and I sense the edges of a deeper fatigue that's plagued me since the catacombs. I force it aside. There is no alternative. Jenna will die soon if we do nothing.

"I'll be back quickly," I say. "Stay quiet. If you sense anyone approaching, leave."

Calla's hand reaches out, brushing my forearm. The contact is fleeting but surprising—a gentle anchor in the darkness. I meet her gaze. A silent question swirls in her eyes: Are you all right? She doesn't voice it. I give her a brief nod, then slip away into the damp gloom.

The forest presses close as I move, each step carefully placed so I don't slip on slick pine needles. My senses scour the surrounding night for any sign of movement. The wind shifts, carrying a faint hint of something decaying—whether it's old vegetation or an animal carcass, I can't tell. Rain continues its relentless assault, blurring the world into shifting silhouettes.

I skirt around a thick cluster of ferns, scanning the forest floor by the thin moonlight that occasionally filters through a break in the storm clouds. I recall silverleaf thrives in damp, shadowy glens. My memory is hazy; I can't be sure I'll recognize it, but the name alone conjures an image: slender leaves with a pale underside that shimmers faintly under the moon.

A scrape of boots on stone. Instantly, I freeze, adrenaline spiking. Several paces to my left, behind a curtain of hanging moss, I catch the faint outline of a figure. Light flickers, possibly a lantern or glowstone. Elves.

I inhale quietly, pressing against the moss-draped trunk of a fallen cedar. Heartbeats pass, slow and steady. There must be two, maybe three elves. Their voices carry in the hush:

“—they came through here, I'm certain,” one says in clipped Elvish.

Another answers, “We'll comb the area to the south. If the hound found them once, it can do so again—assuming it's not dead. Keep your eyes peeled.”

I grit my teeth. The memory of that demon hound's rancid breath still lingers in my



mind. I dealt it a harsh blow; whether it lives or not, I can't say, but it hasn't reappeared yet. If these elves have another one...

Before I can finish the thought, the nearest elf steps closer, torchlight washing over the rough bark. I see a glint of steel and the polished red insignia on his cloak. They're from Vaerathis, all right.

I consider ambushing them. My powers could smother them before they call for help—maybe. But the risk is steep. If even one escapes, it'll bring a flood of reinforcements down on us. And if I'm forced to unleash too much magic, I might lose control in my current weakened state. The last time I truly unleashed my fury, entire corridors burned and twisted, and I can't afford that chaos with mortals so close by.

Carefully, I begin to inch backward, silent as the grave. The light shifts again, and the elves continue forward, scanning the undergrowth in the opposite direction. Once their voices fade, I slip away, heading deeper into a slope thick with rotting logs.

My chest tightens. Focus on the silverleaf.

It takes me several more minutes—ducking beneath low branches, sliding down a muddy ravine, and nearly tumbling into a slick pool of stagnant water—before I find what might be the plant in question. Beneath a tangle of brambles, small leaves glimmer faintly in the murky gloom. I kneel, brushing aside the thorns. The underside of each leaf catches the dim moonlight with a soft gleam, and a faint, fresh scent teases my nostrils.

Silverleaf. Relief floods through me. I tear off several sprigs, careful to keep the roots if possible. The pungent scent intensifies, stinging my sinuses. It's an old memory come to life: Yes, this is it.

Cautiously, I climb back up the ravine, searching for signs of the elves. My senses remain on high alert, but the night is still except for the rainfall. Eventually, I retrace my route to the clearing—no sign of pursuit. When I slip through the pines, I find Silas pacing in agitation while Cole stands watch, squinting into the dark. They both sag with relief when they see me.

“I was worried,” Silas admits, stepping aside so I can pass.

I nod curtly and hurry to Jenna’s side. She’s half-conscious, murmuring feverish words. Calla props her up, lips pressed tight. Ryn hovers, face grim.

“I found it,” I say, holding out the silverleaf. “We need to steep it. Heat would be ideal, but building a fire is risky.”

Calla swallows, pushing her damp hair off her forehead. “Let me see if we can gather enough dry tinder for a small flame. If we do it under the pine trunk, maybe it won’t be visible.”

Silas and Ryn exchange anxious looks. Cole steps forward. “I’ll help. Quietly.”

Within minutes, they scrounge some half-dry kindling from beneath logs, pine boughs, even scraps of cloth. I keep watch while Calla works with Silas to spark a tiny flame using friction and a bit of flint. The hiss of ignition is barely audible over the rain, but the small circle of firelight seems glaringly bright in this gloom.

Calla cups her hands around the flame, sheltering it from the drizzle. Once it steadies, I kneel, shredding the silverleaf into a piece of cloth we can dunk in water. Ryn finds an old tin bowl in his bag—pilfered from the fortress, no doubt—and we fill it with water from the puddles that have collected in the trunk’s hollow. The water is murky, but we have little choice.

With delicate care, Calla holds the bowl over the small flames, ignoring how the steam scalds her hands. I deposit the shredded leaves into the warming water, stirring them with a twig until the liquid turns a pale green. A sharp, herbal aroma wafts upward.

Jenna stirs again, wincing. “Where...?” she croaks.

“Easy,” Calla murmurs, blowing on the brew to cool it. “Just sip.”

I lift Jenna’s head, pressing the bowl to her lips. She sips, face scrunching at the bitter taste. Some dribbles down her chin, but she manages a few swallows. Then she falls back into semi-consciousness, exhaustion claiming her. We have no guarantee this will save her, but at least we’ve done all we can.

Silas extinguishes the fire, scattering the embers into the soaked soil. Darkness settles back around us like a cloak. The hush that follows leaves us with nothing but the drum of raindrops.

Time slips away. At some point, the rain eases to a drizzle, and a thin sliver of moonlight pierces the sky. Everyone except me is half-dozing in the aftermath of tension and fatigue. Even Calla rests her head against a root, eyes closed. I stand at the clearing, arms folded, scanning the forest. My body aches in ways it never did before captivity. The toll of centuries inside that mirror has weakened me, and I despise the feeling.

Footsteps approach behind me, so light I almost miss them. But I turn to see Calla, her expression softer than usual, the bruise on her temple stark in the moonlight.

“You should sleep,” I say quietly, though the concern in my tone surprises even me.

She shakes her head, crossing her arms over her chest. “I can’t. Every time I try, I

keep imagining the elves storming in. Or I see Jenna dying.” She takes a measured breath. “Thank you for finding the silverleaf.”

I nod. “Better than letting her bleed to death.”

Her gaze drifts to the pines overhead. “Still. You didn’t have to risk yourself wandering off. Silas volunteered...”

“I’m more capable of evading elves,” I reply, letting the words hang. A faint tension lingers between us, the awareness that we rely on each other for survival, yet neither truly knows the other’s motives.

Calla shifts on her feet, glancing sidelong at me. “Are you...” She hesitates. “Are you holding up? You fought that hound, used all those abilities, then ran off into the woods.”

Her concern is disarming, given the circumstances. I tilt my head, meeting her gaze. “I’ve survived worse.”

A ghost of a smile touches her lips, though sadness lingers in her eyes. “I’m beginning to think you might’ve survived everything.”

I say nothing, letting the words settle. The truth is, I survived too long. I can’t speak of that yet—how the centuries of captivity eroded my sense of self, how my hatred for House Vaerathis once fueled me until hatred was all I knew. And now, that singular purpose has fractured. Because of her. Because I find myself caring whether she lives or dies.

A breeze stirs her damp hair, and my eyes snag on the line of her jaw, the curve of her lips. I sense her heartbeat quicken. She draws a breath, and in the dark, we stand closer than we should, tension coiling like a living thing between us.

It'd be easy to forget the danger—just for a moment—and indulge in the warmth of her presence. But a lifetime of caution keeps me from stepping forward. Instead, I clear my throat and look away. She does the same, wrapping her arms around herself.

I shift, peering into the forest's distant shadows. "We should head south at first light, as planned. There's a chance to find more resources—maybe even a remote settlement that tolerates humans."

"Humans," she repeats with a hollow laugh. "You make it sound like you're not one."

I almost flinch. "I'm not." The words slip out like a confession. "I don't look like one. What makes you think I am? I'm a demon."

She studies me, eyes reflecting moonlight. "I don't understand how that happened... or why. But I see how you carry that pain." Her hand lifts, as if to reach for my forearm again, but she stops short. "I won't pry, if you don't want me to."

A surge of conflicting emotions hits me. I want to confide in her—tell her how Varzun Vaerathis tried to fuse his essence with mine in a corrupted ritual, how that left me stranded between mortality and the demonic. But revealing too much puts her in greater danger. The elf that cursed me is still out there, waiting to reclaim what he believes is his. For centuries, he was my nightmare. Now, possibly, I am his.

Instead, I murmur, "You deserve answers. Not now. But soon."

She exhales, nodding. "All right." The hush returns, broken only by an owl's distant call.

When she finally drifts back to the makeshift camp, lying down near Jenna, I remain watchful. My chest tightens with strange tension, an unfamiliar ache that isn't physical wounds. No attachments, I used to tell myself. Nothing but revenge. Now

that clarity is muddled by her presence, by the spark in her gaze. By the way my name—Daeva—sounds on her lips.

Dawn comes in a dreary haze, gray light dripping through the pines. Silas and Cole rustle awake, their limbs stiff and sore, while Ryn checks Jenna's fever. She's cooler than before, though still weak and delirious.

Calla passes the leftover silverleaf brew to Jenna in small sips. Jenna accepts, then slumps back, eyes half-lidded. It's not a cure, but it's hope.

We set off southward again, treading through the rain-soaked forest. The morning air hangs heavy, the hush broken only by the squelch of our footsteps and the occasional cough from Jenna. I carry her once more—her weight even lighter than before, frighteningly so.

Cole rummages through the underbrush, collecting any mushrooms or wild berries he finds. We test them carefully, mindful not to poison ourselves. The meager morsels only stave off hunger pangs. Our progress is slow, each mile a battle against soggy ground and battered bodies.

At midday—if one can call this dim wash of light “day”—the terrain changes. Tall pines give way to looming firs and jagged boulders. Moss-draped stones rise like ancient sentinels, their faces carved by centuries of wind and rain. The path becomes a narrow defile between rocky outcroppings, and I pause, scanning for ambush.

The air here is stale, heavy with the scent of damp earth. A line of scraggly shrubs grows near the cliff walls. I'm about to urge the others onward when a shrill cry echoes behind us—too close for comfort. Something in that cry speaks of malice, not a mere animal's call.

“Get behind the rocks,” I bark, voice tight.

Silas and Cole scramble to the left. Ryn tries to lead Calla around a boulder on the right, but the ground crumbles, sending a small landslide of loose gravel tumbling. Jenna moans in my arms. We press ourselves against the stone face, hearts pounding.

A thunder of hooves resonates, but not the refined canter of elven horses. This is heavier, more uneven. My instincts scream. Orcs? Another kind of monster?

A moment later, three hulking shapes clatter into view atop rangy, pale-furred beasts. They skid to a halt on the wet ground. Crude iron armor glints dully. My eyes narrow. Orc raiders. They roam these forests in roving warbands, scavenging and killing wherever they see advantage.

One orc leans forward, scanning the defile. A scar runs across his broad, greenish jaw, and his face contorts in suspicion. He hefts a wickedly spiked mace, sniffing the air.

Next to me, Calla's expression betrays alarm. She and Ryn are pinned behind a small boulder. Silas and Cole are across from us, flattening themselves against the rock. I sense them trembling. Orcs are rarely friendly to humans; slaves hold no value to them except for trade or cruelty.

Quietly, I set Jenna down behind me, leaning her against the stone. Her eyelids flutter, but she's too weak to protest. My powers stir, but exhaustion weighs heavily on me. If I fight, I must do so swiftly.

The orc with the mace barks something in a guttural tongue. The second orc dismounts, brandishing a spear. The third wields a crossbow of dwarven make—likely looted from a caravan. They're methodical, scanning for ambush. If they spot us, they'll attack, no question.

I take a careful step out, meeting the orc's gaze. His eyes narrow in surprise at the

sight of me—white-haired, black-marked. He snorts, raising his weapon. “Demon?” he growls in broken Common. “You look puny.”

My lips curl into a mirthless smile. “I’m more than enough for you.”

The orc glances around, suspicious of a trap. Behind me, I hear Silas shift, but I gesture sharply for him to stay hidden. The fewer of us they see, the less they’ll realize we have wounded.

The orc sneers, revealing jagged tusks. “What you want here?”

I sense an opportunity. Orcs don’t have the same alliances or enmities as elves, but they respect strength. “Just passing. We have no quarrel unless you make one,” I say calmly.

He snorts again. The second orc creeps closer, spear lowered. “We want toll,” he snarls. “What you pay us to pass?”

A toll for crossing their territory. Typical. The question is: do they want gold? Weapons? Or blood? We have neither coin nor a willingness to waste time.

I spread my hands, letting black flickers of power dance along my fingertips in a show of intimidation. “I have no gold. But I could give you something else.”

His grin sours, and I see greed flash in his eyes. “We no want worthless humans, if that’s what you offer,” he says, spitting at the ground. “You have weapons? Supplies?”

“We have little,” I admit. “Still, it might be enough.”

Behind me, I hear a muffled protest—Calla or Silas, perhaps. They realize we can’t



spare anything. The orc with the crossbow shifts in his saddle, scanning the rocks. I sense the tension building. One wrong word, and they'll attack.

I inch forward, letting them see the swirling markings on my arms. The orcs whisper among themselves, uncertain. Orcs are savage, but they aren't fools. They recognize something unnatural when they see it.

Before I can speak again, the orc with the crossbow lifts it, pointing the weapon straight at my chest. My magic crackles, and in a swift motion, I fling a coil of black energy at him, but the angle is awkward. The coil slams into his mount instead. The beast shrieks, toppling sideways. The orc tumbles to the ground, letting off a wild bolt that ricochets off the stone.

The first orc roars, spurring his creature forward and swinging the mace at my head. I duck, slamming my palm against the beast's flank. A jolt of dark energy ripples through it. The mount staggers, twisting sideways as the orc struggles to keep control.

Then the second orc lunges with his spear, nearly skewering me. I dodge, and the spearpoint scrapes across my upper arm, pain flaring. My blood, dark in the half-light, stains my torn sleeve. I grit my teeth, letting the adrenaline sharpen my focus.

Across the defile, Ryn emerges, brandishing a large rock in both hands. He heaves it at the spear-wielding orc's back. It's an act of desperation, but it makes enough noise to distract the orc. The orc twists around with a snarl, and that gives me a precious second. I drive my elbow into his ribs, channeling a pulse of freezing energy. Frost creeps over the plates of his armor, biting into skin. He howls, backing off.

The crossbow orc tries to stand, dazed from the fall. Silas darts out, tackling him around the knees. They crash to the mud, wrestling. The crossbow is knocked loose, but the orc is stronger. He yanks Silas by the hair, about to deliver a crushing blow.

Calla steps in with a broken branch, smashing it against the orc's temple. The orc lurches, releasing Silas. I seize the moment—launching a tendril of darkness that snakes around the orc's neck. He chokes, eyes bulging, and collapses in the mud.

The last orc, the one with the mace, rears his mount, glaring at me with open fury. “You pay in blood, demon!” He spurs the beast, charging forward. I brace, ignoring the pain in my arm. My power surges, swirling around me in a haze of black motes.

To my shock, the beast leaps the boulder behind me, heading straight for the cluster of mortals. Fear knifes through me. Jenna is there, helpless. Without hesitation, I summon a violent rush of energy. It crackles across the rocky ground, forming a barrier of sizzling black.

The orc's mount hits that wall mid-leap. A thunderous impact. The mount squeals, flipping over the barrier. The orc is flung headlong, crashing into the stone with bone-snapping force. For a moment, he twitches—then goes limp.

Heart pounding, I glance at Calla and Silas. They're splattered with mud, faces pale but alive. Ryn stands rigid, chest heaving, while Cole kneels by Jenna, shielding her. She's still conscious enough to look terrified.

I let the barrier fade, staggering slightly. My entire body trembles with fatigue and pain. The slash on my arm burns, and the energy I expelled leaves me dizzy. But we've survived. That's all that matters.

In the aftermath, the orcs lie scattered. One is definitely dead, the others unconscious or too broken to fight. Silas recovers the crossbow with shaky hands, checking to see if it's still usable. Ryn rubs the bruise on his shoulder, and Cole slumps in relief.

Calla's eyes find me in the chaos. She steps over a broken piece of armor, lips parted. “You're bleeding.”

“It’s nothing,” I say through gritted teeth, though each breath stings.

She frowns, crossing to me quickly. Her hands hover near the wound, uncertain. I nod, allowing her to examine it. She peels back the torn fabric, wincing at the gash. “We have some leftover silverleaf,” she murmurs, “but we can’t keep using it on every cut.”

I clench my jaw. “Just wrap it. We can’t linger here.”

Without argument, she tears a strip from the hem of her tunic and binds my arm with surprising gentleness, her hands quick and deft. My breath hitches at her touch, unaccountably distracting in the midst of the carnage. Silas watches with worried eyes, but says nothing.

Once she’s done, I turn to the group. “We have orc mounts now, if any can still be ridden.” My voice is sharp from pain, but the practicality stands. “We need to leave before the rest of their warband arrives.”

Cole steps gingerly around the fallen beasts. One is clearly dead, the other flanks are twitching. Only the crossbow orc’s mount remains, battered but alive. It bares yellowed teeth when Cole approaches, snorting in alarm.

“Not sure it’ll let us ride,” Cole says. “These beasts aren’t known to be gentle.”

I eye the creature, exhaling. In my better days, I might have coerced it with demonic will, but I’m drained. “Then we’ll carry on as we are.”

We scavenge anything useful from the orcs—some dried meat, a half-full canteen of questionable water, a few strips of battered cloth that might serve as bandages. It’s a grim but necessary task. While Silas and Cole rummage, Ryn lifts Jenna again, though he staggers under her weight.

“No,” I say, stepping in. “I’ll carry her.”

He eyes my bandaged arm. “You’re already injured.”

“I’m stronger than you. Don’t argue.”

He relents, letting me cradle Jenna carefully. She breathes in shallow gasps. Calla and Silas take point, crossbow in hand, while Cole and Ryn cover our flank. I keep myself ready for another surge of aggression—from elves, orcs, or anything else in this cursed forest.

As we start forward, Calla falls into step beside me, her cheeks flushed from exertion or lingering adrenaline. “Thank you,” she whispers, her voice nearly lost in the wind.

“For what?” I murmur, though my heart stirs.

“For... protecting us again. You could’ve left when you saw those orcs, but you stayed.”

I don’t reply at first, focusing on the path. Then I glance down, letting our gazes meet. “I stay because I choose to.” The honest confession feels heavier than any blow.

She draws a breath, a flicker of warmth crossing her features. Despite the freezing air and the tang of blood around us, that moment resonates like an ember in the dark. Maybe we’re both lost souls, haunted by House Vaerathis in different ways. Yet here we are, forging a path of mud and desperation in a hostile land.

I shift Jenna’s weight in my arms and push onward, ignoring the sting in my own wound. The sky rumbles again—another storm brewing, or perhaps the remnants of the last. I sense no respite in this place. Our only certainty is that we have to keep

moving, keep surviving. House Vaerathis hunts us. Orc warbands prowl these forests. And I harbor secrets that might tear us apart if revealed too soon.

But for now, I walk beside Calla, each step a defiance of the fate that once bound me. The forest swallows us in its misty hush, and I vow, in the silent depths of my mind, that I won't stop until we find sanctuary—or until the last of my cursed power burns out.

### CALLA

I keep my hand pressed firmly to my aching side, each ragged breath burning my lungs in the lingering aftermath of our clash with the orcs. The metallic scent of blood—some ours, some theirs—still coats the back of my tongue, and the forest around us feels unusually silent, as if nature itself holds its breath in the wake of violence. Daeva leads us at an even pace, though his stride seems more subdued than before. The makeshift bandage on his arm is stained a dark crimson in places, but he doesn't complain.

The ground slopes downward, and I notice how the trees thin out, letting more patches of tired sunlight spill onto the pine-needle floor. Ryn limps at the rear, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder. Each time he does, my heart climbs into my throat, expecting to see some new horror. But so far, the only thing chasing us is the gloom of our own fatigue.

Beside me, Silas remains vigilant, crossbow clutched awkwardly in his hands. He's never fired one before, but necessity and desperation have a way of turning novices into survivors. Cole helps him check the mechanism, occasionally casting worried glances at Jenna, who's still cradled in Daeva's arms. She's conscious but listless, eyes half-lidded from fever and exhaustion.

It feels like days since we broke free from House Vaerathis, though in reality, it's probably just a handful of them—each day crammed with more brushes with death than I care to tally. Between the elves, the demon hound, and now orcs, we've tested

our luck enough. We desperately need a safe place to rest, to let Jenna heal, to let us all catch our breath without the threat of another ambush.

A faint sound catches my attention: the soft rush of water. It weaves through the silence of the forest, barely noticeable over the rasp of our footsteps and labored breathing. But it's there—steady, promising. Water means we can clean wounds, wash away the dirt and blood, maybe even scavenge fish if we're lucky.

“We're close to a stream,” I murmur, glancing at Daeva's profile. His silver-blue eyes flick toward me.

He nods, shifting Jenna's weight in his arms. “Yes,” he says, voice subdued. “Let's find it.”

The faint track beneath our feet merges into a narrower path, and the trees open into a small clearing where the sun filters in golden rays. Beyond that, I glimpse the gentle curve of a riverbank—rocks and pebbles worn smooth by flowing water. The river itself isn't broad—perhaps fifteen strides across—but it looks clear and relatively calm. Relief bubbles up in my chest.

Silas exhales. “Thank the gods,” he mutters, quickening his pace. “If it's safe enough to linger...”

Daeva lowers Jenna carefully against a mossy log at the boundary of the clearing. She stifles a groan, eyelids fluttering at the sudden change in position. Ryn and Cole rush to her side, checking her bandages. Her fever has subsided a bit, but she's still so pale it makes my heart clench.

I step closer to the water's edge. The river flows with a low, melodic whisper, carrying leaves and small twigs downstream. The bank is framed by smooth stones, some large enough to form a natural seating area or serve as a makeshift washing

spot. If we're going to make camp, this seems as good a place as any.

Daeva joins me, scanning the surroundings. He's quiet, though his gaze roams methodically—he's not just admiring the view. He's checking for threats. It's easy to forget how dangerous this land is until you see that caution etched in his features again.

"Should we risk a fire?" Cole calls from behind, still kneeling next to Jenna.

I look at Daeva, hoping for guidance. He sets his jaw, considering. "A small one," he says. "We need warm water to clean her wound, and possibly to cook if we catch anything. Keep it low and smoky, easy to disguise."

Ryn sets about gathering fallen branches while Silas rummages for kindling. Cole helps support Jenna to keep her from sinking into the damp ground. I join them for a moment, pressing the back of my hand to Jenna's forehead. She feels a little cooler than yesterday—maybe the silverleaf is finally taking effect.

She opens her eyes, pupils still clouded by pain. "Calla," she whispers, breath hitching. "Thanks...for not leaving me behind."

A lump forms in my throat. "Don't even say that. We're not abandoning anyone."

She gives a weak smile, then drifts back into semi-rest.

We work quickly. In under an hour, a small camp emerges from the wilderness. Ryn and Cole place branches in a rough lean-to shape, using the thick trunks to shelter us from prying eyes. Silas manages to coax a fire from damp kindling, though he curses under his breath whenever the wind threatens to snuff it out. Eventually, a tiny flame takes hold, sending slender threads of smoke into the evening sky.



Daeva remains on the perimeter, pacing like a sentinel. He steps lightly around the clearing's edge, occasionally pausing to listen. I watch him from the corner of my eye as I kneel by the river, rinsing scraps of cloth that might serve as bandages. Steam from the boiled water rises behind me, swirling in the crisp air.

A pang of guilt nags at me for staring so openly, but I can't help it. There's a lethal grace in the way he carries himself, as though ready for battle at any moment. And then there's that face—too handsome for any demon I've heard about in the old stories. The black markings curling across his collarbones and arms only heighten that uncanny beauty, a reminder that he's not human anymore. But he was once, apparently. Perhaps that's why he's easier to talk to than I'd expect.

By the time twilight settles over the forest, we've eaten a meager meal of roots and wild mushrooms. No sign of fish or game. Still, we're better off than we were in the fortress. I force myself to appreciate these small mercies.

Jenna dozes fitfully near the fire. Silas, Ryn, and Cole fall into an exhausted hush, occasionally trading quiet remarks about watch duty. They talk in subdued voices about rotating through the night. I volunteer for a shift, but Silas insists I rest first.

I nod absently, swirling a rag in the water to rinse it. My muscles ache with every movement, and the grime clinging to me makes my skin crawl. The orchard of bruises along my arms, the dried mud on my legs—I yearn for even a semblance of cleanliness.

A thought takes hold: the river is right here, and the night is dark enough that no one should notice if I slip away. My clothes are damp with sweat and dirt, and if I keep them on much longer, I'll never feel truly clean.

I straighten, scanning the campsite. Silas and Ryn speak by the lean-to, voices low. Cole is half asleep, propped against a tree trunk. Daeva stands a little ways off, back

turned, gazing out into the moonlit darkness as if challenging it. No one seems to be paying attention to me.

Quietly, I gather a scrap of cloth that can serve as a makeshift towel. My heartbeat picks up for reasons I can't entirely name—maybe fear of discovery, or maybe the idea of letting my guard down in a forest teeming with danger. But the craving to wash away this filth outweighs caution tonight.

I pad softly along the bank, heading upstream where the trees form a more private alcove. The moon filters through the branches, painting everything in silver. The water glistens, inviting. I do a quick, careful sweep of the area for any sign of watchers—no glowing eyes, no silhouettes lurking among the trunks.

Satisfied, I set the cloth on a stone and begin stripping off my tattered clothes. The night air caresses my skin, raising goosebumps, but I welcome the coolness. My body is a canvas of scars and bruises, each telling a story I'd rather forget. Still, I feel a small surge of relief at simply being uncovered, free from those rags that marked me as a slave.

I ease into the water. It's cold enough to make me gasp, but I bite back any sound, lowering myself inch by inch until I'm submerged up to my collarbones. The current tugs gently at my ankles, as if urging me to drift away from the shore. For a moment, I let myself float, exhaling slowly. The silence wraps around me, and I feel almost at peace.

I shut my eyes, letting the current swirl around my legs, washing away dirt and dried blood. My heart still thrums from the knowledge that we're not safe, but for these few minutes, I try to pretend I'm just a woman bathing in a moonlit river, not an escaped slave or a fugitive from House Vaerathis.

When I open my eyes again, I notice a faint movement near the bank—almost

imperceptible, but enough to send a surge of panic through me. I freeze, half under the water, scanning the gloom. My breath catches in my throat.

Then I see him, Daeva, standing at the river's edge, clearly as startled as I am. Moonlight dances over his pale hair, making it gleam like silver thread. His eyes lock on mine, widen for the briefest moment, and then flick down to the bare slope of my shoulders.

I stifle a gasp, sliding deeper into the water until only my head is above the surface, heart pounding so loudly I'm sure he hears it. Mortification prickles through me, but also a different sensation—something that warms my cheeks despite the cold.

“S-sorry,” he says, voice quiet, immediately turning away as if to grant me privacy. “I heard movement. I thought?—”

“It's fine,” I manage, though my voice comes out strangled. The water laps at my chin, and I curl my arms around myself. “I was just... bathing.”

He stands with his back turned, tension visible in the set of his shoulders. “I didn't mean to intrude.”

Heat flutters low in my belly. Intrude or not, he's already seen more of me than any man ever has. My entire body hums with conflicting emotions. A small part of me has the urge to tell him to leave immediately, while another part wants to... I don't know. Linger?

“It's okay,” I force out, swallowing hard. “You can... just stay there.”

He hesitates. Then, very slowly, he angles his head, giving me a sliver of his profile. He's definitely trying not to look directly at me. “There could be danger,” he murmurs. “I can keep watch.”

I should be annoyed at how easily he presumes a role of protector, but I can't ignore the relief. If a stray elf or orc stumbled upon me like this, I'd be at a severe disadvantage. "Thank you," I say, voice soft.

Silence falls, thick with tension. I half expect him to stride away, but he remains. The barest turn of his head suggests he's glancing over his shoulder. My cheeks burn. The water's cold, but I feel uncomfortably warm.

Summoning a bit of courage, I clear my throat. "I... I didn't realize you'd follow me."

"I didn't follow you," he says, so quietly I almost don't catch it. "I was circling the campsite. I saw someone near the water. Thought it was a threat."

Embarrassment flickers at the idea that I was so careless. "Of course. I—I appreciate you checking."

He finally shifts enough to look me in the eyes again—just the faintest glimpse over his shoulder. His gaze, even in the shadows, crackles with something I can't name. My heart lurches. Does he still function like a human man? The question leaps into my mind unbidden, set off by the hungry spark in those silver-blue irises.

I've never met a demon like him. Everything about him contradicts the monstrous stories I've heard: he's too refined, too... heartbreakingly human in some of his mannerisms. And yet, every swirl of black marking on his skin reminds me of how far from human he's become.

I sink deeper, letting the current tug at my limbs. My voice is unsteady, but I force the question, "Does it...does it bother you that you were once human?"

He stands silent for a heartbeat. Then he turns fully, though his gaze remains pinned

to a point above my head—scrupulously avoiding my submerged body. “I don’t know if ‘bother’ is the right word,” he admits at last. “It’s more... it’s a wound that never heals. A reminder that I lost what I once was.”

His words strike me with unexpected force. I want to say something comforting, but everything that comes to mind feels inadequate. My fingers tighten on my upper arms underwater, steadying myself. “You said you’re... not at full strength. Is that... is that because of me freeing you too soon?”

A grim, humorless laugh escapes him. “Hardly. If anything, you spared me. My captivity in the mirror—some of my powers atrophied. Others are... twisted.” He exhales. “But it has nothing to do with you.”

I nod, water rippling around me. Hesitating, I venture, “I’ve never seen a demon with a conscience.”

His gaze flicks down, meeting mine. The corner of his mouth lifts in a faint, sad smile. “A conscience?”

“You helped us, more times than you had to,” I say, swallowing. “You saved me from the catacombs, from the elves, from orcs. You carry Jenna when she’s hurt. That’s... more than just a sense of debt, isn’t it?”

His jaw flexes. In the silence, the river’s lullaby fills the gap. Finally, he murmurs, “I was human. And part of me never forgot what it meant to feel... empathy.”

Warmth twists in my chest. The tension in the air seems to pulse with each breath I take. He’s so close—just a few strides away. Moonlight outlines the sharp cut of his jaw, the proud line of his shoulders. Beneath that otherworldly aura, there’s something raw, something that resonates with my own struggles.

A droplet of water trickles down my temple. I realize with a flush that I'm nearly numb from the cold, yet reluctant to leave. "I—I should probably get out," I say, trying to sound brisk, though my voice wobbles.

He takes half a step back as if to give me space. "I'll turn around."

"Thank you," I mumble.

He pivots, posture rigid. I push through the water to the bank, glancing nervously at the darkness beyond him. No lurking shadows. Quickly, I slip onto the wet stones, snatching my cloth and pressing it to my chest. My entire body trembles from cold and adrenaline. I wring out my hair, biting back a shiver.

Daeva's silhouette remains politely turned. I feel a strange pang—something akin to disappointment, but I brush it aside. Wrapping the scrap of cloth around my torso, I rummage for my clothes. They're caked in grime, hardly suitable for wearing after a bath. But it's all I have.

When I'm decently covered—if damp rags can be called decent—I stand. "I'm... dressed now," I say softly.

He turns, eyes flicking to my still-bare legs, then back to my face. His expression is guarded, but I catch a trace of warmth in his gaze that sends a shiver down my spine—not from cold this time.

"We should go back," he says, voice low. "The others will worry."

I nod, hugging my arms around myself. Together, we walk the short path through the pines. He slows his stride to match mine, as if sensing how chilled and shaky I am. For once, I don't feel the bramble of distrust that usually knots my nerves around him. Instead, there's a shared quiet, an understanding.

We reach the edge of camp. The fire is down to embers, a dull glow illuminating silhouettes. Silas is on his feet, crossbow in hand, scanning the darkness. The moment he spots me, relief crosses his face, followed by an uneasy frown when he notices Daeva at my side.

“You were gone a while,” Silas says, tone guarded.

I force a small smile. “I just needed to wash off.”

He glances between us, eyes narrowing slightly, like he’s putting two and two together. “Sure,” he mutters. Then, in a lower voice, “Next time you tell me you’re going off alone, I’m coming with you.”

I bristle, though part of me understands his overprotectiveness. “Silas, I wasn’t far. And?—”

He shoots another glare at Daeva, who returns a calm, unblinking stare. “You alright?” Silas asks me.

“Yes.” My cheeks flush. “I’m fine. I promise. Let’s not wake the others.”

Behind Silas, Cole dozes fitfully against the trunk of a pine, while Ryn sits near Jenna, adjusting her blanket. From the looks of it, no one else seems aware of our little nighttime interlude. My stomach flips at the memory of Daeva’s gaze, how he struggled not to look at me yet couldn’t fully turn away.

Silas lowers the crossbow, tension still radiating off him. I sense he wants to demand more details, but out of respect for me or fear of picking a fight with Daeva, he stays quiet. Instead, he exhales, gesturing at a spot near the lean-to. “Try to get some sleep, Calla. We’ll keep watch.”

My shoulders sag with gratitude and a twinge of guilt. “Thank you.”

I move to the low space under the branches, wringing the damp ends of my hair. Daeva lingers near the edge of camp. Before I duck under the makeshift cover, I glance over at him. He meets my eyes for a moment—a silent exchange that makes my heart trip—and then he resumes his patrol.

I settle onto a patch of soft moss, pulling my tattered cloak around me for warmth. The silence presses in, interrupted only by the faint crackle of dying embers and the whisper of the river behind us. Exhaustion weighs on my eyelids, but my mind churns with too many thoughts: the memory of being caught naked in the river, the haunting sadness in Daeva’s voice when he talked about losing his humanity, the flicker of unmistakable desire I saw in his eyes.

Slowly, I drift into an uneasy doze. My dreams swirl with half-formed images of House Vaerathis, echoing corridors, and mirrors dripping black ink. Then I see Daeva, ghostlike in the catacombs, his face wreathed in shadows, reaching out a hand to me. I wake with a start, my pulse hammering.

It’s still night—or perhaps early morning. The moon has shifted, bathing the camp in a pale glow. Silas is on watch, arms folded, gaze trained on the horizon. I rub the sleep from my eyes, pushing myself up.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Silas murmurs, noticing my movement.

I shrug. “Nightmares, I guess.”

He nods in sympathy, then lowers his voice. “That demon... Daeva,” he corrects, as if the name tastes strange on his tongue, “he’s not normal, is he?”

“None of this is normal,” I reply with a weary sigh.



Silas shifts, conflict evident in his eyes. “I see how you look at him, Calla. Like you’re... curious. Or something else.”

My face heats. “He’s saved our lives. Of course I’m curious about who or what he is.”

Silas gives me a knowing look, but says nothing further. He simply rests a hand on me. “Just be careful.”

I’m too tired to protest, and maybe a little grateful for his concern. “I will,” I murmur, forcing a small smile.

I lie back down, letting my thoughts drift. The evening’s awkwardness glows in my mind like a half-buried ember, both embarrassing and oddly thrilling. I’ve never had time or reason to think about romance or desire, not in the life House Vaerathis forced on me. Now I’m not sure what to do with the possibility of either.

Daeva’s image flickers in my mind: those swirling black markings, that unwavering gaze, the gentle way he carried Jenna as if she weighed nothing. The memory of the river laps at my consciousness, tangling with the memory of his breath catching when he realized how exposed I was. So he does notice me... but do I want that?

I’m not certain. My pulse quickens, and I shut my eyes, willing my body to relax. We have bigger concerns than whether a demon finds me alluring. We have to survive. But even as I tell myself that, I can’t shake the warmth that spreads through me.

Eventually, exhaustion wins. I slip into sleep, cradling the fragile hope that we’ll see another sunrise without incident.

Morning arrives in a reluctant wash of gray light, filtering through the pines overhead. The river’s steady murmur greets me, along with the faint rustle of

someone moving around camp. My body aches from lying on the hard ground, but at least the rest gave me a bit of clarity.

Ryn busies himself with stirring the remaining embers. Cole crouches by Jenna, checking her brow. Silas stands near the lean-to, crossbow slung over his shoulder, scanning the tree line. I don't see Daeva immediately, but I sense his presence in the hush—like a watchful phantom on the periphery.

I shuffle over to check on Jenna. She cracks an eye open, wincing as she shifts. “Morning,” she mumbles, voice strained.

“How’re you feeling?” I ask, touching her forehead. She’s still warm, but not scalding.

“Better,” she whispers, though the weakness in her tone suggests otherwise. “That silverleaf brew helped, I think.”

Cole stands, stretching. “Ryn and I found a few more mushrooms, but not much else for breakfast,” he says apologetically. “I wish we had real food.”

I press my lips together, glancing at the river. “We can try to fish. Maybe set a simple net or trap— if we can weave something from branches.”

Silas drops down onto his haunches, picking up the cloth I used last night to wash bandages. “I’ll see what I can do. If we could at least catch a few small fish...”

He leaves to gather materials, and I head toward the place where we found water the night before. As I approach, I spot Daeva standing on the riverbank. He’s wearing his usual dark attire—ripped in places from the battles—and that bandage on his upper arm, now a bit discolored.

He must sense me coming. His gaze turns, capturing me in a quiet moment that makes my heart stutter. Memories of last night flash between us, unspoken. I force myself to push them aside, focusing on the present.

“How’s your wound?” I ask, gesturing to his arm.

He shrugs, rolling the shoulder experimentally. “Sore, but healing.”

“Thank you again,” I say softly, “for saving us from those orcs.”

Something like amusement flickers in his eyes. “You thank me often.”

“Well, you save us often.” My lips curve, a hesitant smile.

He returns a faint smile of his own, just enough to stir warmth in my chest. “I’d argue you’re just as integral to our survival. You managed to keep Jenna alive, found silverleaf, and you fought back when it counted.”

My cheeks flush, uncertain how to respond. Praise is alien to me—slaves in House Vaerathis rarely received anything but curses.

Before I can think of what to say, Silas and Ryn approach with a bundle of knotted reeds and branches. They’re mid-argument about the best way to fashion a crude fish trap. I step forward to help, grateful for the distraction from the tension that hums between Daeva and me.

As we work, I notice Silas’s occasional glances in my direction, and the uneasy set of his jaw whenever Daeva comes near. It’s clear he’s seen the subtle interplay between us, and he doesn’t like it. I can’t blame him. He’s known me for years, looked after me when no one else would. Now some demon—once-human or not—has swooped into my life, intangible and powerful, capturing my attention in ways I can’t fully

explain.

I keep my head down, weaving the flexible reeds. The repetitive motion soothes me, helps me ignore the thrumming awareness that crackles whenever Daeva stands too close.

Eventually, we manage a rough cylinder shape. If we anchor it downstream with rocks and lure fish inside, we might catch a meal in a few hours. It's a glimmer of hope.

Ryn, Cole, and I carry the contraption to a slower bend in the river, while Silas and Daeva remain behind to tend the camp. We wedge the trap between rocks, tying it off with a strip of cloth so the current won't sweep it away. The water tugs at my ankles, swirling around me.

When we return to the bank, Daeva and Silas have already broken down some of the camp, tidying the area so it looks less like a permanent settlement. Daeva hoists Jenna carefully, mindful of her wound, and Silas shoulders the crossbow.

I drift over to Jenna, brushing stray hair from her forehead. She manages a small smile. "I'm slowing us down," she murmurs apologetically.

"You're alive," I say firmly. "That's all that matters."

Daeva shifts her weight, and for a moment, his gaze meets mine. There's a question there—something about how long we can keep carrying her. I nod, silently promising we'll manage as long as it takes.

We spend the next hours in an uneasy calm, waiting for the trap to yield anything. Cole and Ryn rummage around, searching for edible plants, while Silas scouts the perimeter. I find myself drawn toward Daeva again and again, as if some invisible

tether insists on pulling me close. The fleeting looks, the brush of our arms when we cross paths—it leaves me breathless and uncertain.

When we finally check the trap, we discover two small, wriggling fish. Hardly a feast, but enough protein to bolster our strength. We cook them over a tiny fire using sharpened sticks, dividing the portions with care so everyone gets a bite.

Jenna sits propped against a log, nibbling at the savory meat. “This is better than mushrooms,” she jokes weakly.

A thin layer of clouds dims the afternoon light. With no immediate threats barreling down on us, it’s almost easy to pretend we’re not fugitives. But fear lurks beneath that fragile peace; I can’t forget the wild light in the orcs’ eyes, or the cold fury of the elves who enslaved us.

Silas corners me when I finish my meager meal, pulling me aside near the pines. “Calla,” he begins, voice laced with concern. “You’re... you’re drawn to him, aren’t you?”

I stiffen. “Silas?—”

He sighs, frustration knitting his brows. “I’m not judging. I just worry. He’s a demon, or part demon, or something. We hardly know him, and you?—”

My cheeks flame. “He’s not like the others. You’ve seen how he helps us. And I...”

“You trust him,” Silas finishes for me, sounding pained.

I don’t know if trust is the right word. There’s a storm of conflicting feelings: fascination, gratitude, caution, attraction. It’s all too tangled to be summarized neatly. “We need him,” I say instead. “Without him, we might not survive another day out

here.”

Silas gives me a resigned nod. “Alright. But keep your head, please.”

I force a small laugh, though it sounds hollow. “I’m trying.”

He returns to the camp, leaving me alone among the towering pines. My gaze drifts across the clearing until it settles on Daeva, who stands at the river’s edge again, as if drawn to the water. Maybe he’s replaying the memory of last night, the same way I am.

I close my eyes, swallowing the knot of anxiety in my throat. For years, my only goal was survival. Now that I have this precarious freedom, I’m confronting strange desires and alliances I never anticipated. A demon man—once human, still so painfully human in his regrets and empathy—draws me in ways I don’t fully understand.

Eventually, the wind stirs, carrying the promise of another incoming storm. We’ll need to move again soon, to avoid being pinned down by weather or roving patrols. But for now, we have a little time to breathe.

I return to the lean-to, checking on Jenna and helping reapply her bandages. Overhead, the forest canopy sways, casting shifting shadows across our makeshift camp. Ryn and Cole pack away what little supplies we have. Silas keeps glancing at Daeva, his expression torn, but he’s said his piece for now.

As dusk slips her dark fingers across the sky, I gather up the last of the damp rags. My eyes stray to Daeva’s silhouette, haloed by the dying light. He glances over his shoulder, our gazes colliding. Heat stirs in my cheeks, followed by a fierce rush of something that’s not quite fear and not quite longing, but a heady mix of both.

I know we can't stay in this lull forever. Danger stalks our every step, and House Vaerathis won't rest until they reclaim what they see as theirs—us, or him. But for tonight, I cling to the fragile comfort of a single truth: we've found each other in this world's darkest corners, and somehow, that might make all the difference.

My stomach twists with anticipation for whatever tomorrow brings, whether it's flight or confrontation. A soft sigh slips past my lips, and I settle by Jenna, offering her a reassuring pat on the hand. Above us, the stars blink into view between shifting clouds, and I can't help glancing one last time at Daeva, whose moonlit features betray a subtle tenderness beneath all that lethal power.

I don't know what to call this feeling, but it crackles in the space between us like a spark waiting for kindling. And as dark as our world is, that spark is enough to set my heart racing, no matter how dangerous it might be to let it catch fire.

### DAEVA

I hold my breath as I guide our small party deeper into the forest's shadows, one careful step at a time. Each footfall lands on soft soil or a bed of needles, muffling our presence. Overhead, looming pines and skeletal oaks twist together, swallowing most of the moonlight. The air is thick with an earthy, primal scent—a blend of old leaves, damp moss, and something faintly metallic that sets my nerves on edge.

We've traveled this route for hours, perhaps longer, shifting away from the calmer river valley where we camped last night. Now, the terrain transforms into a maze of thorny undergrowth and bizarrely shaped boulders that jut like beasts' spines. The mortals behind me—Calla, Silas, Cole, Ryn, and the still-wounded Jenna—keep close, their breathing ragged with fatigue. Jenna's fever has waned, but she's frail and leaning against Ryn for support. There's no sign of orcs or elf patrols at the moment, yet every instinct I possess warns me that something else prowls these depths.

I pause at a small clearing where the grass stands tall enough to brush my thighs. The wind here carries a strange odor: decay and something sweet, as though flowers have been crushed under a rotting carcass. My stomach tightens in distaste. I remember whispers from old memories—faint recollections of creatures that dwell in remote corners, monstrous beings avoided even by the dark elves. Perhaps we've stumbled into their domain.

"Let's rest," Calla says softly behind me. Her voice, though quiet, resonates in the hush. "At least for a moment."



I glance at her. Her hair clings to her cheeks, slick with sweat from the oppressive humidity. She tries to keep her expression calm, but I see the tension in her eyes. That same tension pulses through me whenever I look at her—an acute awareness that we share secrets neither of us fully comprehends yet. My chest twinges as I recall the moment by the river, where I nearly lost my composure seeing her in the moonlit water. A demon has no business longing for closeness. But once, I was human...

I exhale, shoving the memory aside. “Just for a moment,” I agree, voice low. “We shouldn’t linger here. The trees... feel wrong.”

Silas moves closer to Calla, crossbow in hand. He’s protective of her; that’s always been clear. He notices how my gaze lingers and sets his jaw, displeased. But we have no time for petty conflict. Right now, survival trumps everything else.

Cole and Ryn find a spot to settle Jenna against a trunk, carefully lowering her to the ground. She sighs with relief. They begin rummaging for a canteen. We have precious little water left—no streams in sight since morning. The dryness of my own throat reminds me we’ll need to find another source soon.

I crouch near a mossy log, scanning the perimeter. The forest is silent—no birds, no insects, just the slow hiss of wind through branches. Then I feel it, a faint tremor in the air, like a heartbeat. It’s reminiscent of magic, but primal, raw. A memory stirs, whispering of flesh-eaters known as waira. I’d heard scattered rumors in ages past. They were said to lurk in remote mountains, feeding on anything unfortunate enough to cross their path. Grotesque, cunning, territorial. The dark elves avoided them out of fear—or so the stories claimed.

A creeping dread threads through my veins. If we’ve entered waira territory, we need to leave. Swiftly. My eyes dart toward Jenna. She’s barely upright. Speed will be a problem.

“Daeva?” Calla’s voice is soft, almost apologetic. “You sense something, don’t you?”

I stand, scanning the gloom. “We’re not alone,” I say quietly. “We need to move, find a safer place to make camp.”

The others don’t question me. We gather our meager supplies and press forward. The tension among us deepens with each step, like a chord pulled ever tighter. Calla keeps near my elbow, occasionally brushing my arm—a brief contact that forces me to swallow hard and refocus. I can’t let her distract me. Not now, not with that ominous smell thickening the air.

We push through a bramble-choked path and emerge into a small hollow of twisted trees. My heart jolts at the sight looming there: a tall, skeletal figure perched amid the roots of a gnarled oak. The shape has an elongated animal skull—perhaps deer-like, with two jagged horns—and a body that’s both humanoid and hideously malformed. Ribs protrude like pale bars, partially covered by patches of matted fur. Between the gaps in its chest, a glow pulses a sickly green. Its eyes—mere pinpoints of red light—track our movements with unnerving stillness.

I hear Silas inhale sharply. Cole mutters a curse. Ryn clutches Jenna protectively. The waira cocks its head, a low growl vibrating through the clearing. One of its clawed hands digs into the soil, stirring rotted leaves and stirring that nauseating sweet-rot stench.

Beside it stands a figure I nearly mistake for a child at first. But no—she’s a woman, a human, shorter than Calla, wrapped in a ragged cloak. Her hair is braided in a loose, practical style, and her eyes are keen, flickering to us with tension. She’s touching the waira’s arm as if calming it.

I clench my fists. The presence of a human with this... monstrosity is inconceivable at first glance. How could she survive among them? Yet she stands unafraid. The

waira, though it bristles, doesn't strike.

"Ssstay away," the waira rasps, its voice like stone scraping stone. Its body stiffens, revealing rows of fangs behind the skeletal muzzle. "This is Dirroth's territory. You. Do. Not. Belong."

The woman puts a hand on Dirroth's bony forearm. "They look exhausted," she murmurs, her tone far calmer than the situation warrants. "Let me speak to them."

Dirroth huffs, glowing essence flickering a shade of green tinged with ominous orange. Territorial anger. The woman steps forward carefully, arms raised to show she's unarmed. Despite her caution, she radiates a certain confidence.

"My name's Amalia," she says, voice pitched to carry across the tense silence. "You've wandered into Dirroth's domain. He doesn't like trespassers. Especially not so many."

I step between my group and the waira, holding up a hand. "We mean no trouble," I reply evenly. "We're only passing through—looking for safety."

At my side, Calla extends a trembling hand in a show of peace. "Please," she adds, her voice less steady than mine but still earnest. "We have an injured companion. We just want to?—"

Dirroth's growl intensifies, cutting her off. His massive claws scrape the dirt. "All intruders say that," he snarls, voice deep and guttural. "They come to steal my territory... my hunts... or they come for me."

Amalia touches Dirroth's chest, right over the place where the glowing aura churns. "Calm," she tells him softly. "They've not threatened us." Then she looks at me, her gaze lingering on the markings along my arms. "You... you're different. I feel magic

in you, but it's twisted. Demonic."

I stiffen. She's perceptive. That shouldn't surprise me—anyone who can live among waira must have sharp instincts. "Yes," I say simply. "But that doesn't mean we wish you harm."

Dirroth's lip curls, exposing uneven fangs. "Humans. Demons. Elves. All the same. They come, they hunt, they kill. Dirroth kills first."

I brace for an attack, dark power coiling in my fingertips. My entire body tenses. If it comes to a fight, I'm not sure we'll survive. Fighting a waira is no simple feat, especially not in its home territory—and we have an injured woman to protect. Even if I muster my magic, I'm hardly at full capacity.

Amalia steps between us, raising her arms. "Wait," she insists, looking up at Dirroth. "They're in trouble, obviously. Someone is wounded." Her eyes flick to Jenna's pallid face. "And that man—" She points at me, "—he's carrying around a demon's aura. Perhaps we can learn something."

Dirroth exhales a long, rattling breath. His eyes remain fixed on me, and the glow in his torso pulses, shifting from green to a flicker of orange and back again. A silent standoff grips the clearing.

Slowly, I lower my guard, though I remain ready to unleash force if needed. "Let us pass," I say. "We can move on."

Dirroth's claw drags a furrow in the ground, red eyes narrowing. "You found your way to my domain. I have questions. You will answer."

Amalia's expression is apologetic. "We don't often get visitors." She glances back at Calla and the others, her gaze softening at Jenna's obvious pain. "Look, Dirroth isn't

going to let you cross unless he's sure you mean no harm. And... I can't let him kill you." Her voice tightens with quiet resolve. "If we offer you a place to rest for the night, will you talk? Then we'll see about letting you move on."

Calla casts me a worried look. Silas tightens his grip on the crossbow, uncertain. But we have little choice. We're too spent, especially with Jenna's condition. Engaging a waira on its turf would be suicidal. The only path that might grant survival is cooperation.

I nod once. "We'll talk."

Dirroth scowls, but Amalia's hand upon his arm soothes him marginally. His essence glows a steady greenish hue, still territorial, but no longer raging. He gestures with a bony claw, beckoning us to follow. My group hesitates, exchanging apprehensive glances, but in the end, we trail after the waira and his human mate into the deeper forest.

The lair Dirroth leads us to is a shallow cave carved into a hillside. The entrance is partially concealed by a tumble of rocks and dense underbrush. Inside, the space is surprisingly neat—if you ignore the faint coppery smell and the scattered bones near the rear. A small fire pit rests in the center, ringed by stones. Animal furs are piled along one wall, forming a sort of bed or lounge area. The flickering light from a single torch reveals more details of Dirroth's physiology: elongated limbs, fur clinging to parts of his torso, the rest an unsettling mix of sinew and bone.

Amalia lights the fire with practiced ease, using a piece of flint. Her posture is relaxed, as if she does this every day. Dirroth stays near the entrance, glaring at us from the gloom. The flicker of his aura—still that mix of green and a faint swirl of yellow—suggests curiosity, though I doubt he'd admit it.

"Sit," Amalia invites. "I can't say we have the best accommodations, but you'll be

sheltered from the elements.” Her voice is steady as she looks over Jenna’s weakened form. “Let me see if I can help with that wound.”

Cole helps Jenna to the edge of the fire pit, gently lowering her. She looks uneasy, clutching Ryn’s hand, but she nods at Amalia in thanks. Amalia produces a pouch of herbs from somewhere and begins examining the bandage. Despite the tension, the human woman’s presence is oddly comforting—she exudes a confidence that none of us expected in such a macabre environment.

Silas remains standing, crossbow half raised, as though ready to defend himself at any second. Calla tries to calm him with a hand on his arm. I approach Dirroth carefully, wanting to gauge him. The waira shifts, eyeing me with suspicion.

“You are demon,” he rasps. “Yet not... fully. I smell something human in your blood.”

My gut clenches. “Your nose is sharp,” I say, my tone guarded.

Dirroth’s reply is a rough snort. “If you’re lying about your intentions, I will devour you all.” He drags a claw along the stone in a warning scrape. “Amalia says I must be patient, but Dirroth does not like being patient.”

I arch a brow. “I’m not lying. We just want safety.” Glancing back at Calla, I note how she kneels by the fire, tension etched in her features. “We’ve been pursued by dark elves, orcs... We stumbled here by accident.”

He tilts his head, horns scraping the low ceiling. “Dark elves, yes. Tasty prey.” A crimson flicker dances in his chest, perhaps reminiscent of old hunts. “Orcs, savage. They threaten my forests too. But demon? That is new.” He leans closer, rancid breath washing over me. “You reek of old power.”

My stomach twists. I sense Calla's gaze on me, but I keep my focus on Dirroth. "Then you know I'm not powerless."

He huffs, amused or annoyed. "I'll judge your power if the time comes."

I step back, tension unspooling. We've reached a standoff of sorts—he won't kill us outright, so long as we abide by some unwritten code. Maybe that's enough for tonight.

Amalia finishes binding Jenna's shoulder with fresh herbs and cloth. "She'll need rest," she tells Calla softly, wiping her hands on her cloak. "At least a night or two, if Dirroth allows."

Dirroth lets out a grumbling sigh. "Amalia, you always want to help," he accuses, though there's a begrudging warmth in his tone, as if he's incapable of denying her entirely.

Amalia quirks a smile at him, then beckons me closer. I comply, noticing the shift in her eyes as she studies me. "You hide something else," she says quietly, glancing at my arms and the faint glow of black markings. "That demon magic weighs on your soul. You haven't told your companions about the price, have you?"

I stiffen, uncertain how to respond. She saw something in me with just a glance? The others, busy trying not to anger Dirroth, might not overhear, but I feel Calla's attention drifting our way.

"You've read me quickly," I admit.

She nods. "Dirroth is territorial and fierce, but even he can sense your aura. There's something unspoken—some contract you made?"

My mind races back to the catacombs beneath House Vaerathis, where Calla freed me. A deal was struck, hastily, in the throes of desperation. I told her every power demands a price. But in the chaos of escaping, we never revisited that bargain. It's a law of my demonic existence, one I cannot escape. Payment always comes.

Amalia's gaze slides toward Calla, who's now standing, tension marking her face. "You should tell her," Amalia murmurs, voice kind but firm. "It's cruel to keep them in the dark."

My heart twists. I never intended cruelty. Fear of losing them—fear of losing her—made me delay that conversation. Admitting the truth might drive them away. Or worse, it might lead them to some tragic end, because the price for demonic assistance is rarely small or simple.

Before I can respond, Dirroth's growl fills the cave. We all jerk, expecting violence, but instead he's gazing into the darkness beyond our makeshift shelter, bones shifting in agitation. A second later, I feel it too—something prowls outside. Another waira, or some other forest predator?

Amalia's expression tightens. "Dirroth, is it...?"

He nods, aura flaring a deep red, the color of impending battle. "Another waira. Not from my territory. An intruder." His stance turns predatory, claws flexing in anticipation.

Fear surges through Calla. She glances at me, then at Silas. "We can't handle another fight," she whispers. Jenna's condition is precarious, and none of us are well-rested.

Amalia looks at Dirroth. "Maybe it'll move on?"

Dirroth snorts. "If it found our scent, it might be hungry. Waira do not share territory



lightly.” His gaze falls on me, and there’s an unspoken question— Will you fight by my side if it attacks?

I meet his look with grim understanding. We might not have the luxury of neutrality. If a hostile waira arrives, it could see us all as prey, ignoring Dirroth’s claim. Even Dirroth might be forced to defend us if we’re in his lair, because the other waira will view all of us as potential kills. Ironically, we’ve become Dirroth’s responsibility, as bizarre as that seems.

A tense moment stretches. Cole’s knuckles whiten around a scavenged dagger. Ryn edges protectively nearer to Jenna, her breathing shallow but steady. Silas shifts in place, crossbow trembling in his hands. Calla stands behind me, her presence a steady warmth against my back.

I close my eyes, summoning what remains of my power. “If it comes to a fight,” I say softly, “we’ll help. But we can’t hold out for long. Our group is weakened.”

Dirroth releases a low, rumbling growl, which I interpret as acceptance. He lopes toward the mouth of the cave, the flicker of red in his chest intensifying. Amalia glances at me once more, worry etched in her features. “Stay with them. Protect them if things go wrong.”

With that, she hurries after Dirroth, stepping into the twilight. I exchange a glance with Calla, who’s pale but resolute. “Stay alert,” I whisper.

Time drags. The hush outside is deafening, broken only by faint scuffles of movement. My nerves coil like a spring. The mortals huddle near the fire, eyes flicking between the cave entrance and me. My mind echoes with Amalia’s words about the price. The guilt churns. But we can’t confront that now.

A sudden thunder of snarls reverberates from outside. The torchlight trembles with

the vibration of massive bodies colliding. Silas curses under his breath, and Calla edges closer. I step forward, intending to see what's happening, but a monstrous shriek rips through the gloom—a waira's cry of rage. The intruder has arrived.

Dirroth's silhouette flashes against the faint moonlight. He's locked in a brutal struggle with another waira, this one sporting a skull reminiscent of a wolf, elongated jaws snapping. Their claws scrape the rocky ground, sending sparks. Amalia ducks back, eyes wide, searching for an opening to help her mate.

I dash out, ignoring the risk, black power crackling around my fingertips. If Dirroth falls, the intruder will turn on us. But the moment I step beyond the threshold, a hideous stench of decay floods my senses. The second waira's aura glows a furious crimson, edges tinged in black. Fear and anger combined. Its jaws snap inches from Dirroth's shoulder, tearing fur and sinew.

Dirroth roars, raking his claws down the intruder's side, exposing pale bone beneath. They crash into a tree with enough force to splinter branches. I shift to the side, summoning a wave of demonic energy. The swirling shadows around my hands intensify. If I can land a decisive blow, maybe we can drive it off.

"Move!" Amalia yells to me, just as the intruder waira's tail lashes out, a bony whip of spine and matted fur. I dodge, slamming my palm into its flank. My power surges, momentarily halting the creature's lunge. It staggers, aura flickering dark. Dirroth seizes the opening and plunges his claws into the intruder's chest cavity, twisting with brutal efficiency.

A wet shriek echoes in the night. The second waira thrashes, then slumps, spine cracking under Dirroth's relentless grip. For an instant, I see the hatred in its eyes before the glow in its torso dims to nothing. The body collapses, half-limp, and Dirroth steps back, panting. His own essence burns an even deeper red, signaling rage. He grabs the intruder's skull and wrenches with a sickening pop. The fight ends

in savage finality.

Amalia rushes forward to place a hand on Dirroth's side, murmuring soothing words. My own heart thunders, adrenaline leaving me shaky. Claws, fangs, blood—it's a stark reminder that waira are not mere curiosities. They are apex predators.

Calla and Silas emerge from the cave, eyes wide at the carnage. Cole and Ryn remain inside, likely shielding Jenna's gaze. Dirroth stands over the corpse, chest heaving, muzzle smeared with gore. Slowly, he glances at me. A nod, curt but unmistakable: an acknowledgment that I helped, though he wouldn't call it gratitude.

I incline my head in return, keeping my distance from the remains. The stench is overwhelming. "Is it dead?" Calla asks softly, stepping around me to get a better look.

Dirroth snorts. "Dead enough," he growls, tossing the severed skull aside. "I will burn it later. For now, we rest." His aura fades from deep red to something closer to a dull green, the color of guarded territorial calm. "You fought well, half-demon."

Despite the tension, I allow a wry smile. "Likewise."

Amalia tears her gaze from the bloody scene. "Let's go back inside," she suggests, voice subdued. "We'll have to be quiet in case others lurk nearby."

We slip into the cave once more, Dirroth following after a final glance at his kill. He radiates a primal satisfaction, but I also see weariness in the sag of his massive shoulders. That was no easy fight, even for him.

Inside, Cole exhales in relief, while Jenna musters a faint question—"What happened?"—which Ryn answers quietly. Silas stands next to Calla, his face betraying conflicting emotions: horror at the brutality, grudging acceptance that we

needed Dirroth's help, and a flicker of guilt at not having done more.

Amalia steadies Dirroth as he sinks down near the fire. Then she turns to me, her eyes firm. "You see now how dangerous these lands are," she says. "Dirroth protects his territory, and occasionally helps travelers if I ask him. But he demands respect for it. That waira came to challenge him, or maybe to feed on you."

Dirroth rumbles, resting his clawed hands on his knees. "No more interruptions tonight, I hope." He eyes the mouth of the cave warily.

I kneel by the embers, letting the heat chase the chill from my bones. Calla joins me, wrapping her arms around herself. Her gaze flicks between Dirroth and me. She opens her mouth as if to speak but hesitates. I realize she's picking up on the tension—Amalia's pointed words about paying a price, the secrets I carry.

Amalia gently places a fur cloak around Dirroth's shoulders, half-stained with old blood. Then she looks at me, her eyes sharp as steel. "So," she says quietly, "about that price you owe... or rather, that price your companions owe you for your demonic help. I hope you realize the weight of it."

My throat tightens. Calla's gaze snaps to me, confusion apparent. Silas frowns, hearing enough to sense trouble. The firelight casts flickering shadows across the cave walls, an ominous backdrop for this conversation.

I swallow, aware that I can no longer keep them ignorant. The vow I made in the catacombs, the contract of demonic power exchanged for our escape, cannot be left in the dark. "I told you," I say softly, eyes meeting Calla's, "that every gift from a demon demands a price. We never... clarified what it was."

Her face pales, breath catching. "I remember," she whispers. "You said I'd have to pay eventually. But with everything happening, I... forgot. Or maybe I hoped it

wasn't real."

Silas bristles. "What do you mean? Some kind of blood pact?"

Amalia's expression is somber. "A demon's law. Life for life. Soul for soul. Some variation. It's how these contracts are enforced in realms beyond mortal laws." She glances between Calla and me. "If the demon doesn't collect, the magic itself punishes him. If the mortal tries to avoid payment, the consequences can be dire."

I feel the weight of Calla's stare. My chest constricts, guilt mingling with an odd pang of regret. She rescued me from that accursed mirror. Without her, I might still be trapped in oblivion. Yet, in that moment, I bound us with a promise. One I can't simply discard.

Her voice trembles. "What... what do I have to sacrifice?"

My throat constricts. I can't lie to her, but I can't deliver that blow easily either. Dirroth and Amalia watch from the sidelines, impassive as though this is a drama that often plagues lesser beings. Silas curses under his breath, stepping closer to Calla protectively.

I force the words out, each one like a shard of glass. "Typically, a demon's power demands an equal exchange. For freeing me, for the power I used to help you... I require a life. Or a soul. It's not something I choose arbitrarily; it's the nature of the old magic that made me what I am."

Fear and betrayal flash across Calla's face. Silas hisses, half-raising his crossbow, though he doesn't fully aim it at me. Cole and Ryn exchange alarmed looks, while Jenna simply closes her eyes, too exhausted to fully react. The cave's silence throbs.

I wish I could conjure comforting words, but the truth is stark: the bargain stands. "I

haven't demanded payment yet," I say, hating how hollow the reassurance sounds. "And if there's another way?—"

Calla's eyes glisten, shoulders trembling. "So, if I don't... if I don't give you a life, you'll die? Or we all pay the price?"

I hesitate. In my centuries of existence, the specifics of demonic compacts vary. Often, the demon withers or goes mad if the contract remains incomplete. But another route may exist—some hidden loophole or vow beyond my knowledge. I want to believe that, for her sake, though my certainty wavers.

Amalia sighs, kneeling by Dirroth. "It's not an easy truth. But in my travels, I've seen similar pacts. Usually, the mortal offers a proxy life: the life of an enemy, or a sacrifice who agrees to it. Or they forfeit themselves. Or the demon itself dies if the contract remains unfulfilled. None of the options are pleasant."

Calla's trembling intensifies, the color draining from her cheeks. Silas curses again. "This is insane," he mutters. "We're not killing anyone to feed some arcane law."

Dirroth's aura flickers green, then orange, showing mild discomfort at the tension. "Don't tear my cave apart over your demon nonsense," he growls. "Not my concern. But don't forget where you are."

A miserable silence settles. My stomach churns, guilt threatening to choke me. I never wanted this. Yet the contract is older than I am, an unbreakable chain forged by the dark powers that twisted my humanity. I glance at Calla, hating the fear in her eyes.

She steels herself, lifting her chin. "We'll... discuss it," she murmurs, voice thick with emotion. "But not tonight. Not like this."

I nod, feeling relief and regret swirl together. “Agreed.”

Amalia gives us a sad smile. “For what it’s worth, demon, I can see that glimmer of humanity still alive inside you. And you, Calla—you have a fierce spirit. Perhaps you’ll find a better path.” She stands, returning to Dirroth’s side. “But be careful. These bargains aren’t easily defied.”

No one says more. The fire crackles softly, painting the cave walls in wavering orange light. Exhaustion weighs heavily on us all after the fight with the intruder waira, but the new revelation eclipses any relief we might have felt.

We gather ourselves, forming a tense circle near the flames. Jenna rests against Cole’s shoulder, drifting in and out of fevered sleep. Ryn rubs his arms, eyes darting between me and Calla. Silas stands vigil, brow furrowed in anger and uncertainty. Calla keeps her eyes on the fire, knuckles white as she clasps her hands in her lap.

I watch her, heart aching at the burden I’ve forced upon her. The memory of her bare skin glistening in the moonlit river flares in my mind—an image of fragile beauty and unexpected hope. That spark of tenderness we shared is drowned now by the ugly truth of demonic law. A price must be paid.

In the flickering shadows, I vow silently to find another way. I don’t know how, but I refuse to let her life or another innocent’s be the coin of my freedom. Even if it costs me the last remnants of my power, or my own existence. Yet I can’t speak such promises without proof. Words alone mean nothing in the face of ancient magic.

Outside, the forest hushes after the kill, as if acknowledging Dirroth’s victory. We remain still, lost in our own turmoil, hearts pounding with dread. Tomorrow, we’ll face the next step—whether it’s forging alliances with these monstrous neighbors or forging our own path deeper into Protheke’s wildlands. But tonight, in the glow of the dying fire, the weight of the unspoken threat hangs like a blade over all our heads.

I let my senses drift, aware of Calla's presence near me. She doesn't look at me, but I feel her trembling. I wonder if she's thinking of the same question swirling in my mind: If we must trade a soul for our salvation, whose life stands in the balance?

No matter what happens next, I can't escape the bitter truth: I have bound us all to a fate we didn't foresee. And a rarity in the centuries I've lived, fear coils in my gut at the thought that I might lose the one person who made me remember my human heart.



### CALLA

I rise in the gloom before dawn, exhaustion clinging to my bones like a damp shroud. The embers of the fire have dwindled to gray ash, leaving only a faint warmth on the cave floor. Jenna sleeps with her head on Cole's shoulder, her breathing rough but steady. Ryn dozes nearby, arms crossed, while Silas still stands a silent watch, crossbow in hand. His eyes are bloodshot with sleeplessness.

Daeva, seated against the far wall, lifts his gaze when I stir. Our eyes meet in the flickering darkness, and the weight of last night's revelation crushes any chance of a gentle morning. I look away, unable to hold his stare for long. My whole body hums with the knowledge of what he told us: that our salvation comes with a terrible price. A soul for a life, or some twisted variation thereof. And I'm the one who unleashed him, forging a demonic contract I never thought through.

Dirroth lies curled near the cave entrance, that massive skeletal waira form half-covered by a patchwork cloak. Amalia rests at his side, her cheek pillowed against a nest of fur. Just a few hours ago, Dirroth tore another waira apart before our eyes, defending us as much as his own territory. Unthinkable alliances—us with him, him with us—tied together by necessity.

I rub the stiffness from my neck and stand, stepping carefully around the others. As I straighten, my limbs ache from sleeping upright on the cold stone. I need fresh air, or maybe just a moment of solitude to piece my thoughts together. But the cave's confines only remind me how trapped I feel: locked in a demon's contract,

surrounded by monstrosities of the forest, pursued by elves and orcs who would enslave or kill us.

A rustle of movement announces Amalia's wakefulness. She sits up, stretching stiff shoulders, then passes a fond look at Dirroth. The waira stirs, that eerie red glow flicking beneath his ribs. His aura remains subdued after last night's fight. I sense no immediate aggression in his posture, though the tension in the cave is thick enough to choke on.

"It's almost dawn," Amalia says softly, turning her calm gaze toward me. "We'll show you the way to the old hunting path. From there, it's just a day's journey to the human settlement." She brushes a few stray strands of hair from her face and adds, quieter, "I hope it gives you safety."

Dirroth utters a low, guttural sound. "I hope they leave quickly," he rumbles, though the menace in his voice is half-hearted at best. "My territory is cramped enough without more weaklings to protect."

Amalia gives him a reproachful nudge with her elbow. "You're a terrible liar, Dirroth. You almost seem to like them." Her eyes sparkle with amusement, an affection I find both baffling and touching. How can she be so at ease with a flesh-eater? Yet it's clear she's bound to him by more than fear. There's genuine devotion in the way she looks at him.

Daeva stands. Even half-drowsy, he commands the space with an unsettling grace. Those swirling black tattoos mark his forearms, the same arms that so easily channeled chaos and death when we needed it. My chest constricts as I remember the price that remains unpaid. Before I can speak, Silas crosses to me, crossbow slung over his shoulder, expression grim.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

I nod, rubbing my hands along my arms. My clothes still carry the faint smell of rot and waira musk. “Yes. I can’t imagine staying here any longer.”

Ryn and Cole stir Jenna awake, helping her to her feet. She’s pale but determined, managing a weak smile for me. “I can walk,” she insists, though her knees tremble. Ryn supports her carefully, and we gather what little supplies we have left.

As we make for the cave entrance, Dirroth grunts. “Bring them,” he says to Amalia, stepping aside so we can pass. “I will watch for other waira.”

We exit into the predawn hush. The sky glows faintly purple in the east, crowning the distant mountains with a cold, ethereal light. Tall pines sway around us, their needles brushing our shoulders as we move through the undergrowth. My breath mists in the chilled air. I cling to the small hope that once we reach the human settlement, we can rest, reorganize... perhaps figure out what to do about this demonic contract.

Amalia leads us through a twisting path, Dirroth stalking silently behind. The forest here is so thick that the morning light barely penetrates, leaving us in a perpetual twilight. A few times, I catch glimpses of bony silhouettes slipping between tree trunks, other waira perhaps, but none approach. Whether they sense Dirroth’s presence or simply lack the hunger, they keep their distance.

By the time the sun has fully risen, the terrain begins to level out. A narrow game trail emerges between mossy rocks, leading west. Amalia halts, turning to face us.

“This is it,” she says, pointing down the faint path. “Follow it for a day, maybe less if you walk swiftly. You’ll come upon a small outpost where some humans trade occasionally. They’re wary of strangers, but they should be less hostile than elves.”

I exhale. “Thank you,” I say, voice scratchy from disuse. “You’ve done more for us than we could’ve hoped.”

She just smiles, her gaze flicking to Daeva momentarily. “I did what felt right. And you—” She fixes her attention on him. “Don’t forget what we talked about. You owe them clarity.”

An uneasy tremor slithers through my stomach. Daeva inclines his head, lips pressed tight. “I won’t forget,” he mutters.

Dirroth huffs, crossing his skeletal arms over his protruding ribs. A swirl of greenish color glows between them, some mix of annoyance and territorial pride. “Leave now, or I’ll change my mind,” he growls. But there’s no real threat in his tone. “If you see more waira, run. Or kill them first. Less competition for me.”

A single, awkward beat passes. Then Cole chuckles nervously. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

Amalia steps forward, pressing a small pouch into my hands. “Herbs,” she explains. “The same kind I used for Jenna. If her fever spikes again, steep them in water, make her drink. It might help.” Her eyes soften. “Good luck.”

I nod, placing a trembling hand over the pouch. “Thank you,” I whisper, voice catching. For a moment, the lump in my throat is almost too large to swallow. Somehow, these two—Dirroth and Amalia—have become an odd beacon of hope in a world that seems determined to devour us. If they can find acceptance with each other, maybe there’s a chance for the rest of us.

Without further ceremony, we part ways. Dirroth and Amalia vanish back into the shadows of the forest, leaving us alone on the game trail. A hush settles, broken only by the rustle of branches overhead. The path stretches before us, seeming endless. But it’s a direction, at least.

We walk. At first, no one speaks. Jenna leans heavily on Ryn, her feet dragging. Silas

maintains a short lead ahead, scanning for signs of ambush. Cole flanks the rear, dagger at the ready. Daeva drifts closer to me than usual, though he doesn't speak. My heart thuds with the knowledge that soon, we'll have to face what we've avoided for so long.

Half the morning passes in a daze of step after aching step. The forest gradually opens into rolling hills dotted with scrub and smaller trees. A hawk screeches above us, circling lazily in the milky sky. Rocks jut from the ground like broken teeth, forcing us to weave around them. My shoulders burn from tension, and my mind won't stop replaying Amalia's final words: You owe them clarity.

Eventually, Ryn calls for a rest near a half-collapsed stone wall—perhaps the remnants of an old boundary marker. We settle behind it, out of the breeze. Silas drops the crossbow and rubs his temples, exhaustion etched into every line of his face. Jenna settles onto the grass, breathing shallowly. Cole and Ryn rummage for water, but our supply is nearly gone, just a trickle sloshing in the bottom of the skins.

Daeva remains standing, eyes scanning the horizon. His posture is tense, as if he expects an attack at any moment. Or maybe he's just bracing himself for a different confrontation.

My stomach flips. This can't wait any longer. Amalia was right—there's no point dragging my friends into a deal they never asked for. And if someone must pay, I know it should be me. Shame and dread war inside me, along with a spark of something else: a strange, irresistible pull that I can't name.

I stand, brushing bits of grass from my legs. "Daeva," I say softly, pitching my voice so the others won't overhear. "Can we talk? Alone?"

He glances at me, the storm in his silver-blue eyes barely contained. Then he inclines his head. "Lead the way."

I move away from the ruined wall, rounding a bend of shrubs until we're out of earshot. The wind rustles dried leaves across the ground. My heart thunders loud enough to drown out my thoughts. I face him, inhaling shaky breaths, and force myself to meet his gaze.

"I can't let them pay for my mistake," I begin, voice trembling. "I'm the one who freed you from that mirror. That means the contract is my burden."

He tenses, jaw flexing. "Calla, it isn't that simple?—"

"Isn't it?" I interject, stepping closer. "You said a life, a soul must be given. But it was me who summoned you—my hands that touched the mirror, my voice that spoke the words. I can't let Jenna, or Silas, or anyone else bear that price. It's mine."

His eyes narrow, pain etched in the furrow of his brow. "I never wanted you to suffer," he says, voice taut. "But the law of demonkind—ancient magic older than memory—demands balance. Payment for power."

"I know." My pulse quickens, a restless fire in my veins. The reality of what I'm about to offer sinks in. "So let me pay it. But you have to promise me something first."

He folds his arms, tension evident in every line of his body. "Name it."

I swallow hard. "Promise you'll leave my friends alone. That no matter what happens, Silas, Cole, Ryn, Jenna... they walk away free." My throat constricts as I add, "I can't bear it if they're forced to make some sacrifice."

His expression shutters, conflict raging in his eyes. Finally, he nods—slowly, deliberately. "I promise."

A tremor of relief mingles with dread. I stare at him. “How do we... finalize this? Do you... do you need me to kill someone? Or?—”

“No,” he interrupts, voice rough. “Nothing like that. Typically, a demon demands the mortal’s life or soul directly. You... you offer yourself to me fully, irrevocably. Obedience in all things.” His gaze slides away. “You sign your soul over, become bound by my will.”

His words slash through me. Obey him unconditionally. The notion sets my heart fluttering between terror and a sudden jolt of heated curiosity. Why am I... excited? The shame of it stings, but I can’t deny that my pulse thunders not just from fear.

I lick my lips, forcing the question: “If I do that... what happens to me?”

He exhales, a long, ragged breath. “You become mine, in essence. You’ll feel the demonic influence. Magic might awaken in you, or shift your emotions, amplify your desires. It can be dangerous.” His voice drops. “I don’t fully know how it will affect a mortal who willingly gives their soul to a demon that was once human.”

A breathless laugh escapes me, high and strained. “So you’re not sure if it’ll make me... insane? Mindless?” My stomach twists at the possibilities.

“Possibly neither. Possibly something else,” he says, words hushed with regret. “But you’ll gain power, Calla. Strength beyond human limits. I—I can’t guarantee it won’t devour you.”

Despite the fear roiling in my gut, a spark of determination flares. I think of the chains I’ve worn, the helplessness that’s haunted me my entire life. Slavery under dark elves, subjugation under orcs, or something worse if we can’t defend ourselves. Am I truly free if I live every day in fear?

“Then we’ll figure it out,” I whisper. “Better me than any of them.”

His gaze snaps to mine. “You’re certain?”

I nod, trembling. “Yes.”

A beat of silence, heavy as a tomb. Then he lifts his hand, and black markings swirl over his skin, stirring like living shadows. “The contract can be sealed by words,” he explains quietly. “A vow. Then... we affirm it with a blood oath. Or a kiss, in some traditions.” A faint flush touches his cheeks. “I don’t want to force you to cut yourself.”

My chest tightens with a mix of terror and something else I dare not name. “So a kiss is enough?”

He inclines his head. “If you’re sure. It’s unorthodox, but the magic will recognize intent.”

I exhale, trying to steady the pounding in my ears. A thousand half-formed thoughts collide in my mind: Am I really doing this? Will it truly save them? Will I survive this power coursing through my veins? But I find no alternative. Either I pay, or the contract remains unfulfilled, and we all risk damnation.

Daeva’s eyes burn with intensity as he speaks the ancient words—a demon’s binding incantation. The syllables scrape the air, thick with power. My skin prickles, every hair standing on end. The forest hushes, as if listening to our clandestine vow.

He finishes, voice trembling with a raw edge: “...and in the acceptance of this mortal soul, the contract stands. Speak your name and pledge.”

I swallow the dryness in my throat, trying not to falter. “I... Calla... offer my soul to



you, Daeva. I swear obedience and... and service,” my cheeks flame at the word, “so that my friends may be spared. Let the contract be paid.”

Even before I finish, I feel it—a ripple of cold energy passing through my spine, coalescing in my core. The air crackles, a static hum raising goosebumps along my arms.

Daeva steps closer, shadows writhing around him. “Calla,” he whispers, voice hoarse. “Then we seal it.”

I can hardly breathe. My heart hammers as he lifts a hand to cup my cheek. The heat of his skin contrasts with the swirl of cold magic between us. Our gazes meet, and in that moment, every doubt and fear collides with a deep, inexplicable yearning. Gods help me, I want this.

His lips descend on mine, capturing them in a kiss that ignites every nerve in my body. Heat surges, devouring the cold, wrapping me in a pulse of raw energy. My knees weaken, and I cling to his forearm for balance, fingers digging into the corded muscle there. His free hand slides to my waist, steadying me with surprising gentleness.

The kiss is not soft or tentative. It’s laced with desperation, an undercurrent of hunger that echoes the swirling power. My skin tingles, molten warmth spreading from where our mouths connect, rushing through my veins like liquid fire. I feel him exhale against my lips, a ragged sound that resonates with the frantic beat of my heart.

A faint spark crackles between us, dancing across my senses. My breath hitches. I taste something wild in him—centuries of pain and longing, tempered by fierce resolve. The swirl of black tattoos on his forearms glows faintly, as if in response to our contact. My entire body feels suspended in that luminous rush of magic, halfway

between terror and ecstasy.

Slowly, he breaks the kiss, panting softly. The world around us spins, and I cling to his chest to keep from collapsing. My pulse thrums, energy buzzing behind my eyes. I can barely form a thought.

“Calla,” he murmurs, resting his forehead against mine. “It’s done.”

I tremble, pressing a palm to my chest. Beneath my palm, my heart gallops. I sense a foreign presence fluttering in my mind, like a door unlocked to a room I never knew existed. A whisper of power nips at my consciousness, beckoning me to embrace it. Is this the demon influence he warned about?

“What... what happens now?” I manage, voice shaky.

His gaze darkens, regret and possessiveness intertwined. “You belong to me. I’ll protect you, guide you, but we must tread carefully. Already, I feel the bond pulsing between us, merging our energies.” His throat bobs. “You may sense my emotions, and I might sense yours. This is more than a contract—it’s... a tether.”

A sudden wave of vertigo hits me. I stagger, and he steadies me. My cheeks blaze with heat, equal parts embarrassment and that lingering spark from the kiss. The memory of it burns on my lips—strange how something so dangerous could also be so... intoxicating.

After a moment, I straighten, forcing myself to breathe normally. “So long as my friends are free,” I whisper. “That’s all that matters.”

A flicker of pain crosses his features. “Yes.” His arms fall to his sides, though I notice how one hand hovers near me, as if unable to fully let go. “But they must never learn the details—some might fear you now. Demonic power draws hostility.”

I recall Silas's expression whenever he glances at Daeva, the barely masked suspicion. If Silas knew I'd pledged myself so completely, how would he react? I suspect not well.

"Alright," I agree, voice subdued. "I won't say more than necessary."

We linger in silence, the forest breeze caressing our heated faces. The space between us crackles with new tension: I sense him, not just physically, but on a deeper level, as if a chord connects our hearts. Is that his longing, or my own? The lines are already blurring.

At last, he clears his throat. "We should return to them," he says, voice low. "They'll wonder what happened."

My stomach clenches with apprehension. "I need a moment, then I'll join you. Tell them... tell them I needed water or something." I want to gather my thoughts, quell the racing of my heart. He hesitates, concern flickering in his eyes, but eventually nods and slips away, leaving me alone in the hush of the scrubland.

The wind rustles the grasses around me, and I tilt my head back, gazing at the pale blue sky. My lips still tingle from his kiss. Beneath that fleeting physical sensation, a deeper thrumming resonates—like a second heartbeat echoing in my chest. The bond. I belong to him. A shiver of dread and excitement courses through me at the realization.

He told me that I might change, that demon influence might twist my emotions. Already, I feel the stirrings of something new inside me: a roiling mixture of raw power and longing. I swear I can sense the faint pulse of Daeva's presence, as though he stands behind my eyelids, watching. The thought sends a hot flush over my cheeks.

Eventually, I force my limbs to move. We can't stay hidden forever. The contract's sealed; no going back now. And my friends—my family—are depending on me to see this through. I push away from the bushes and retrace my steps around the bend.

They're waiting by the ruined wall, scanning the horizon for threats. Jenna is pale, but awake, leaning on Ryn's shoulder. Silas stands near the front, arms crossed, eyeing Daeva suspiciously. Cole meets my gaze, relief softening his features. "You alright?" he asks.

I force a tight smile. "Yes," I lie. "Just needed some air."

Silas arches a brow. "We all need air. You were gone a while."

"Let it be, Silas," Ryn murmurs, giving me a sympathetic glance. "We're all on edge."

Daeva remains silent, arms folded, face unreadable. But I sense the tension in him—this unspoken knowledge of what just transpired. My cheeks burn again. Thankfully, no one presses further, though Silas's eyes linger with a flicker of concern that borders on jealousy. I'm sorry, Silas. I did what I had to do.

Cole helps Jenna to her feet. "Shall we keep moving? We might reach that settlement by nightfall if we push."

We set off once more, following the trail across rocky plains. My skin prickles with new awareness, the wind's touch sharper than before. Every so often, I glance at Daeva, and he catches my eye, lips tightening in a private acknowledgement of our secret. Each time, warmth pools low in my belly, mingling with guilt.

The hours pass in a grim march. The sun climbs high, baking the stones underfoot, then begins its slow descent. We spot occasional fragments of old roads—weathered

cobblestones peeking through the dirt—and once, a battered signpost with no readable letters. By midday, Jenna nearly collapses from fatigue, forcing us to slow even more.

I fall into step with her and Ryn, offering an arm when she wobbles. She tries to smile. “I’m okay, really,” she protests, sweat beading her brow. “Just... a little tired.”

I brush damp hair from her face. “We’ll rest soon.” My voice catches. She’s alive because of me, but at what cost? The contract’s shadow hovers at the edge of my thoughts, a constant reminder that my soul is no longer my own.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Jenna whispers, eyes flicking behind us. I suspect she notices how I keep glancing at Daeva.

Forcing a nod, I feign confidence. “Yeah. Tired. That’s all.”

Eventually, the sun sinks toward the horizon, painting the sky in bruised oranges and purples. Just as twilight creeps across the land, we crest a small rise and glimpse, in the distance, a scattering of structures—wooden fences, low huts, and the faint glow of torches. My heart leaps. Civilization. Humans, presumably. We might find a roof, real food, medicine for Jenna.

Cole grins, though exhaustion lines his face. “Look!” he exclaims, pointing. “That must be the outpost.”

Silas squints. “We have a few hours of light left. Let’s push forward.”

Jenna gives a shaky laugh. “Beds. Maybe even soup.”

We press on, determination renewed. Daeva remains quiet at my side, and I sense his wariness. He’s not used to approaching human settlements. I recall what Amalia said:

some humans might be wary of a demon. But we have no choice if we want refuge.

Near sundown, we reach the outskirts—a rough palisade of sharpened logs marking the boundary. A pair of watchmen, clad in dusty leather, step forward warily, torches held high. They call out, “Halt!” and we oblige, raising our hands to show no threat. Tension spikes, but eventually, they let us in with a warning that the local leader will want to see us. Silas does most of the talking, explaining we’re refugees fleeing dark elves. They don’t press for details, and my heart swells with relief when no one demands too many answers.

Inside, it’s little more than a cluster of wooden huts, a few ramshackle stalls, and a communal fire pit. Still, it’s the closest thing to a town we’ve seen since leaving Vaerathis. People eye us from doorways, curious and cautious. We find a stable where a tired-looking woman named Mira agrees to let us sleep on straw pallets for the night, in exchange for a handful of trinkets we scrounged from the orcs.

I sink onto one such pallet, ignoring the itch of straw beneath my sore body. It’s not a luxurious bed, but it’s better than stone floors or muddy ground. Jenna collapses beside me, relief etched in her features. Silas and Cole speak with Mira about buying simple provisions. Ryn stands guard, scanning for trouble.

Daeva, though, lingers in the corner, half-hidden by shadows. When my gaze meets his, the tether between us pulses, a subtle reminder of the vow sealed by our kiss. My entire body tightens with that recollection—fear and an inexplicable longing swirl like a tempest in my veins.

An uneasy calm settles over the stable, broken only by the snuffling of horses in nearby stalls and the low murmur of the outpost’s inhabitants outside. I attempt to rest, but my mind thrums too loudly with all that’s changed. The hush of evening drags on, and eventually Silas, Cole, and Ryn drift into an exhausted doze. Jenna is already asleep, face pressed into the crook of her arm.

I glance at Daeva again, heart lurching. In the dim torchlight, his hair glows pale, his angular features highlighted by sharp shadows. The black markings on his arms ripple subtly, as if alive. I rise, compelled by an urge I can't quell, and approach him.

He regards me with a mix of wariness and warmth, stepping aside so my footfalls don't disturb the others. "You should sleep," he murmurs, voice barely above a whisper. "We have a long road ahead."

I chew my lip. "I can't. There's too much... swirling in my head." My heart hammers, recalling how it felt to share that kiss, how power and heat twisted inside me. "This bond... it's like I can't stop thinking about you. Is that normal?"

A flicker of guilt passes over his expression. "It's the contract. Part of your essence is bound to me. You'll sense my presence... my emotions, perhaps."

I swallow. "I sense something." My cheeks burn. "Desire. Fear. I don't know if it's mine or yours."

His eyes darken, tension in his shoulders. "Likely both. Our emotions feed off each other. I'm sorry."

A strangled laugh catches in my throat. "Don't apologize for how we feel. This was my choice."

He lifts a hand, almost touching my cheek, then stops short. I see the question in his gaze— Is it too soon? Too intimate? But the bond tugs at us, drawing me closer until my body almost brushes his. My breath catches in my throat, a tremor of longing rippling through me.

"Calla," he whispers, voice cracked with vulnerability. "I won't let this contract destroy you. If there's a way to free you without harming your friends or me... I'll

find it.”

I rest my palm against his chest, sensing the steady beat of his heart. Heat floods my face. “Thank you,” I manage. “But until then... we’re bound. I’ll live with that.” I’ll live with it, no matter how it changes me, I add silently, a flutter of excitement stirring beneath the dread.

His eyes slide shut for a moment, as though waging an internal battle. Then he exhales, and his free hand lifts to cradle my jaw gently. The tether between us intensifies, humming with unspoken tension. I know we’re in a stable, that my friends lie just feet away, but the rest of the world feels far removed.

“Get some rest,” he repeats, voice softer now. “We can figure out the rest tomorrow.”

I nod, heart pounding. Our gazes lock one last time. An unspoken promise passes between us: We’ll face whatever comes, together. Despite the terror of surrendering my soul, I’ve never felt so alive. My blood churns with the memory of our shared kiss, the rush of demonic magic pulsing inside me.

Slowly, I step back, my hand slipping from his chest. He watches me with that same quiet intensity until I settle onto the straw pallet. Closing my eyes, I let exhaustion drag me down, even as the bond thrums beneath my skin. I sense Daeva’s presence lingering across the stable, standing sentinel in the half-light.

Before I plunge into a restless dream, I think of Amalia’s gentle smile, of Dirroth’s bestial power tempered by her hand, and of the horrors we’ve left behind. The road ahead is uncertain—dark elves, orcs, or more monstrous things may yet stalk us—but for the first time, I feel a spark of power in my veins. I’m no longer a helpless slave. I have a demon’s strength behind me... and within me.

In the hush of the outpost night, I press my palm against the spot over my racing



heart, acutely aware that it doesn't beat for me alone anymore. The contract's seal resonates like an echo, binding my fate to Daeva's. Whether it becomes a doom or a salvation, I can't say. But as weariness claims me, my last waking thought is that I no longer face this world alone. And for all the danger and uncertainty, that knowledge warms me in ways I never thought possible.

### DAEVA

I linger in the shadows of the settlement gate, hood pulled low over my brow, cloak draped around me like a funeral shroud. Evening light slants across the dusty courtyard, illuminating only the tips of my boots. The rest of me remains hidden in darkness—a necessary precaution. Though these humans are not as oppressive as the dark elves or as savage as orcs, I know the mark of a demon invites suspicion. If they recognized the tattoos swirling across my arms and the faint aura that clings to me, they'd probably bar me from entering altogether.

But I can't stand too far away. Calla's presence tugs at me like an invisible cord, and I can't let that tether stretch too thin. Because of our bond, I sense her worry, her exhausted relief at having found a scrap of safety. I almost feel her heartbeat in my own chest. My emotions coil tight with a mix of protectiveness and dread, a perpetual undercurrent since we sealed our contract in that stolen kiss.

My gaze sweeps the settlement. It's little more than a wide clearing surrounded by crude wooden walls. A few huts line the perimeter, each topped with straw roofs. A central area holds a communal fire pit, though no flames crackle there at the moment. People wander past, eyes flicking curiously toward the cluster of newcomers—my traveling companions—while I remain back in the gloom.

I watch as Silas, Cole, and Ryn negotiate with a local official, a stout man wearing tattered furs, presumably some kind of village leader or head guard. Jenna stands a pace behind them, leaning heavily on Ryn's arm. Her fever has returned, leaving her

face pale and drawn. I resist the impulse to step forward and offer my magic. It would only raise more questions if I revealed my nature now. And we have no currency to speak of, no coins for lodging, so I assume the others must bargain with leftover trinkets or labor.

Calla stands near them, arms crossed around her middle. She glances toward me occasionally, a silent flick of her gaze through the crowd, as if searching to confirm I'm still there. I tug my hood lower in answer, letting the edge of a half-smile curl my lips unseen. Her worry seeps into me, a faint echo. My chest tightens with the knowledge that I put her in this predicament: bound to a demon, forced to wander the wilds, risking her relationships for a contract I can't easily break.

The village leader gestures broadly, muttering something about a small house on the outskirts. Silas gives him a curt nod, and a moment later, the group steps back from the conversation. I melt into the folds of my cloak and slink forward just enough to hear their quiet words.

"House on the edge of the settlement," Silas mutters, his voice laced with relief and a hint of leftover hostility. He runs a hand through his tousled hair. "We can stay there as long as we keep to ourselves and don't cause trouble. We'll need to help with menial tasks, maybe gather firewood or hunt if we can find anything."

Cole nods. "Better than nothing. Jenna can rest."

Jenna swallows, forcing a small smile. "Thank you."

Ryn rubs her shoulder. "Let's get you inside."

Calla's eyes drift toward me again, and I sense a faint stirring in my chest: a mixture of gratitude and guilt. I gave them a chance to reach this place alive. But at the same time, Silas's sideways glare tells me he'd rather I vanish. He doesn't speak it aloud,

not in front of Calla. However, the tension in his posture is unmistakable. He grips the crossbow at his hip like it's a promise.

They begin walking, heading down a narrow pathway that leads between low huts toward the outskirts. I trail after them, staying half a dozen paces behind, letting the swirl of my dark cloak and the shadows keep my features hidden. The settlement's residents cast curious, sometimes fearful looks. A man with a scarred face glances at me twice, sniffing as though he smells something off, but he says nothing. Perhaps he simply thinks I'm an unsociable traveler.

Within minutes, we reach a ramshackle house perched at the farthest edge of the village, near where the walls curve inward to meet a rocky slope. The structure is small—two rooms at most—built of uneven planks. A single door stands crooked on leather hinges. It's hardly a fortress, yet it's a roof, a place for Jenna to rest.

Once the door opens, the musty scent of stale straw and damp wood greets us. Ryn helps Jenna inside, where she sinks onto a low wooden bench. Cole and Silas begin examining the space: a hearth with no fire, a single table, and missing shutters on the window. Calla stands near the threshold, scanning the interior. The faint flicker of a single lantern reveals dust dancing in the air.

I linger on the doorstep, my hood casting my face in shadow. They've no reason to thank me out loud; I contributed nothing to these negotiations. Silas obviously keeps track of that fact, given how he avoids meeting my eyes.

Cole sets down his pack. "We'll need to fetch water, see if there's a well or stream. Maybe scrounge for some food tomorrow."

"We can manage," Ryn agrees, voice subdued. He eyes Jenna with concern, then crosses to her, checking her brow. "You hanging in there?"

She nods weakly. “Better than this morning,” she whispers.

Silas finally looks at me. His words come out flat. “We’re settled, for now.” A pause, tension radiating off him. “Thank you for... everything.” The gratitude is forced, barely concealing his desire to be rid of me.

I keep my voice low and impassive. “You’re welcome.”

Calla shifts from foot to foot, catching the anxious undercurrent. I can’t blame her for noticing. The bond thrums between us, and I feel her wariness spike. Even after sealing our contract, I haven’t told her everything. There’s my ancient enemy, the one who cursed me centuries ago, still out there. As long as I remain in Protheka, that threat looms. If it finds me, it might find her —the one person who stands to break my isolation. The thought sends cold dread through my veins.

But she’s bound to me now. I need her warmth like a starving man needs bread. In her eyes, I glimpse a glimmer of unwavering humanity, the kind I lost long ago. Being near her is like standing close to a hearthfire after a thousand years in the cold. I won’t sever that link, can’t even if I wanted to. Yet the consequences of my presence in her life are vast.

I clear my throat, turning my gaze on the group. “You have shelter,” I say quietly, crossing my arms beneath my cloak. “That was the goal.”

Cole gives a short nod. “Yes. We can figure out next steps after we rest.” He sounds tired but genuine.

Silas’s jaw flexes. “So... what now? You staying, or are you going to vanish off into the night as usual?”

I sense the challenge in his tone. A surge of annoyance flares beneath my ribs. This

settlement is a convenient respite for them , but for me... it's a trap. Humans will eventually notice the peculiarities around me—my lack of breath, the unnatural aura if I remove my cloak, the swirl of demonic power I can't fully contain. Better if I depart. But the bond to Calla is unbreakable. She has to come with me, or else the contract might twist her soul in my absence. Not to mention, I can't protect her from afar. Nor do I want to.

Anger ignites in Silas's eyes. He steps closer, voice low but dangerous. "Leaving? You'd take her with you? We only just arrived."

He's guessed my intention. I can see how his hand drifts near the crossbow, but it remains at his side for now. Tension crackles in the cramped space, drawing Cole's and Ryn's attention. Calla inhales sharply, worry radiating through our bond.

I set my jaw. "I have matters to attend to outside these walls," I reply, voice tight with restrained emotion. "I won't remain in this place for long. And yes, Calla must accompany me. It's part of our... arrangement."

Calla shoots me a stricken look. She's known I'd eventually leave, but hearing it stated so bluntly in front of everyone cracks the veneer of peace we've clung to since entering this settlement. Damn this tension. I swallow, trying to control my voice from trembling with the swirl of contradictory emotions: desperation, guilt, fear of losing her, and fear of harming her if she stays.

"What arrangement?" Silas demands, focusing on Calla now. "You're truly going to follow him, out into the wild? We only just got you somewhere safe."

Calla's hands curl into fists at her sides, eyes darting between me and Silas. "I—I have to," she says softly. "It's the only way to protect you. All of you."

Silas's face twists with disbelief, then betrayal. "Protect us? He's the one who

threatened your soul, right? He's the one who demands a price. How is leaving with him better than living here?"

Her voice shakes. "Because the contract is sealed. I can't just... pretend it doesn't exist. He can't either."

A cold spear of shame pierces me. They're discussing me like I'm a plague. Perhaps I am. Silence grips the room for a moment. Even Cole and Ryn, though not outwardly hostile, share uncertain glances.

Jenna, from her bench, lifts her head. "If Calla's certain, we have to respect it," she says, her voice hoarse. "She... she saved me, saved all of us. Let her decide her path."

But Silas's anger won't be quelled so easily. "You'd do that, Calla? Walk off with this demon, leaving us behind, all so you can... what? Pay off a debt in blood?"

She flinches. I sense her despair through our bond, as if a sharp needle pricks at my chest. She's hurting because of me. My anger stirs, directed at Silas's scathing tone, but more at myself for causing this rift.

Without warning, Silas jerks into motion, crossing the room in a few swift strides. He pivots, leveling the crossbow at me. My eyes narrow behind the hood, darkness stirring in my blood. The swirl of demonic power flares in response to the threat, and I feel the old instinct to kill or be killed whisper at the back of my mind.

"Silas, don't!" Calla yells, stepping forward.

But Silas's finger tightens on the trigger, terror warring with fury in his gaze. "I won't let you take her away," he snarls. "If you're gone, she's free from the contract, right?"

“Stop it!” Cole barks, surging forward to grab Silas’s arm. But Silas shakes him off, pure desperation fueling him.

Everything slows. The crossbow fires with a twang that cuts through my eardrums. Reflex alone saves me. I twist sideways, letting the bolt whistle past my hood, embedding itself in the wooden wall behind me with a dull thunk . My heartbeat pounds in my ears. I want to tear him limb from limb for daring to attack. Another part recognizes Silas is just a frantic mortal, terrified of losing the woman he cares about.

He doesn’t wait. He’s already reloading with trembling hands. This time, my power surges before he can aim. A coil of black energy crackles around my arm, lashing forward to knock the crossbow from his grip. He gasps as it skitters across the floor. But in his desperation, Silas lunges at me with a dagger, face contorted in rage.

“Silas, no!” Calla’s voice breaks, echoing in my head.

I bare my teeth, raw fury sparking. He’d kill me if I let him. My cloak flares as I dodge, then I seize his wrist in a crushing grip. He cries out, the dagger clattering to the ground. My other hand snakes toward his throat, a lethal reflex. For a heartbeat, I see my claws raking across flesh, tasting the kill.

“Daeva, please!” Calla’s plea slices through my rage.

I freeze, Silas’s wrist pinned in my grip, my fingers hovering at his neck. The demon inside me rumbles for blood, but Calla’s presence is a bright flame staving off darkness. She’s behind me, her fear pummeling my senses. If I kill Silas, I kill part of her heart. I can’t— won’t —do that.

Slowly, I release Silas’s wrist, stepping back. He staggers, rubbing at bruised skin, eyes wide with confusion and fear. Cole and Ryn jump between us, unsure whether to



restrain Silas or shield him. Jenna leans against the bench, horror etched on her features.

I spin away, forcing my breathing to steady. The recoil of my near-violence leaves me shaking inside. I sense Calla's trembling as well. She rushes forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. Her voice trembles with relief. "Thank you for not hurting him," she whispers.

Silas collapses to his knees, fists clenched, staring at the ground in abject misery. "I... I'm sorry," he rasps, though I'm not certain whether he's speaking to me or Calla. "I can't watch you leave with him. I can't."

Calla kneels beside him. "I'm so sorry, Silas," she murmurs, her eyes glistening. "But this is my decision."

He exhales a ragged sob, burying his face in his hands. Cole and Ryn hover, uncertain how to console him. Tension hums in the room, thick enough to smother us all. I remain rigid, every muscle coiled with leftover adrenaline. My mind spins with the realization: if I stay a moment longer, I might lose control. The demon inside me roars for space .

I glance at Calla, and she meets my gaze, understanding. This settlement, these mortal entanglements—it's too volatile. She sees in my eyes that I won't remain here. She stands, a faint tremor in her posture, and crosses to my side.

"Silas," she says softly, though he refuses to look up. "I have to go. If I stay... it only puts you in danger. That's the truth."

Jenna tries to protest, voice shaky, but Cole hushes her. Ryn steps forward and says gently, "At least give us a chance to say goodbye properly?"

Calla's lips part, grief shining in her eyes. "We don't have time," she whispers, though her heart aches. I feel it like a twisting knife in my gut, echoing through our bond. I've made her break their hearts for me.

Without another word, I turn, cloak swirling, and push the door open. The last rays of sunlight streak across the threshold. Calla follows, footsteps hesitant but resolute. Silas lifts his head at the sound, tears bright in his eyes. He doesn't move to stop her this time. Instead, heartbreak etches his features as he chokes out her name: "Calla..."

She pauses, tears slipping down her cheeks, but then steels herself. "Goodbye," she whispers, voice cracking.

I step out, letting the door swing shut behind us with a hollow thud.

Night falls swiftly as we leave the settlement behind. Torches flicker along the palisade, but we slip into the darkness unchallenged, no guard stopping us. Perhaps the watchmen are too occupied or too afraid to question me. The road leading out is little more than a faint dirt track, winding into the wilderness of Protheka. My cloak billows around my legs, and Calla walks a pace behind me, arms wrapped around herself.

I sense her turmoil. My own emotions churn violently—anger, regret, a searing guilt for how this parted her from friends who cared for her. Yet there's also a fierce possessiveness, an irrational need to keep her close, to ensure no one else tries to claim or kill her.

After a time, the path curves, and we find ourselves trudging across a rolling expanse of grass beneath a moonless sky. Stars scatter overhead like shards of broken glass. The wind gusts, carrying the distant cry of nocturnal beasts. I sense the tension in my shoulders, and I know Calla feels it too. We share a bond. My anger might spill into

her mind if I'm not careful.

She lifts her voice into the quiet. "Where are we going?"

I keep my eyes forward, unable to face her just yet. "Away," I say curtly. "I can't... remain in one place. We have to keep moving."

"Daeva," she persists, "you said you'd look for a way to free me from the contract. Is that where we're headed?"

I exhale shakily, bitterness creeping in. "Yes. There might be hidden knowledge in the old ruins scattered across Protheka, or among certain wanderers who dabble in forbidden magic. I can't promise anything, but I... must try."

Silence. I sense her pulse quicken. "But what if I don't want to be free?" she asks softly.

That simple question slices me raw. My steps falter, rage flaring unexpectedly. How can she say that? She should want her freedom above all else. I'm a demon, for the gods' sake. I spin on her, eyes flashing with residual fury.

"Don't talk nonsense," I snap, voice echoing across the grassland. "You're a mortal. This contract will ruin you. I can't—" My words hitch, because part of me loathes the idea of letting her go. Yet I press on, spitting the words. "I can't watch you waste your life chained to a demon. I won't be around forever, and if you rely on me, you'll die soon enough or lose your humanity entirely."

She reels, shock etched on her face. "But?—"

"You're weak," I bite out, the old cruelty of demonic nature rising unbidden. "Fragile. A fleeting spark. I can't hold your hand through every storm." The moment

the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Her face pales, eyes brimming with hurt. A dagger of self-loathing twists in my gut.

At once, I see how I've wounded her. My chest constricts. She's not weak—she's brave and resilient. She overcame slavery, faced orcs and waira, sacrificed everything to save her friends. Even now, she fights for the right to stand at my side.

But my fear is uncontrollable. If my ancient enemy resurfaces, she'll be a target. She'll suffer, or worse. I can't let that happen. Yet I can't bury that fear enough to speak calmly.

Calla's lips tremble. "I thought..." She looks away, tears gathering. "I thought this contract bound us. That we were in this together."

The anguish in her voice scalds me. I'm trembling with a fury I can't fully articulate. "We are," I grind out. "But it's a mistake. A demon's bond kills everything it touches."

She flinches. I hear her breath hitch, and the bond between us resonates with her despair. I want to comfort her, to gather her close, but my thoughts are a tangled snarl of guilt, longing, and an unspoken terror of letting her see the darkest corners of my existence. I can't let her know about my immortal foe, about the curse that might crush us both.

"I'm sorry," I force out, forcing my hands to relax instead of balling into fists. "I... I didn't mean?—"

Her face crumples, and she turns away from me. "No," she whispers, hugging herself. "You did mean it."

Shame claws at me. I step forward, but she takes a step back. My mouth opens,

desperate for the right words, but nothing comes. The tension in my own chest is too thick. My anger, frustration, and protective instincts tear at my sanity. The contract tugs us together, but I can't reconcile how much I might endanger her.

With a growl of self-directed fury, I spin on my heel, striding away several paces. "I need... a moment," I say, voice shaking. The bond thrums as I distance myself physically. Calla's heartbreak slams into me, a dull ache. Each step tears at me, but I can't remain so close or I'll unravel further.

The grass swishes around my boots. Farther away from her, I can almost breathe. The night wind slaps against my cloak, as if scolding me. I stare at the dark horizon, shoulders tense. I can still feel her behind me, the faint warmth of her soul, the raw hurt in her chest that echoes my own regret.

I rake a hand through my white hair, cursing softly under my breath. How did I become this monster that snaps at every perceived vulnerability? It's not what I wanted. Once, I was human—before betrayal turned me into something else. I still carry that memory like a festering wound. And now I've forced Calla into a bond that might end the same way.

I close my eyes, anger at myself roiling. She deserves better. The sting of that realization is almost unbearable. She gave me her soul, trusting I'd keep her safe. Instead, I spit venom because I'm terrified. Terrified of losing her, or destroying her by letting her stay. Terrified of repeating the cycle of pain my centuries have inflicted on anyone close to me.

The hush stretches. I try to calm the raging sea inside my head, listening to the night calls of distant creatures. After a long, ragged moment, I force a low exhale. I must apologize properly. Must try to explain, at least in some small way, that her presence stirs up a tempest of emotions I can barely contain. That the thought of losing her or seeing her harmed by my old foe—someone so dangerous even I fear them—keeps

me on edge constantly. But I can't reveal that enemy's identity yet, not without endangering her further.

Steeling myself, I start to turn back toward Calla, prepared to kneel at her feet if that's what it takes for her to forgive me. But I hesitate, uncertain if my presence will only worsen the raw wound I've inflicted. My fingertips tremble, hungry for her forgiveness, for the balm of her voice. She might push me away. And if she does... I deserve it.

Another shuddering breath escapes my lungs. The sky stretches vast and empty above, starlight offering no comfort. My eyes sting with unshed anger and regret. Even if we find a way to break the contract, would it mean losing her forever? The idea carves a hollow ache inside me. But I can't keep her enslaved. She should be free to choose her life, not shackled to a demon with a cursed past.

With an unsteady resolve, I move a few steps nearer, though still out of her reach. She stands where I left her, arms wrapped around her torso, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. My heart twists at the sight, but I keep my distance. Let her gather her composure. Let me gather mine. We are bound by magic, but right now, we are separated by the havoc of fear and pain.

Tomorrow, perhaps, we'll find a calmer moment to speak—to mend this rift or at least place a balm on the wound. But for tonight, the darkness claims us both. And I remain on the edge of it, swirling in my cloak of guilt, silently cursing my own cowardice, my inability to share the deepest secret lurking in my shadows. If she knew the danger that stalks me, that might soon stalk her ...

But no. Not yet.

Wind whips across the grass, sending it rippling like a dark ocean. The stars watch, distant and uncaring, as two souls bound by demon law drift in the night, each

battered by truths too heavy to speak. Tomorrow, I vow, I'll find a way to soothe her. For now, I stand alone, my back to her trembling figure, the bond throbbing with an ache I can scarcely endure. And in that ache, I realize how deeply I need her light—and how unworthy I feel to keep it.

### CALLA

I keep my distance from Daeva as we trudge across the moonlit plains, my hands tightly clutching the straps of my pack, shoulders bowed against a wind that carries the lingering scent of autumn. The night stretches endlessly ahead, and my mind churns with raw thoughts, replaying the harsh words he threw at me hours ago. He's a silent silhouette several paces in front, hood drawn low over his white hair. Though the bond thrums—an unrelenting thread of awareness—I feel as if a yawning chasm stretches between our hearts.

I can't ignore the sting of his accusation: that I'm weak, that I'm only going to chain him down with my mortality. It cuts deeper than any physical wound, because I surrendered my soul to him, believing we shared a mutual need. Yet, perhaps he's right: compared to his centuries of power, I am fragile. A liability. Still, the memory of that single, heated kiss we shared, when I sealed my contract, reminds me I'm not worthless. He wanted me, needed me. Or so I believed.

Step after step, we push on. I'm exhausted, but the tension crackling beneath my skin won't let me rest, not while our last conversation hangs unresolved in the air. Occasionally, Daeva glances back, the lamplight from distant stars catching the faint shape of his jaw under the hood, but he never speaks. I feel the echo of his mood: conflict, regret, a swirl of anger that he's trying to tamp down. I sense he's hiding something crucial from me, a secret that spurs his desperation to keep me at arm's length. Fear, perhaps, or an old enemy he refuses to name.



Eventually, the plains give way to a rocky slope dotted with twisted trees. Shadows drape the landscape, weaving an ominous tapestry around us. My boots crunch over loose gravel. A cluster of jagged boulders juts out, creating a natural cave-like formation in the hillside. Daeva stops, lifting a hand for me to see.

“We’ll stay here tonight,” he says in a low voice. “We’ll move on in the morning.”

I nod, lips pressed together. The space between us seethes with unspoken tension. Clinging to battered pride, I follow him inside the rocky shelter. It’s large enough that we can hunker down out of the night winds. The walls are rough stone, carved by time and water, with a low ceiling at the rear. It smells faintly of dust and old soil. A short way in, there’s enough room to stand upright without scraping our heads.

Without a word, we set about making a rudimentary camp. He gathers scattered sticks and lights a small fire with an effort of his demonic power, something quick and unobtrusive—just a faint flicker of chaotic magic that ignites the wood. Normally, I might have stared, enthralled by the graceful control of his abilities, but my heart’s bruised. I keep my gaze on the kindling until the flames catch and warm the cold stone.

We sit on opposite sides of the flickering fire, the glow dancing over our faces. My arms wrap around my knees as I lean back against the stone wall, wishing I had the nerve to confront him about everything. But we’re both too raw. Maybe tomorrow. Sleep might ease these wounds.

“You should rest,” he finally says, voice guarded. “I’ll keep watch.”

His tone brooks no argument, but it’s not unkind. I let my head nod in acknowledgment. Words hover on the tip of my tongue— Am I truly that worthless in your eyes? —but I can’t bring myself to say them. Instead, I scoot a little farther from the flames, curling up near a flat outcropping of rock that forms a makeshift

pillow. I keep my back half-turned to him, heart heavy. His own presence radiates across the cave, reminding me that physically, we're close, yet emotionally a world apart.

In the flicker of half-sleep, my mind conjures the image of him trapped in that cursed mirror, centuries of solitude etched into the lines of his face. I recall the hollow look in his eyes when he first emerged, how he stared at me as if I were a miracle he didn't believe in. He lived in darkness for so long, I remind myself. Maybe that's why he's pushing me away. He doesn't know how to trust—or love—freely anymore.

Eventually, my exhausted body claims me, and I drift into a restless slumber. The crackle of the fire dulls into white noise, and my last coherent thought is a wish that dawn might bring even a fraction of clarity between us.

I wake suddenly to the chill of the night and the insistent pressure in my bladder. The fire has dwindled to low embers, casting the cave in shadowy half-light. I blink groggily, pushing myself up on shaky elbows. Daeva is nowhere in sight, though I sense the tether of our bond faintly—he must be outside, possibly scouting the area.

Stifling a tired groan, I rise and pick my way around the dying fire. I slip beyond the cave entrance, bracing against the cold air that stings my cheeks. The moon has emerged from behind thick clouds, drenching the boulders in a silver wash. I move a short distance away for privacy.

After I finish relieving myself behind a rock, I shake my head to clear the remnants of sleep. My breath steams in the crisp air, and I tilt my chin up to the moon, letting that pale glow ease my frayed nerves. Would it be so hard for him to trust me?

A sudden rustle of movement behind me jolts my thoughts. I spin, heart leaping into my throat, expecting to see Daeva. Instead, my gaze collides with the slim silhouette of a dark elf, half-lit by moonlight. My veins ice over. The figure's pointed ears,

elongated limbs, and mocking grin reveal his heritage in an instant.

He's not alone. Three others melt from behind the boulders, forming a loose ring around me. My pulse jackhammers. Dark elves—here, in the wilderness?

“Well, well,” the first elf purrs, voice dripping with condescension, “what have we here? A stray human, all alone in the middle of the night?”

I back away a step, scanning for any sign of Daeva, cursing myself for venturing so far. Where is he? The bond thrums, but I don't sense him close enough to intervene immediately. My heart beats faster, adrenaline pumping. “I'm—just passing through,” I manage, trying to steady my voice.

One of the elves laughs, a cruel sound that makes my skin crawl. “Oh, we know humans. We keep them as slaves back in our estate. We can always use more.” A scimitar gleams in his hand, reflecting the moonlight.

“Stay back,” I warn, though my voice shakes. A part of me wishes I had a weapon, but I carry only the dull knife for cooking. Daeva, please, my mind calls silently. Hear me.

They move in, smirks spreading like wolves scenting blood. A harsh command barks from the largest elf—a whipcord-thin figure with a scar slashing across his face. “We'll have some fun first,” he sneers. “Then we'll see if you're worth taking.”

Fear lances through me, but it twists into defiance. I turn on my heel and bolt, mind racing. If I can just reach the cave or find Daeva, I have a chance. Rocks slip underfoot, threatening to tumble me. My breath comes fast, heart thundering as I scramble over uneven ground, moonlight spinning the shadows into a maze.

Behind me, the elves give chase, laughing, almost playing with me. I stumble on a

loose stone and nearly fall. My cheeks burn with shame at the memory of Daeva's words: weak... fragile...

Somehow, I keep moving, but my pursuers are swift, their footfalls unnervingly quiet. I must scream, I realize. I suck in a breath, letting out a shout that tears my throat: "Daeva! Help!"

The echo reverberates, but I'm not sure how far it carries. Another elf leaps in front of me, blocking my path. He swings the flat of his blade at my legs, forcing me to skid sideways to avoid it. I stagger, heart clenching. They're herding me away from the cave.

"Run, little human," one jeers, voice echoing among the rocks. "We love a good chase."

They strike like cats batting a mouse, letting me slip past only to corner me again. My lungs burn with cold air. My mind reels, searching for an out. Where is Daeva? Does he hear me?

A stone catches my toe, and I go sprawling, scraping my palms on sharp gravel. Blood oozes where the skin tears. Pain jolts up my arm, but I force myself to stand, adrenaline roaring. Before I can sprint anew, the scarred elf grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back. I cry out, tears stinging my eyes.

He leans in, rancid breath washing over me. "Let's see how well you beg," he murmurs, blade pressing to my throat. "Or would you prefer to amuse us first?"

An icy terror grips my spine. They're mocking me, tormenting me—like a cat with a wounded bird. My lips tremble, but a spark of anger flares. I won't beg. I thrash, trying to elbow him, but he's too fast, twisting my arms behind me. Pain blooms across my shoulders. Another elf snickers, pressing the tip of his blade to my side.

“Careful,” the second says. “We don’t want to damage her too much.”

My heart roars with combined terror and fury. I think of Silas, of Ryn and Jenna, of Daeva’s scalding words. I refuse to be prey again— I am not a slave. A strange static crackles in my veins. My pulse thunders, and the tingle under my skin spreads, reminiscent of the way I feel Daeva’s power. But this is stronger, more primal. I can’t contain it.

The scarred elf loosens his grip, intending to taunt me further. Snarling, I rip free, ignoring the slice of pain as his blade grazes my arm. I spin to face them, rage igniting my bloodstream. “Get away from me!” I scream, voice raw.

Laughter echoes. “Does the little mouse have claws?” the scarred elf sneers.

An ember of darkness flares inside me. It’s as though invisible threads tie me to the ambient night, fueling me. A memory surfaces: Daeva told me demon influence might grant me power. Now, a well of black energy pulses under my skin, hungry and turbulent. The bond with him stirs, even though he’s not here—perhaps it’s his chaotic magic resonating in me. My breath catches as power surges hot in my chest.

An elf lunges, trying to pin me again. This time, I raise my palm, and a crackle of dark energy leaps from my fingertips. He’s slammed backward with a ragged gasp, colliding with the rocks. Shock contorts his features before his head lolls.

The others freeze, wariness flickering in their eyes. “Magic? A human can’t?—”

I let out a low, furious laugh, hardly recognizing my own voice. “I can,” I snarl, stepping forward. Something in me roars to see them cower. The crackling darkness intensifies around my hands, curling like serpents of living shadow. Each breath fans the flames of my rage. They hurt me, they threatened me—now they will suffer.

One elf tries to flee. I flick my wrist, and a tendril of blackness snaps out, ensnaring his leg. He stumbles, screaming. Without conscious thought, I yank him closer, my muscles trembling under the rush of raw power. He howls in terror as I draw near, energy crackling. If I feed on him, will it make me stronger? An insidious voice in my mind urges me on. He deserves it, they all do.

His panic-laced eyes meet mine, and I unleash that dark power, letting it spill into his chest. A twisted sensation follows, as if I'm siphoning life from his body. He jerks, mouth agape, color draining from his skin. A dark thrill courses through my veins, exhilarating and horrifying. Part of me screams to stop, but the fury overshadowing my fear is too strong.

The elf collapses, twitching, and I stagger backward, chest heaving. My entire body hums with new strength, like I swallowed raw lightning. The third elf leaps at me, sword raised. I pivot, that savage power swirling around my fist. With a single strike, I knock the blade aside and slam my palm to his chest. Another rush of stolen vitality floods into me, sending a dizzying wave of euphoria through my head. More...

He collapses in a ragged heap, eyes rolling back. My breath comes in ragged gasps, heart pounding with savage triumph. Am I a monster now?

The scarred leader remains. He stares at me with open horror, sword trembling in his grip. "You demon bitch," he spits, voice cracking. "Stay away?—"

But I'm already moving. My mind is half-lost to this dark rage. I lunge, ignoring the slice of his blade across my shoulder. The pain is distant, overshadowed by the drug-like rush of chaotic power. My hand clamps over his chest, and I wrench more life from him, feeding that twisted magic swirling inside me. He shrieks, body convulsing, until I fling him aside, letting him crumple with eyes wide in deathly shock.

Silence falls, punctured only by the rasp of my breathing. A cold wind sweeps across my cheeks. The four elves lie motionless on the ground, each chest barely stirring or completely still. My pulse thrums with the stolen life force, almost pleasurable in its intensity. I inhale the night air, reeling from what I've done.

Then I hear a familiar roar from behind—a flash of black movement. Daeva arrives in a frantic flurry, landing among the fallen elves with lethal grace. His hood is thrown back, white hair gleaming in the moonlight. His eyes dart from me to the bodies. Shock etches his features, disbelief momentarily freezing him mid-step.

“Calla?” he breathes, voice thick with concern and awe.

I stand amid the carnage, chest heaving. The darkness inside me subsides to a slow burn, but my skin still crackles with remnant energy. My vision swims with the aftereffects of that stolen vitality. I want more. The thought horrifies me, yet it also smolders in my belly, stirring an unexpected hunger.

“They attacked me,” I whisper, voice tremulous. “I couldn’t—I had to fight.”

A low, inhuman growl resonates in Daeva’s chest. He whirls, noticing one elf half-stirring, reaching feebly for a blade. With an angry snarl, Daeva finishes him in a blur of demonic power, snapping the elf’s sword arm and hurling him into a boulder. Then he turns back to me, dark tattoos coiling along his arms. The final threat gone, the night falls silent once more.

His gaze rakes over me: hair disheveled, clothes torn, cuts lining my arms. But deeper than that, I sense his shock at the aura of magic enveloping me. The bond between us flares, and I taste his swirling emotions—admiration, fear, desire.

“You... used my power,” he murmurs, stepping closer with deliberate slowness. “You siphoned their life force... how did you?—?”

“I don’t know,” I manage, voice quivering. “It just happened. I felt them hurting me, and I... snapped.”

His eyes flick to the bodies strewn around us, then back to me. For a moment, no words pass, only the electricity in the air. I killed them, or came close enough that their survival is uncertain. My entire body still pulses with that savage high, blood sizzling. My mind whirls with confusion and a new, burning sensation low in my stomach—like the raw fury of the fight has turned into something else.

Daeva steps nearer, concern etching his features. “Calla, are you hurt?” He lifts a hand to hover near my cheek, eyes searching.

I press my lips together, trembling. The cuts on my arm sting, but not as sharply as the hunger pounding inside me. Our bond resonates with unbridled energy, and I see it mirrored in his gaze. The violence of battle, the demonic magic surging in my veins—somehow it’s morphing into a molten desire that spirals out of control. My breath shudders, and the moment I catch the raw intensity in his silver-blue eyes, I realize I’m not alone in this madness.

He seems caught off guard by the arousal flaring in our tether. I see his throat bob. He senses it. He wants me. Despite the turmoil mere hours ago, the primal need overshadowing everything else demands release.

I lick my lips, stepping closer. My heart pounds as I catch the faint tremor in his body, the way his fists clench at his sides. “Daeva,” I whisper, a husky edge to my voice. “I—I can’t stop this feeling.”

His eyes darken, shadowed by longing and conflict. “You’re under the influence of... the power,” he says, voice strained. “It’s twisting your adrenaline.”

“Maybe so,” I murmur, taking another step. Our bodies almost touch, the air between



us crackling. “But I know I want you.”

He inhales sharply, eyes flaring wide. I sense his furious desire, reined in by a thin thread. The memory of our bond’s tension, the earlier arguments, and the swirl of jealousy and fear now combust into a fierce magnetism. He sets his hands on my shoulders, half-intending to push me away, but the moment our bodies meet, the bond ignites. My breath catches at the heat of his touch, electricity dancing along my skin.

“Calla,” he groans, voice torn. “We shouldn’t?—”

I lift onto my toes, pressing my lips to his in a bruising kiss that tastes of blood and fury. He freezes for a split second, then surrenders, responding with desperate hunger. Our mouths collide, tongues sliding together in a frantic clash. I moan against him, fingers digging into his chest, feeling the firm planes of muscle beneath his shirt.

He exhales a ragged sound, hands sliding around my waist, hauling me tight against him. The world blurs, overshadowed by the savage tangle of our mouths, the smell of sweat and ozone from spent magic. My body hums with need, and the bond pulses, echoing each frantic heartbeat. Every breath fans the flames of desire, as though the fight and the kill unleashed something primal in us both.

“Calla,” he gasps, breaking the kiss long enough to stare into my eyes. His pupils are blown wide, face flushed with want. “This is madness. We?—”

I clutch his tunic, cutting off his words with another feverish kiss. He meets me halfway, devouring my mouth with the same ferocity I poured into killing those elves. The cave that once stood between us cracks beneath this unstoppable force of shared hunger. I sense the tension of conflict in his aura, but lust and the bond overshadow his reservations. We can’t hold back.

His fingers claw at my shirt like he’s starved for the feel of me, all rough impatience

and trembling need. I don't bother with finesse—I yank at his cloak, sending it slithering to the ground as we crash down among the rocks. My skin sings under his touch, every scrape of his calloused hands a brand. He traces the cuts along my arms, his touch equal parts worship and punishment, and when his teeth graze my collarbone, I arch against him with a gasp.

Fuck.

The taste of him—smoke and salt and something darker—floods my mouth. I want to devour him. I want his cock pressed against my thigh, want his fingers buried in my pussy, want him to ruin me right here in the dirt.

Time fractures. The night is nothing but the slick slide of skin, the ragged hitch of his breath, the way his hips grind against mine like he's already imagining how deep he'll split me open. Between us, the bond thrums, molten and vicious, turning every touch into a promise, every moan into a prayer.

His kiss is a bruise, his tongue a claiming. I rake my nails down his back, savoring the way he growls, low and filthy, against my lips. This isn't just hunger—it's possession. The same fire that had us tearing through enemies now has us tearing at each other's clothes, desperate to feel the heat of bare flesh.

And then his hand fists in my hair, tilting my head back as his other hand slips between my thighs. His fingers drag through my slick, teasing, torturing, before plunging inside with a groan. “Oh, you're dripping,” he rasps, and I bite his shoulder to muffle my cry.

We don't speak. We don't need to. The way his cock throbs against my hip tells me everything—how badly he wants to be sheathed inside me, how hard he'll fuck me when he finally gets there.

"Yes, finally," he growls, his voice rough as gravel, fingers digging into my thighs hard enough to bruise. "This is the me you want, Calla. You want all of me. Now you take it."

And then he does.

No sweet preamble, no gentle testing of waters—just one brutal thrust, burying himself to the hilt in a single stroke. I cry out, my back arching off the jagged rocks beneath me, my nails scraping down his sweat-slicked shoulders. "Gods—fuck—Daeva!"

He doesn't give me time to adjust. He owns the stretch, the delicious burn, setting a punishing pace from the first second. My pussy clenches around him like a vice, greedy, needy, and he snarls against my throat, "That's it. Squeeze me just like that, Calla. You feel so good, no one does it like you. Fucking choke on my dick."

I lock my legs around his hips, heels digging into the hard muscle of his ass, urging him deeper. "Harder, Daeva. Take me, make me yours," I gasp, my voice breaking as he slams into me again, knocking the air from my lungs. "I said harder?—"

"You'll take what I give you," he bites out, but his hips snap forward anyway, driving into me with enough force to make my vision blur. The rocks bite into my back, sharp and unforgiving, but the pain only sharpens the pleasure, each thrust sending sparks up my spine.

The air is thick with the smell of us—sweat, sex, the primal musk of skin on skin. There's the stench of blood in the air, heightening my senses. His rhythm is relentless, his cock hitting that perfect, torturous spot inside me with every stroke. I'm clawing at him now, gasping, begging, my thighs trembling as pleasure coils tighter, tighter?—

"You close?" His voice is a dark rumble against my lips, his breath hot and ragged. "Calla, come with me. Take all that I give you, suck me dry... "

"Y-Yes—"

"Then come," he orders, biting down on my lower lip as his hips piston faster. "Come all over my cock. Let me feel how you want me."

The command snaps the last thread of my control. Pleasure detonates, white-hot and electric, ripping through me like a wildfire.

"Daeva!" I scream his name, my body convulsing around him, and with a guttural groan, he follows me over the edge, spilling deep inside me in hot, pulsing waves.

For one endless, breathless moment, we're fused together—nothing but tangled limbs, shared pulse points, the wet slide of skin on skin. His forehead drops to mine, our panting breaths mingling, his body still shuddering with the aftershocks.

When we finally collapse, wrecked and gasping, I drag my fingers through the sweat-damp hair at his nape and press my lips to the wild hammering of his pulse.

No words.

None needed.

This—the bruises, the bite marks, the way my body still trembles around him—this is the only truth that matters.

In the aftermath, the dark night envelops us, and I feel a flicker of uncertainty creeping in. I wonder if we'll wake to regret, or if this moment can carry us closer instead of pushing us apart. For now, his arms around me feel like an anchor, and the

bond pulses with comforting warmth, as if reassuring me we share more than conflict and pain.

Closing my eyes, I let exhaustion wash over me, lulled by his heartbeat and the lingering pulse of demonic power. For the first time since we left our friends, I feel a measure of safety in his embrace, even though we stand on the precipice of something far more dangerous than either of us could have imagined.

Come morning, we'll confront our actions, our secrets, and the fear lurking behind Daeva's eyes. But tonight, we lie together under the indifferent moon, blood and sweat drying on our skin, bound by a contract deeper than flesh—and a bond that might be the closest thing to salvation either of us has ever known.

### DAEVA

I wake to the faint, dying embers of dawn. The night's chill still lingers in the air, clinging to every rock and shard of grass. My back rests against the rough stone walls of the cave, my cloak draped haphazardly around me. Sometime in the small hours, I must have pulled away from Calla's warmth. Now, my eyes flick open, immediately seeking her in the soft gloom.

She's there, only a few strides away, still asleep on a makeshift bed of moss and our scattered clothes. Her hair spills over her bare shoulders, the pale locks catching what little light seeps into our shelter. My gaze drifts down to the faint scratches marring her arms and collarbones—remnants of the fight she waged against those elves last night and the frenzy that followed. A strange tightness constricts my chest, recalling the raw, savage hunger that gripped us both, culminating in... that .

I shake my head, smothering a surge of emotion I can't afford to examine. I inhale once, slowly, centering my thoughts on the reality of our situation. It was the contract, I tell myself, a quiet lie I desperately want to believe. The bond between demon and mortal can twist desire, stoke lust in response to bloodshed and adrenaline. It's all part of the magic, nothing more. Or at least, that's what I claim.

My eyes trace her sleeping form, and I clamp down on the urge to brush a lock of hair from her cheek. The memory of how she felt beneath me—fiery, alive—still crackles in my veins. I try to quell it with logic: This is just the bond. A temporary conflagration. Deep down, a smaller, more vulnerable voice protests that it was more

than magic, that I felt something real. But I refuse to entertain that notion. I can't allow it.

Pushing myself upright, I slip out of the cave, ignoring the ache in my muscles. Outside, the world sprawls in a quiet hush. We've chosen a remote area—a rocky ravine that slopes into a forest of twisted pines. The horizon glows faintly, promising a sunlit day. My mind remains clouded. Focus, I tell myself. We have to move, to keep wandering, to find answers for her stolen soul. The threat of my old enemy gnaws at me more each day, and if I linger too long, I risk drawing danger straight to Calla's doorstep.

But you already bound her to you, a vicious internal voice reminds me. How much more danger could she be in?

I push that thought aside, scanning the area. No sign of stray elves or other pursuers. We must've traveled far enough from that settlement to escape immediate notice, at least for now. Once I'm certain the coast is clear, I return to the cave.

She's awake, sitting up with the cloak gathered around her shoulders. Her gaze flicks to me, and for an instant, our eyes lock. Heat crawls up my spine, unbidden memories of last night rushing in. I quickly break eye contact, clearing my throat.

"How do you feel?" I ask, keeping my voice curt.

She blinks, as though testing her limbs. "Sore. From everything." A pause. "And... about last night?—"

I cut her off, yanking my tunic over my head. "Don't worry about it. It's just part of our bond." My tone is harsh, though inside I'm wincing at the abruptness. "You know how demon magic can amplify desires, especially after combat. It's normal."

A flicker of disappointment shadows her features. “Normal,” she echoes, voice subdued. “Because of the contract.”

I pretend to rummage in my pack, ignoring the twinge of guilt at her hurt expression. “Yes,” I say flatly. “It’s the nature of the demonic link. We feed off strong emotions—fear, anger, lust. It’s not... personal.” The word feels like a blade in my mouth.

She exhales, looking away, shoulders tightening beneath the cloak. I see how her lips press together, how her eyes flick with unspoken questions. I can’t do this. If I let her see how deeply I’m conflicted, how each second with her stirs something I thought long dead, it’ll only complicate matters further. It’s safer for both of us if she believes it’s just the contract.

Clearing my throat, I change the subject. “Your power,” I say. “We need to talk about that.”

Her brow furrows. “My... power?”

I nod, stepping forward, forcing my voice into a teacher’s calm. “You tapped into demonic magic last night, drawing life from those elves. It was raw, uncontrolled. You nearly gave in to it completely.”

She stiffens, recalling how she hunted them with terrifying ease. “I was outnumbered,” she murmurs defensively. “They would’ve killed me.”

“I’m not chastising you for defending yourself,” I say, gentler now. “But you need to understand, if you keep losing control like that, you risk corruption.” My gaze slides over her bruised arms. “Demonic influence can consume you from within if you don’t learn to master it.”



Her lips part in alarm, though her chin tilts in stubborn defiance. “So teach me,” she challenges. “Instead of scolding me, show me how not to become a monster.”

I arch a brow, surprised by her directness. She’s bold, I admit, a spark of reluctant admiration stirring. “Very well,” I reply, voice steady. “We’ll begin today.”

She nods, though uncertainty lingers in her eyes. Quietly, we finish dressing and gather our belongings. The air between us brims with tension—remnants of both desire and unspoken pain. But we say nothing more about the night’s intimacy. We step out of the cave, leaving that charged memory to fade among the shadows.

For the next few days, we roam farther into the wilderness—harsh landscapes dotted with jagged hills and pockets of twisted woodland. We skirt around any sign of civilization, unwilling to tempt more trouble. Each evening, we find a place to camp, and each day, I push Calla to hone the power seething under her skin.

“You can’t rely on surprise alone,” I warn her on the second day as we stand in a desolate clearing. Above us, the sky churns with gray clouds. A bitter wind snatches at our cloaks. “You took those elves unprepared before. Next time, your enemies might be ready.”

She grits her teeth, recalling my comment about her being weak. “I’ll do better,” she mutters.

“Show me,” I say, and direct her to focus on conjuring a thread of dark magic in her palm.

She closes her eyes, inhaling slowly. I sense the bond stir between us as she taps into the demonic well. A faint swirl of shadow flickers around her hand. It’s there, ephemeral but real. My own aura bristles in recognition.

“Good,” I whisper. “Steady now. Don’t let it engulf you. Picture the power as a tool you wield, not a hunger that rules you.”

She nods, sweat beading her brow. The swirl of black intensifies, dancing along her forearm. I step closer, bracing a hand on her arm. Her breath hitches—some mixture of fear, desire, and concentration. The bond thrums. Even a casual touch sets me on edge, memory of her body pressed against mine still so fresh. But I force calm.

“Now, release it,” I instruct, stepping back. “Cast it away from you, harmlessly.”

Her eyes snap open, and she lifts her hand, letting the swirling energy unravel like a whip of shadow. It crackles, striking a nearby boulder with a dull crack. A hairline fracture appears in the stone. Impressive for a novice. But I see how her lips curl in a momentary rush of pride, how the power surges in her chest.

She staggers a bit, fighting the wave of euphoria. “Gods,” she breathes, hand trembling. “It feels so... addictive.”

I nod grimly. “That’s how it draws you in. You must remain clear-headed. If you indulge too much, you risk losing yourself.”

Her expression tightens. “Then keep pushing me,” she says, determination flaring. “I won’t be helpless again.”

I sense her referring to more than just the elves. Perhaps she recalls years of enslavement to the dark elves in House Vaerathis, the helplessness she endured. I swallow, nodding. “We continue, then.”

So begins a cycle. We train from dawn until midday or beyond, forging through exhaustion. When she’s not practicing magic, I teach her basic combat: how to grip a blade properly, how to dodge, how to read an opponent’s stance. Whenever she

grows complacent, I lash out with a sudden feint or challenge. She falters, but she's learning to adapt—her eyes flick with a growing confidence, even as I remain harsh in my critiques.

“Don't rush in blindly,” I snap on the fourth day, parrying her attempt to strike me with a wooden staff we scavenged. We're perched on a wide plateau, a biting wind pushing at our backs. “You assume you can absorb every blow with magic, but your enemies might be faster or stronger.”

She bristles, frustration evident. “I'm trying,” she retorts, swinging again, only for me to knock her staff aside with a single deft movement. She nearly stumbles, muttering a curse. “I'd do better if you didn't keep changing tactics.”

I slam her staff again, sending it flying from her grip. “Your foes won't stick to a neat pattern,” I retort. “They'll do everything they can to kill you. Accept that.”

Her eyes flash with anger, a swirl of dark power flickering around her knuckles. She lifts a hand as though to hurl a bolt of energy at me. I raise an eyebrow. “I said no magic in this exercise.” My tone is icy.

She hesitates, the shadows dissipating as she clenches her fists. “Fine. But once you're done mocking me, I'll show you that I can fight without relying on your demon tricks.”

A faint smirk tugs at my lips, though a part of me admires her spirit. “Try again, then.”

She lunges, bare hands this time, attempting to sweep my legs. I dodge easily, hooking my arm around hers and pulling her close until her back slams against my chest. For a moment, we freeze—her breathing ragged, my heart pounding in my ears. The tension flares again, an undercurrent of the physical closeness. My pulse

spikes, recalling how we fit together in the throes of passion. Her scent envelops me, fanning embers I've tried to smother.

But I force myself to remain stern, releasing her abruptly. She stumbles forward, scowling. "This is impossible," she mutters, rubbing her bruised elbow.

"You said you wanted me to push you," I remind, voice sharper than intended. "So don't complain."

She glares, wiping sweat from her brow. "I'm not complaining. I'm—just—" She bites her lip, frustration evident. "I hate feeling useless."

I exhale, some of my harshness draining away. "You're not useless. You're learning."

Her eyes flick up to mine, a small spark of hope there. But I can't let warmth linger, for fear it'll open the floodgate of everything I'm hiding. "That's enough for now," I say curtly. "We'll find a place to rest, then resume tomorrow."

She nods, swallowing whatever reply hovered on her tongue. We gather our things, tension smoldering between us. Another day ends, her muscles aching, my mind churning with too many thoughts left unspoken.

By the fifth day, we establish a rough rhythm: travel for half the morning, searching for a new area to practice or a vantage point to ensure we're alone, then train until she's at her limit. The nights pass in a swirl of silent standoffs—sleeping near each other, but not touching, not discussing what we shared. I see the disappointment cloud her gaze, feel it in the bond when she tentatively draws close, only for me to deflect with a reminder: "It's just the contract."

I can't bear to elaborate. Each time I try, my chest squeezes with the weight of half-formed confessions. It's more than the bond. I crave you. I want your light. But I

refuse to burden her with such vulnerability. She's bound to me already—it would be cruel to entangle her in emotional shackles too.

Yet the unspoken tension simmers. I catch her watching me with guarded longing when we set up camp at twilight. I sense the friction in her smile when she musters a polite question, only for me to brush it aside. We're caught in a cycle of distance, broken only by training. The fight is our language, a safer exchange than words.

On the sixth day, I decide to test her further. We find a secluded glade surrounded by towering pines. Pale sunshine filters through the canopy, illuminating the mossy ground. Birds call overhead, oblivious to our strife. I set my pack aside and roll my shoulders.

“All right,” I say, voice echoing among the trunks. “We’ll spar again. But this time, if you manage to land a solid blow on me, I’ll grant you a wish. Any single request, within reason.”

Her eyes light with cautious excitement. “A wish?”

“Yes,” I confirm. A subtle challenge thrums in my tone. “If you beat me, I’ll honor your request, no matter what it is.” Though I pray it’s not something that unravels my secrets entirely.

She nods, swallowing. I see her determination spark. “I’m ready.”

We face each other. She squares her stance, knees bent slightly, while I loosen my shoulders, scanning her posture for openings. Then, with a flicker of silent agreement, we leap into action.

She lunges first, swinging a short blade I gave her earlier—a dull practice knife, but the weight is real enough. I parry with my forearm, pivoting aside. She tries to twist

around my defense, her movements quicker than before, honed by days of drills. Yet I remain faster. I block each strike with fluid efficiency, guiding her momentum away from my core.

“Focus,” I taunt, stepping back when she overextends. “Don’t rush.”

She grits her teeth, eyes blazing. Her power crackles along her arms—she yearns to use the shadow magic, but she knows the fight’s rules. Instead, she channels adrenaline into speed. She crouches low, feints left, then slashes right, nearly catching me by surprise. I jerk away, a ripple of satisfaction at her improvement. But not enough.

Seizing an opening, I spin behind her, hooking my arm around her torso. She gasps, blade pinned uselessly at her side. For an instant, her back presses to my chest, and the bond hums with a precarious charge. My pulse stutters, recalling the shape of her body so intimately entwined with mine just nights ago. She stiffens, fury and desire warring on her face.

“Let me go,” she snarls.

I comply, pushing her off. She staggers, regains balance, and whirls, lunging again. Our knives clash in a flurry of quick thrusts. She tries a bold upward slash, but I block and respond with a light rap to her knuckles. Her grip falters momentarily, but she recovers, glaring at me.

“You keep holding back,” she accuses, voice trembling with frustration.

“You haven’t given me reason to do otherwise,” I shoot back. “If I fought in earnest, you’d be pinned in seconds.”

Her cheeks flare. “Then fight me for real!”

I narrow my eyes. “Be careful what you wish for.” Nonetheless, I shift my stance, deciding to apply more pressure. I come at her from the side, forcing her to pivot quickly. She parries twice but leaves her flank open. I slip inside her guard, elbow brushing her ribs. She yelps, staggers. I catch her wrist, twisting just enough to disarm her without snapping bone.

She hisses in pain, dropping the knife. I release her, stepping away. “Yield,” I command, breath a tad heavier than I’d like to admit.

She bends, snatching her blade again, ignoring my order. Frustration contorts her features, and a swirl of black aura gathers around her fingertips, as if her demonic side threatens to burst free. But she halts, remembering the rules. She can’t use magic in this spar.

“Damn it,” she curses, flinging the practice blade aside. She presses the heel of her hand to her forehead, pacing in a tight circle on the moss. “I can’t land a hit, no matter how hard I try. It’s hopeless.”

My voice softens. “It’s not hopeless. You’re improving daily. But I’ve had centuries of combat experience?—”

“Centuries,” she echoes, bitterness creeping in. “How can I ever catch up to that?”

I watch her, noting the slump of her shoulders, the shimmering tears in her eyes she refuses to let fall. A pang of regret twists in my chest. My harshness is driving her, but also hurting her. I can’t coddle her if she wants true strength, though.

“You may never equal my skill,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “But you can become strong in your own right. Strong enough to defend yourself, to protect others if needed.”

She inhales shakily, meeting my gaze. “That’s all I want,” she whispers. “To not feel helpless, to never be at someone’s mercy again.”

Something tightens in my throat. I understand that feeling too well. I close the distance, fighting the familiar rush of heat from even this simple touch. “Keep training,” I say, voice turning gentler. “You’ll fail a thousand times, but you only need to succeed when it counts.”

Her eyes reflect a flicker of hope. The tension between us simmers, that unspoken awareness of how close we stand. I sense her heartbeat pounding through the bond, and my own pulses in response. My mind flashes to the memory of her lips parted in passion, her body arching under mine. A swirl of guilt at how I dismissed it as mere contract compulsion.

She clears her throat, stepping back slightly. “I want that wish, Daeva,” she murmurs, defiance coloring her tone. “I swear, I’ll fight you again. One day, I’ll win.”

A faint smile ghosts across my face, despite my efforts to remain stoic. “I’ll look forward to it.”

That night, we make camp near a shallow stream, the chirping of crickets underscoring the quiet between us. She busies herself collecting water, her face thoughtful. I sense her emotions roiling—determination, lingering disappointment, a spark of curiosity about the wish. But she doesn’t speak of it. I, too, remain silent on deeper matters. We share a meal of dried rations, the tension thick as the star-flecked sky arches over us.

The days stretch into a rhythm of training and traveling. Sometimes, she nearly manages a lucky strike—earning my wary respect—only for me to twist away at the last second. My mind roils with conflicting feelings: pride at her progress, concern at her reckless desire to prove herself, and an aching need to keep her close while



feigning detachment.

I watch her from the corner of my eye as she practices conjuring small wisps of shadow, then forcing them to dissolve before they latch onto her mind. She's determined, brow knitted in fierce concentration. My chest tightens with grudging admiration. You are not weak, Calla—nor worthless, I admit silently. But I can't speak it aloud, for fear you'll see how much I need you.

Each night, we part ways at the edges of the fire's light—she sleeps on one side, I on the other, hearts pounding with unresolved tension. Occasionally, I sense her gaze on me across the embers, and my entire being thrums with the urge to close the distance, to seize her mouth in a punishing kiss. But I smother it, reminding myself of the contract, of my hidden enemy, of the looming danger I still refuse to name. She can't be entangled more than she already is.

And so we endure the hush, broken only by the crackle of flames, the rustle of wind across the rocky plains, and the unspoken promise that she'll challenge me again—and someday, she might just land that decisive blow.

On the last evening of our week-long trek, I stand at a high bluff, overlooking a valley bristling with pine trees. Calla is behind me, packing up remnants of our meager dinner. A faint copper glow tints the horizon, dusk threatening to descend fully. My mind churns with half-formed plans. We should move east soon, skirting the foothills in search of any rumored arcane ruins. Perhaps there I can find a key to unraveling our contract. Or maybe I'm chasing rumors, frightened of the day my old adversary inevitably finds me.

I sense Calla's approach. She stands beside me, arms folded, eyes scanning the same valley. "Tomorrow we move on?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply. "We'll try to cross the ridge before midday."

She nods, breath fogging in the cool air. “Thank you,” she says quietly after a moment.

My brow furrows. “For what?”

She shrugs, not meeting my eyes. “For teaching me. For... tolerating me. Even if you’re harsh.” A wry twist of her lips. “I know I’m not the best student.”

I sigh, turning to face her. Moonlight grazes her hair, illuminating the curve of her cheek. My chest aches with too many unsaid words. “You’re better than you think,” I manage. “And— I’m not good at this. Teaching, I mean. Patience isn’t my strong suit.”

She lets out a soft laugh, but it fades swiftly. Silence wraps around us. I wrestle with the urge to hold her, to bridge the gap in more ways than one. But I cling to my facade, reminding myself it’s safer to keep her at bay.

Eventually, she exhales, giving me a faint smile. “I’ll beat you one day, you know.”

The corner of my mouth curves. “Is that so?”

She lifts her chin, defiance sparking in her eyes. “Yes. And when I do, I have a wish you’ll grant.”

A ripple of tension goes through me. What will she wish for? Her freedom from the contract? My secrets? Something else? I force a scoff. “You’re welcome to try.” My voice sounds more confident than I feel.

She nods, satisfied, as if she’s made a silent promise to herself. Then, with the matter closed, she brushes past me, heading back to the campsite. Our shoulders nearly touch, and I catch a thread of that old, maddening pull in the bond. She doesn’t stop,

but the look in her eyes as she passes—lingering vulnerability—spears me through.

I remain on the bluff, staring into the darkening valley long after her footsteps fade. The wind tugs at my cloak, raking through my hair. My heart hammers with a confusing mix of pride, longing, and dread. Each day I watch her grow stronger, more capable. Each day I grapple with the knowledge that I want her , not just for the contract's sake, but for the spark of life she brings.

Yet I can't afford to let her in. I can't let her see the demons of my past. If she knew about the ancient enmity that still hunts me... No, I think, eyes drifting shut. That secret is mine to bear. She might be bound to me, but she's better off not knowing how deep the darkness truly runs.

At length, I return to the camp. She's already curled on her bedroll, eyes closed, though I sense she's not asleep. I settle across from her, near the fading fire. A hush falls, broken only by the crackle of dying embers. My gaze finds her face half-lit by the glow, and I swallow thickly, recalling the warmth of her body pressed to mine on that night of blood and frenzy.

It's the bond , I repeat in my mind, a mantra that's losing its conviction. Just the bond. Because admitting otherwise would mean letting my heart step into a place I vowed never to go again.

I close my eyes and let exhaustion claim me, half-aware of her presence thrumming through the tether. Someday, you might land that blow, Calla , I muse, a trace of reluctant fondness stirring. But will it be me you defeat, or your own fears?

The darkness gives no answers. And so we drift into uneasy dreams, bound by a contract neither of us can fully escape, locked in a dance of blood, magic, and unresolved longing—both yearning for a victory that might free us from the chains we refuse to name.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

I sense trouble long before I see it. It's a tingle at the base of my spine, a prickling awareness in the back of my mind that has me tightening my grip on the dagger I carry. Beside me, Daeva's lips press thin. He feels it too—something dark stirring in the wind or creeping across the horizon. We've just crested a low ridge, overlooking a valley cluttered with stunted trees and dry underbrush, when the scent of dust and fear drifts our way.

I draw in a cautious breath, scanning the valley floor. The late afternoon sun glares in my eyes, but I make out shapes moving along a narrow track—an armed caravan, perhaps six or seven figures on foot, herding a group of smaller silhouettes. My heartbeat kicks. The smaller forms wear tattered clothes, some limping, some shackled. Slaves. My mouth goes dry.

A knot forms in my stomach. How many times did I trudge along a path just like that, head bowed, the whip at my back? My pulse quickens, anger simmering.

Daeva notices the flush in my cheeks, the tension in my jaw. His voice is low and edged with warning. "Calla. Don't get involved."

I tear my gaze from the caravan to glare at him. "They're slaves—humans, from the looks of it. Our people."

He doesn't blink. "We can't save every mortal who suffers in Protheka. We have more pressing goals."

It's the same response he's given me countless times whenever we come across injustice. Each time, it chips at the fragile bond between us, stirring resentment. The

frustration I've carried these past days—over our training, his dismissals, the tension after that night of blood and lust—clashes with the memory of my own enslavement. My jaw clenches.

“You don't care?” I ask, voice taut.

His eyes flick away, revealing nothing. “Their plight isn't our priority. Interference risks drawing attention.” He gestures pointedly at the valley. “We can bypass them unseen.”

My throat tightens. “I won't leave them.” Before he can argue further, I drop low, ducking into the scrub. A faint hiss of exasperation escapes him, but I'm already crawling away from the ridge line. Let him sulk, I think furiously. My blood hums with righteous anger, so fierce it drowns out caution.

I scramble down the rocky slope, sticking to shadows. I'm vaguely aware of Daeva hovering behind me, though he keeps his distance. The caravan is slow, forced to match the stumbling gait of its captives. As I draw closer, I see the captors are indeed dark elves—eight or nine of them, all female, clad in House Vaerathis colors. My heart stutters. Vaerathis? The very same family that enslaved me?

Bile rises in my throat. My mind snaps back to the endless corridors, the whip's crack, Lord Kaelith's sneer. Fury blazes, fueling the dark power stirring in my veins. I grit my teeth, waiting behind an outcrop, letting them pass by so I can count their number accurately. Seven armed elves, I confirm. About four or five humans shackled together...

My stomach roils. Some of the humans appear near my age, others older, their eyes dull with exhaustion and despair. All female. The brand on one woman's forearm is hideously familiar. A Vaerathis mark. No, I vow. Not again.

I risk a quick glance over my shoulder. Daeva lurks twenty strides behind, crouched behind a thorny bush. His face is impassive, but I sense a swirl of tension through our bond, as though he's coiled to intervene if I do something catastrophically foolish. I probably am, I admit silently. But that doesn't stop me.

I wait until the caravan files past my position. Then, summoning a breath, I slip from my hiding spot, creeping behind the rearmost guard. My heart pounds, adrenaline surging. Focus, Calla. Don't lose control. If I unleash magic blindly, I might slaughter them all—something I've done once already, and the memory haunts me. But I can't let them continue this slave train unchallenged.

The guard at the back is armed with a short sword. Her pointed ears are half-covered by a burgundy hood that bears the Vaerathis crest. She leads one of the enslaved women by a chain. The woman stumbles, and the guard snaps, yanking hard, nearly toppling her.

That's all I need. Now. I surge forward, clamping a hand over the guard's mouth and jamming my dagger against her neck. She stiffens, muffled shock escaping her throat.

"Don't make a sound," I whisper fiercely. "Or your life ends now." My heart drums with savage intensity. I can feel the pulse of demonic power beneath my skin, itching to lash out. But I keep it at bay for the moment, channeling my fear and fury into a controlled threat.

The guard's eyes widen, but she's well-trained—she tries to jerk aside, reaching for her sword. I tighten my grip, slicing her throat shallowly in warning. Warm blood trickles over my fingers. A muted rasp of pain escapes her. The human captive looks on in stunned silence.

"Release the chain," I hiss. She doesn't comply fast enough, so I twist the dagger. Her breath hitches, and she fumbles to unhook the metal. The captive tears free,

stumbling back with eyes wide.

My victory is short-lived. Another guard notices. A sharp bark of alarm cuts through the air. A flurry of movement follows: dark elves rushing forward, the enslaved humans recoiling in confusion. My hostage tries to elbow me. I duck and drive my dagger up, ending her with a grim slash. She crumples in a heap, blood slicking the dirt.

No turning back now. The rest of the guards converge, swords out, faces contorted with rage. Two of them stay near the front, corralling the remaining slaves behind a wagon. The other four form a half-circle around me. Outnumbered, again, I think, but my blood sings with dark adrenaline.

One guard snarls, “It’s her—the Vaerathis runaway. The mortal slave who escaped with that demon!”

My pulse leaps. They recognize me. Another guard exclaims, “We have orders to bring her back. The master wants both the demon and his summoner.”

Hatred flares. Master? They must mean the patriarch, or perhaps the entire House that hunts me. My body trembles, recalling endless punishments. “I’m no one’s property,” I snarl, letting the demonic power coil in my chest. A faint swirl of shadow crackles around my forearm. Just enough... Don’t lose control.

With a yell, they attack. Steel glints in the sunlight. I dodge a sweeping blade, sinking low into a stance Daeva drilled into me. My foot hooks around the guard’s ankle, sending her toppling. Another swings from behind. I spin, parrying with the battered dagger. The blade screeches as it meets metal, jarring my arm. I grit my teeth, pushing the second guard off-balance.

A third lunges, chanting something. Magic flares from her palm—a crackling ribbon

of purple energy that sizzles across the space between us. I barely roll aside, the blast scorching the dirt. Dark elf sorcery. My eyes narrow. So be it. I unleash a pulse of my own magic, letting it surge from my fingertips. It collides with her chest, sending her flying into a wheel of the wagon. She hits with a sickening crunch.

I pant, heart racing. Two guards remain within striking distance; the other two are near the wagon. The clamor is too loud—I can't keep track. Where is Daeva?

As if in answer, a feral growl echoes across the road. Daeva appears from behind the wagon, cloak flaring, black markings rippling along his arms. He's chosen that moment to strike, apparently deciding he can't remain idle. Magic crackles around him, dark and ominous. The guards near the wagon spin, eyes wide with terror.

"Your House Vaerathis wants me?" he hisses, voice resonant with lethal anger. "They should've sent more than a handful of you."

A slash of chaotic power lances from his outstretched hand, ripping into one guard with unstoppable force. The other tries to flee but Daeva intercepts her, hooking her blade with a single fluid motion and twisting it free. She staggers, fear etched in her features.

I blink, forcing myself to refocus. The two guards flanking me seize advantage of my distraction. One charges from the left, blade angled for my ribs. I sidestep, bracing my wrist to deflect, but she's quicker than I anticipate, steel biting into my shoulder. Pain flares hot. I stifle a cry, retaliating with a vicious slash. My dagger carves a shallow cut across her abdomen.

She gasps, stumbling, but her companion leaps in. I barely block the blow, arms shaking under the force. I need more power. The darkness beckons, seductive and potent. My vision blurs with red. Do it. Use it.



My lips peel back in a snarl. I let the demonic energy surge, ignoring the voice that warns me to hold back. Shadows coil around my arm, seeping into the dagger, turning the blade's edge black with writhing magic. The next time the guard lunges, I slash—and the blade slices through her sword as if it's made of parchment. Her eyes widen in mortal panic. I follow through, hacking into her torso. She collapses, choking.

The final guard behind me curses, spinning away from my savage strike. She tries a retreat, but I lunge, hooking her chainmail with my free hand. Shadows swirl around my fingers, hungry. With a roar, I siphon the life from her, just as I did that night in the wilderness. She lets out a final, tortured scream. Blood vessels burst across her face, and her body goes limp.

A heady rush of stolen vitality floods me, sending tremors down my spine. My breath shudders with the euphoria of borrowed strength. Stop, some rational part of me screams. Don't lose yourself. I wrest the power back under control, letting her corpse slump to the ground.

The sudden hush that follows is broken only by ragged breathing—mine, and the slaves' whimpers. Four guards lie dead or near-death around me, and the others, presumably, have fallen to Daeva. My blood chills. We survived...

I whirl around to see Daeva gripping a battered dark elf by her collar, magic crackling ominously around his wrist. Her face is twisted in pain, yet she spits curses at him. A flash of black tattoos covers his forearms, swirling in a mesmerizing pattern. My stomach lurches: He's letting the demon in him feed.

“Tell me more about this order,” he demands, voice lethal. “Why does Vaerathis want me?”

She coughs, blood trickling down her lip. “The House... the old master... He's close

to reclaiming his youth,” she rasps, malice bright in her eyes. “He needs you to complete the ritual. The human is your tether. She’ll ensure you don’t... resist.”

My heart stutters. “What do you mean by that?” I move closer, ignoring the ache in my wounded shoulder. “Explain.”

The elf’s gaze flicks to me, contempt curling her lips. “You freed him from the mirror,” she sneers. “You’re the key. Our master will use you to bind him during the final ceremony. He wants both of you delivered?—”

She breaks off in a strangled cry as Daeva tightens his grip. “Shut up,” he growls, releasing a surge of power that leaves her gasping. “You know nothing.”

She spits blood at his feet. “If you kill me, more will come. House Vaerathis will never stop. They have your essence, demon. They always did. And her soul is just another piece in the puzzle.”

Rage twists Daeva’s features. With a snarl, he flings her aside. She collapses in a broken heap, chest barely rising. I stare, mind reeling. So they truly want me, and him... for some new ritual. My thoughts spin, recalling the half-truths Daeva told me about his curse, his thirst for revenge. He left out a lot, didn’t he?

The slaves remain huddled behind the wagon, eyes wide with terror. My anger shifts to compassion. I hurry over, ignoring the pain in my shoulder, grabbing the chain that binds them. One woman flinches, expecting cruelty, but I force a gentle tone. “It’s okay,” I whisper. “You’re free now.”

I find the locking mechanism and slice through with a thread of shadow magic. They gasp, stepping back in awe and fear. “Go,” I urge. “We won’t harm you.” A wave of relief surges in me when they stumble away, some muttering thanks, others too dazed to speak. They vanish into the wilds, likely fleeing to the nearest settlement.

Daeva stands motionless amid the carnage, the last dark elf's ragged breaths fading by the second. My entire body thrums with leftover adrenaline, the swirl of questions thickening. I glare at him, chest tight. "You heard what she said. Something about using me to bind you. About finishing a ritual that grants immortality?"

His face is a mask of stony fury. "She was delirious, spouting Vaerathis propaganda. Don't believe everything."

I bristle, stepping forward. "Don't lie to me," I snap, voice trembling with anger. "She recognized us both. She said your old master needs us. Why? What does he plan to do?"

His jaw works, eyes dark with conflict. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," I insist, hand curling into a fist at my side. "You're planning something. You always were. And now they want me, too. I have a right to know."

He meets my gaze, the bond between us pulsing with tension. I feel the swirl of guilt and desperation in him, though he tries to hide it. "Stop asking," he says coldly, turning away. "We have to move before others come."

Something in me snaps. The old wounds from our training, from him dismissing my worth, flare up. "You can't keep treating me like a pawn," I hiss, voice cutting. "You owe me the truth!"

He spins, eyes flashing. For a moment, raw pain surfaces in his expression, then he locks it down. "I owe you nothing," he grits out, though the tremor in his voice betrays him. "I'm protecting you."

I scoff, heart pounding. "Protecting me from what? Myself? Or the knowledge that you plan to die? Because it sure sounds like the House wants to finish a ritual that

leads to your death—and apparently mine, too!”

He flinches as though struck. “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand!” I nearly shout. The wind whips dust across my boots. “Tell me why they need us both. Why you were in that mirror, why this ‘ancestor’ still lives—any of it. For once, let me in.”

He stares, silent, a thousand unspoken words burning behind his eyes. The air between us crackles with leftover magic, the stench of blood from the dead elves. Something in him quivers, as if he might finally yield. Then, with a hiss of breath, he looks away.

“I can’t,” he mutters. “Not now.”

Rage floods me. The bond thrums with my frustration, but he refuses to meet my gaze. I throw my hands up, letting a few sparks of dark power flicker off my fingertips. “Fine,” I bite out, voice unsteady. “I’m done prying answers out of you. If you won’t share them willingly, maybe I’ll find them myself.”

Without waiting for a reply, I stalk away from the carnage, ignoring the throbbing in my shoulder. The setting sun casts elongated shadows across the dusty road. Daeva calls my name, but I don’t turn. My entire being trembles with anger and a deeper hurt. I gave him my soul. I risked everything, yet he still shuts me out?

I trudge up the slope, away from the massacre. Once at the top, I find a hollow behind a craggy boulder and collapse there, pressing my hand to my bleeding shoulder. The cut isn’t deep, but it stings. My heartbeat echoes in my ears. So House Vaerathis wants to bring me back, to control him? A final ceremony to claim immortality? Is that the same ritual that created him as a demon?

Memories swirl: the cursed mirror, the catacombs, Daeva's vow for revenge. He wants to kill the ancient elf who betrayed him. Could it be the same "master" who's ordering these scouts to retrieve us? Likely. My throat tightens. But how does that tie to me?

Tears sting my eyes, a potent mix of confusion and fury. The taste of old fear lurks beneath my anger. If Vaerathis truly hunts me, I might lose everything—my fragile freedom, my friends, the powers I've only begun to wield. Or worse: Daeva might still plan to sacrifice us both if it means destroying his foe.

I lean my head back against the rock, swallowing hard. Night approaches, chill creeping in. Eventually, the shuffle of footsteps signals his arrival behind me. I sense his presence before he speaks: the bond faintly thrumming, a dark whisper in my blood. I keep my eyes on the horizon.

He stands there, silent for a moment. Then he exhales. "Your wound," he murmurs. "Let me see."

My chest constricts with warring impulses. I want to lash out, tell him to leave me alone. Another part yearns for the comfort of his touch, the way he bandaged me in the past, the quiet gentleness lurking under his harsh front. Reluctantly, I pull the torn fabric aside, exposing the cut. Blood mats my sleeve.

He crouches, producing a strip of cloth from his pack. The tension weighs heavily as he cleans the wound, careful but efficient. My breathing hitches at the sting, though his hands are steady, emanating warmth. When he finishes, he binds it, tying the cloth snugly around my shoulder. The closeness sends flickers of memory— his arms around me, the heat of his lips. Anger coexists with longing, an agonizing combination.

We remain in tense silence. Finally, I lift my gaze, finding his eyes. "Why won't you

tell me?" I ask softly. "Is it so terrible that I can't handle it?"

His jaw clenches. "You want honesty?"

I nod, heart hammering.

He breathes once, staring at the bloody cloth in his hands. "If I complete the ritual—if I kill the old ancestor—the magic might end me as well." His voice is low, each word weighed with care. "I was cursed with him, bound to his life. If he dies, so might I."

I swallow, that old dread surfacing. "You said you wanted to die," I whisper. "That you longed for an end to your existence."

His eyes flick to me, pained. "Maybe I do. But... there's more. If the ceremony restarts... you're tied to me, Calla. Our contract. You—" He falters, as though the words physically hurt him. "You might be dragged down with me."

A cold wave crashes through my body. So I might die if he proceeds. My thoughts race. "Then... you can't do it. You can't finish the ritual."

He flinches, heartbreak flickering in his gaze. I realize he's caught between vengeance and what he feels for me—though he'd never admit it. "House Vaerathis might not give us a choice," he mutters. "They want to bind me, use you to control me, and force the ritual to their advantage. Possibly to restore their old master's youth, or to twist it to a new purpose. I don't know."

My lips part, horror twisting my stomach. "You... you knew this was a risk all along?"

His silence is answer enough. Fury surges again. "So you were prepared to drag me into your death wish? Did you ever plan to tell me I might die for your revenge?"

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

He meets my eyes, something raw in his expression. “I didn’t want you to be involved at all,” he admits, voice catching. “I tried to keep you at arm’s length, to push you away, hoping you’d leave, break the bond or... anything. But it’s too late, isn’t it?”

Tears blur my vision. The longing, the confusion, the anger all collide in my chest. I stand abruptly, ignoring the twinge of pain in my shoulder. “Yes,” I whisper. “Too late. We’re bound, and House Vaerathis hunts us. So we face this together, or we’re doomed.”

He rises as well, looming close. The bond pulses, a mixture of heartbreak and fierce protectiveness swirling. “Calla...” His voice trembles, heavy with apology and unsaid emotion. “I’m sorry.”

For a moment, I’m speechless. He’s never offered me an apology before. His dark lashes lower, and I see the torment in him—fear of losing me, fear of living, fear of everything. My heart aches. Despite my anger, I crave to comfort him. But a wedge remains between us.

I draw a shaky breath, lifting my gaze. “Then promise me something,” I say, voice trembling. “No more secrets. If House Vaerathis is determined to bring us in, if you’re planning some final showdown with your old master... I need to know everything. We decide together.”

He inhales, a storm in his eyes. “I promise to try,” he says at last. “But some things... they’re not easy to share.”

My lips press tight. “We’ll figure it out.” The final word cracks with exhaustion. My entire body sags, worn from the fight, from the emotional upheaval. The sun has dipped below the horizon, leaving the world cloaked in dim twilight.

He stands there, uncertain. Then, with surprising gentleness, he reaches out, fingertips brushing my uninjured arm. “You’re bleeding through the bandage,” he notes quietly. “Let me rebind it before we?—”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “Always patching me up after a fight, aren’t you?” I search his face. “What if I want more than that from you?”

His breath catches, the bond thrumming. For a heartbeat, it feels like he might gather me into his arms, bridging the gap. But that flicker of closeness shutters quickly. He steps back, gaze tortured.

“It’s dangerous,” he murmurs, voice ragged. “I can’t... you know the bond complicates everything.”

Pain lances through me. “I’m aware.” I exhale shakily, letting him check the bandage in silence. My eyes roam over his face, seeing the shadows carved by centuries of curses. “Let’s go,” I say wearily when he finishes. “I want to put distance between us and any survivors who might call for reinforcements.”

He nods, subdued. We gather our packs, stepping away from the ridge and the lingering stench of blood. The night wind rustles the brush, carrying the faint cries of freed slaves in the distance. My heart twinges, hoping they find safety. At least I saved them, I remind myself grimly. Even if it means House Vaerathis is certain we’re here.

We head east in tense silence. Clouds scuttle across the moon, flickering shadows over the stony ground. Each step reopens wounds in both body and spirit. I recall the



interrogation, the dark elf's sneer: "He needs you to complete the ritual... You're the key..." The notion of being a pawn for Daeva's death, or for his ancient foe's immortality, chills me. I won't let either happen.

Eventually, we find a small depression in the rocky terrain, partially sheltered by leaning boulders. It's hardly comfortable, but it's hidden enough to serve for the night. Daeva mutters about scouting, though I suspect he just wants space from me. I let him go, ignoring the pang of loneliness. My shoulder throbs, each pulse reminding me how fragile we both are in this monstrous world.

Hours pass, and I drift in and out of a restless doze. The sky remains moonless, countless stars pricking the darkness. When Daeva returns, I feel his presence loom at the edge of our makeshift camp. He doesn't speak, simply settles some distance away. Our bond hums with tension, but we exchange no words. I sense his guilt, his worry, but also an iron wall that keeps me from seeing deeper. He's not ready to share more. A hollow ache gnaws at my chest.

Eventually, I give up on sleep, sitting up to peer at him through the gloom. He's half-hidden, back propped against a stone. The faint starlight casts silver along the sharp planes of his cheekbones. I recall, vividly, the first time I saw his face when I freed him. So much has changed, yet we remain bound by secrets and blood.

My voice comes out hushed. "Daeva."

He tenses, as though bracing for another argument. "Yes?"

My throat tightens. "I... thanks for saving me earlier. Even if you said you didn't care to get involved." A bitter edge threads my words, but I mean it. If not for his timely intervention, the outcome might've been grim.

He closes his eyes briefly. "I couldn't just stand by." His voice is low, carrying a

nuance that both soothes and hurts. “You force my hand, Calla, every time you rush into danger.”

I huff a humorless laugh. “Someone has to do what’s right.”

Silence thickens again. I trace a finger over the bandage on my shoulder, recalling his gentle touch. My head spins with exhaustion, but sleep eludes me. Each time I shut my eyes, I see House Vaerathis looming, or that ancient ancestor withered in the catacombs, or Daeva glancing at me with heartbreak in his gaze.

After a while, I sense him stirring. He shifts closer, as if about to speak. My heart stutters. Will he finally open up?

“Calla,” he says quietly, voice strained. “I don’t want you to die.”

My breath catches. Tears prick my eyes. “Then find a way,” I whisper, “to end your curse without sacrificing me. Let’s do it together.”

He exhales, leaning his head back against the stone. “I’ll try. But I don’t know if it’s possible.” Then, softer, “I once only cared about vengeance. Now...” He trails off, leaving the confession half-spoken.

I release a shaky breath. The unspoken words swirl in the cold night air. We remain there, a short distance apart, each grappling with unvoiced fears and desires. It isn’t resolution, but it’s something—an acknowledgment that he doesn’t wish for my demise. It’s a start.

Eventually, the heaviness in my limbs asserts itself. My eyes droop, lulled by exhaustion and the faint sound of Daeva’s measured breathing. I let myself slump onto the cold ground, hugging the cloak around me. Sleep claims me in fits, haunted by half-dreams of mirrors and monstrous shadows wearing the crest of Vaerathis.

Dawn arrives, bleak and uninviting. My muscles protest every movement as I push to my feet. The events of the previous day weigh on me, from the brutal fight to Daeva's partial confession. He stands at the corner of the camp, eyes on the horizon. I approach, swallowing my lingering resentment.

"Ready?" he asks curtly, not meeting my gaze.

I nod. "Let's move."

We set off eastward again, our footsteps crunching over loose gravel and sun-scorched grass. The morning wind carries hints of distant storms. I keep my cloak tight around me, wincing whenever my shoulder twinges. We haven't spoken about the new revelations beyond what little he shared. I want to demand more answers, but the cautious glint in his eyes stops me. He's on the verge of letting me in, but not there yet.

Still, a strange sense of unity surfaces. We walk side by side, scanning the surroundings for threats. When we chance upon a shallow stream, he helps me refill our flasks, checking my injury without comment. The tension remains, but not as brutal as before. We're in silent agreement: House Vaerathis is coming, and we must be ready.

By noon, the landscape changes—rocky hills give way to rolling plains dotted with stubborn shrubs. Overhead, clouds gather, threatening rain. We press on, nerves frayed. Every now and then, I catch glimpses of dark shapes in the far distance, too far to be certain if they're travelers or illusions. My paranoia spikes with each sighting.

We rest near a dead tree, the sun hidden behind ominous clouds. Daeva hands me a strip of dried jerky, and I nibble listlessly, thirst overshadowing hunger. I risk a glance at him. "We keep going?"

He nods once. “Until dusk.” Then he hesitates, a flicker of uncertainty in his gaze. “Your shoulder—how is it?”

“Hurts,” I admit. “But I’ll manage.”

A slight dip of his chin. He tears off a piece of jerky for himself, gaze distant. Silence stretches, broken only by the rustle of the wind. I can’t stand the tension, so I blurt, “We’re nearing the foothills soon, right? That’s where you planned to search for... answers?”

His jaw tenses, but he nods. “There are rumored ruins, possibly older than the House Vaerathis line. Maybe they hold a key to severing curses. Or so I’ve heard.”

A spark of hope flickers in my chest. “Good,” I say softly. “I want to help. If there’s a way to break your bond with that ancestor—without killing us both—I’ll do whatever it takes.”

His eyes lock on mine for a moment, raw emotion swirling there. Then he looks away, swallowing. “Careful what you wish for, Calla,” he murmurs. “Such magic can be dark... or demand terrible prices.”

I recall the black hunger that flares whenever I unleash my power. The way I devoured life from my enemies. My heart clenches, but I set my jaw. “I’m not afraid,” I whisper, refusing to let dread consume me. “We face it together, or not at all.”

He bows his head, a troubled acceptance in his posture. We finish our paltry meal in silence, each lost in thoughts of the uncertain path ahead.

By dusk, the sky opens in a drizzle, soaking the plains in cold, miserable rain. We find shelter under a craggy overhang, building a feeble fire from damp twigs. My

teeth chatter as we huddle near the flames. Daeva sits close enough that our arms occasionally brush, sending jolts of awareness through me. The bond thrums softly, an undercurrent of warmth in the dreary dampness.

I recall how once, I would have seized that contact, leaning into him, hoping for comfort. But the revelations weigh heavy. I settle for letting our shoulders touch, a small show of tentative truce. His presence banishes some of the cold.

In the firelight, I study the faint lines of fatigue around his eyes. Something inside me softens. Despite our conflicts, I can't deny how deeply he's fought to protect me—even if his choices remain bound in secrecy and regret. I consider pressing him for more details about the House's exact plans, about the ritual, about how he truly feels. But the day has worn me down, and the fear of another argument holds me still.

Night falls. The rain intensifies, drumming on the rocks. At some point, I drift to sleep against the stone, lulled by exhaustion and the slow crackle of the flames.

A nightmare finds me: I'm back in Vaerathis, shackled to a mirror that glows with vile power. Daeva is on the other side, hands pressed to it, eyes hollow with despair. Dark elves chant around us, their voices echoing off cold marble floors. The old ancestor cackles, his withered frame gleaming with unholy magic. Then the mirror cracks, sending shards of black glass raining down, each one carving into my flesh as I scream Daeva's name.

I jerk awake, heart hammering, sweat plastering my hair to my forehead. The rain is still pouring, the fire low. My shoulder throbs, and I stifle a cry. Daeva's crouched nearby, on watch as usual, eyes flicking to me in concern.

"You cried out," he says softly.

I press a trembling hand to my face. "Just a dream."

He doesn't speak further, but in the silence, I sense his empathy. My breathing steadies. I wrap the cloak tighter around me, leaning my head back. The wind howls, and in a sudden flash of lightning, I glimpse Daeva's expression—a raw mixture of guilt and protectiveness that tugs at my heart. We can't keep going like this, dancing around the truth.

But for tonight, neither of us knows how to break the cycle. We remain in the half-light of the dying fire, each haunted by shadows. Outside, the storm rages, and somewhere beyond, House Vaerathis hunts for us, determined to finish the ritual that might claim us both. We're not heroes, I remind myself, echoing his old words. Just two cursed beings, stumbling through a world that wants us destroyed or enslaved.

Yet, despite the bleakness, a defiant spark lingers in my chest: We're not alone. The bond ties us in ways more potent than fear. Whatever secrets remain, I refuse to let them tear us apart. He chose me once, I recall, lips curving in a wry smile. Even if he won't say it, even if he insists it's just the contract, I know there's more in his eyes than cold detachment.

Eventually, the rain begins to ease, and my eyes drift shut again, lulled by the rhythmic drip of water. Tomorrow, we'll press onward, searching for ancient answers. Tomorrow, I'll stand by him, demanding honesty and forging my own path to strength. And if House Vaerathis dares to cross us again, let them see the fury of a mortal who won't be caged—and a demon who might yet choose love over death.

Until then, I cling to the fragile promise we've made: that we will try, together, to shape our fate.

### DAEVA

I wake to find the remnants of our meager camp shrouded in half-light. Dawn hovers on the verge of the horizon, casting weak rays across the jagged ruins ahead of us. The wind carries the faint reek of old magic—sharp as ozone, laced with decay. It prickles along my senses, and a part of me tenses in anticipation. I glance toward Calla, who huddles near the smoldering embers of our dying fire. Her face is drawn, exhaustion bruising her eyes. We both know this place might hold answers—or fresh dangers.

We've come so far to reach these rumored ruins. Each step cost us blood and breath. Now, just within sight of the crumbled walls and collapsed spires, the final stretch weighs on our resolve. A hush hangs over the shattered remnants of what was once a grand fortress—or maybe a temple. The stone is dark, veined with some mineral that gleams in the pale dawn. A single arch juts from the rubble, reaching for a sky thick with bruise-colored clouds. It looks ominous, a monument to a forgotten age.

Calla's gaze flicks to me. Despite our earlier tension—the secrets I've clutched, the argument that still simmers—there's a determined glint in her eyes. She rises, wincing at the slow-healing wound on her shoulder. I feel a tug at my core—the bond that insists I shield her, even if I can't always explain why. My heart twists with conflicting urges: to guard her from everything, and to keep her at a distance so she never learns the darkest shadows of my past.

She nods once, silently asking if we're ready. I return a brief nod, and we break camp

with minimal words, each lost in thoughts of the unknown. We descend a slope strewn with broken columns, stepping carefully over scattered debris. The air buzzes with old ward-traces, as if the land itself remembers the magic that once thrived here.

Up close, the ruins are a disappointment. The outer walls are little more than rubble, and the interior is a collapsed skeleton of pillars and archways. We walk among the wreckage, dust swirling at our feet. There's no sign of hidden libraries or arcane vaults—no crypts containing secrets of demon curses. Just endless heaps of stone. I ball my fists, frustration gnawing.

“This place is... destroyed,” Calla murmurs, voice hollow. She runs her hand over a crumbled column, letting fine grit slip between her fingers. “Nothing left.”

I swallow the surge of bitter anger. Another dead end. For days, I've been half-telling her that these ruins might yield a clue to sever our bonds from Vaerathis, to break the tether that could kill us both if the ancient ancestor completes his ritual. Yet it appears we've arrived too late—or the rumors were false from the start.

Calla watches me, shadows in her eyes. I sense her disappointment, a mirror to my own. “What now?” she asks softly.

I exhale, scanning the lifeless expanse. “We look deeper,” I say, though my voice wavers with doubt. “Sometimes, the real secrets lie beneath the surface.”

She gives a weary nod. We pick our way through the rubble in silence, searching for any sign of a cellar or substructure. The wind stirs, carrying a faint echo—like a sigh from the past. I clench my jaw, trying to focus. No point in despair. We must try every corner.

We find a corridor half-buried by collapsed stone. Calla squeezes through a gap, and I follow, cursing the jagged edges that catch my cloak. We step into a small courtyard



littered with shattered statues, their features worn to anonymity. A sense of ancient power, long dormant, clings to the stones. But no path leads down, no hidden stair that might hold forbidden knowledge. My hope fades.

Then, a faint sound pricks my ears—distant footsteps. I stiffen, glancing sharply at Calla. Her eyes widen, confirming she hears it too. We're not alone. I motion for her to stay low, creeping behind a toppled column. She follows, breath shallow.

Through a gap in the debris, I see them: dark elves, at least nine or ten, fanning out across the courtyard. Their armor glints with the Vaerathis crest. My blood runs cold. They tracked us here. That means we're in peril. House Vaerathis won't stop until they drag us back to that ancient tyrant.

Calla's expression sets in grim determination. She grips her dagger, shadows already flickering along her knuckles. I want to order her to hide, to let me handle it. But I know she won't comply. We fight together, or not at all.

Then, all subtlety dies. A deep voice booms across the courtyard: "We know you're here, demon," a tall dark elf male shouts, stepping over a broken statue. "Show yourself, or we'll tear these ruins apart."

My teeth bare in a silent snarl. We exchange a look—neither of us is inclined to surrender. I nod once, then spring from cover, letting my cloak swirl around me. Calla moves in tandem, flanking my side. The elves jerk to face us, weapons raised, eyes full of triumph. Their numbers are greater than before, armed to kill. Dread coils in my gut.

One elf, presumably their leader, gestures with a gauntleted hand. "At last," he sneers, black braids swinging. "Lord Vaerathis commanded we bring you in alive, but you've proven troublesome. I won't hesitate to maim you if needed."

I stare him down, shadows writhing along my forearms. “You’ll regret coming here,” I warn, voice resonant with demonic power. Bluff or not, we must appear strong.

He laughs, a cold, mirthless sound. “We’ve studied your weaknesses, demon. Your pact with that mortal girl. Don’t think we haven’t come prepared.” Around him, the other elves fan out, encircling us. I spot crossbows loaded with quarrels etched in runes, swords that glimmer with strange enchantments.

Calla tenses at my side, her pulse thrumming through the bond. We can’t be reckless. But the ring of armed foes closes in. No choice but to fight.

“Go,” I hiss at her. “I’ll cover?—”

She cuts me off, voice low and fierce. “I’m staying.” Her dagger flares with black sparks, testament to her new power. My heart clenches with mingled pride and fear.

Before we can form a plan, they attack. Bolts whistle through the air. I fling up a ward of shadow, deflecting some projectiles, but a few slip past my half-formed barrier. One grazes my leg, burning with arcane venom. Pain lances up my thigh. I grunt, staggering.

Calla hurls a blast of her own magic, catching one elf in the chest. He cries out, armor smoking as he collapses. Another lunges from the side, sword aimed at her exposed flank. I dart forward, intercepting his strike with a vicious slash of my claws. He reels away, blood spraying. But more close in, unrelenting.

They came prepared indeed—wielding wards that disrupt demonic energy, chanting spells that flicker in the air like silver glyphs. My power falters under the onslaught of their combined magic. Calla slams a swirl of darkness into a pair of elves, knocking them back, but she wavers, breath ragged. She’s not invincible. We’re cornered, pinned against a collapsed wall.

“Daeva!” she cries as another crossbow fires. I attempt to dodge, but the bolt buries itself in my side. Agony flares, scorching me from within. I snarl, yanking it free, black ichor staining the shaft. The runic etchings glimmer. My vision blurs for a heartbeat.

Seizing advantage, an elf drives his blade through my shoulder. I grunt, staggering back, pinned briefly against a fallen column. Pain rattles me. Focus, demon. Gritting my teeth, I unleash a desperate pulse of chaos, blasting him off me. He lands hard, but a second elf slams her mace into my ribs. My chest explodes in white-hot agony, and I collapse to a knee, fighting for breath.

Through the haze, I see Calla fighting with grim determination, her eyes glowing faintly red from channeling dark power. She dispatches one elf, but two more tackle her, pinning her arms. She screams, fury resonating. Shadows surge around her, forcing them back. The scene is chaos, both of us wounded, outnumbered. We’ll be overwhelmed any moment.

Gathering the last of my strength, I lash out with a wide arc of darkness, knocking several elves away in a swirl of debris. “Calla, run!” I rasp, pressing a palm to my bleeding side.

She scrambles free of her attackers, eyes locking on me. For an instant, fear and heartbreak war in her gaze. But she moves—grabbing my arm, hauling me upright with surprising strength. We break from the circle of foes, sprinting deeper into the ruins. Crossbow bolts clatter off stone as we vanish into a half-collapsed passageway.

Pain throbs in every fiber of my body, blood trickling from multiple wounds. My breath comes in ragged gasps, yet Calla drags me onward, refusing to slow. Our footfalls echo among broken walls. We take a twisting route, descending a crumbling staircase that plunges us further into darkness. Behind, the dark elves shout, their voices reverberating through the corridors.

She gasps my name, urgency in her tone. “Daeva, hold on.” Her free hand grips my torn cloak, steadying me. “We’ll lose them.”

I cough, spitting blood. The taste is acrid and bitter. I’m losing too much. My vision swims, but I force myself forward. The corridor narrows, debris crunching underfoot. A low growl echoes from somewhere ahead— not an elf , but some creature lurking in the depths. My battered senses flare. We’ve no choice but to keep going.

Sure enough, a hulking shape lumbers from the darkness—a beast with matted fur, elongated limbs, eyes glowing a sickly yellow. It snarls, baring fangs. My heart clenches. Not now...

“Move,” I bark at Calla, pushing her behind me. The creature lunges. I muster a thread of magic, flinging it at the monster. It staggers, yowling, but doesn’t fall. Too strong for a single blow. Calla tries to assist, flaring her shadows, but the corridor is tight. The beast snarls, swiping a massive claw. We dodge, and it rakes a chunk of stone from the wall.

Then the echoes of the pursuing elves draw nearer. We’re trapped between two threats. Adrenaline surges, momentarily numbing my wounds. I lash out again, channeling chaos into my palm. The beast roars, stumbling sideways. Taking advantage, Calla seizes my arm, hauling me past. We dash deeper, the creature’s enraged howls behind us.

The corridor slopes downward, crumbling steps slick with moss. Our pursuers’ shouts echo overhead—someone curses about “the demon heading below.” My side throbs with every step, black spots dancing at the edges of my vision. But Calla’s determination buoys me. She’s desperate, guiding me on, refusing to let me collapse.

Suddenly, the floor gives way under our feet. We plunge into a hidden shaft with a startled cry. Stones clatter around us, and I slam hard onto a lower level, pain

exploding anew. Calla lands beside me with a gasp, rolling over shards of debris. Dust billows.

I groan, forcing myself to check her. “Calla?—?”

She coughs, pressing a hand to her chest. “I’m... alive.” She grimaces, blood trickling from a fresh cut on her temple. “You?”

“Worse each passing second,” I manage, biting back a moan. My wounds scream, but I cling to consciousness. Carefully, we push to our feet, discovering we’ve fallen into some kind of subterranean hall. The walls are etched with faded symbols, half eroded by time. A faint glow emanates from braziers that shouldn’t still be lit, unless...

“Do you feel that?” Calla breathes, eyes wide. “Something... calling me.” Indeed, a strange resonance vibrates the air. My spine tingles, and even in my agony, I recognize the taint of old mirror-magic.

We stagger forward, exploring the hall. Broken pillars line the center, leading to a dais at the far end. Debris litters the floor, but one object stands out—a tall frame, half draped in tattered cloth. My stomach knots. A mirror? The shape resembles the cursed artifact that once imprisoned me. A wave of dread surges.

Calla approaches it, as though compelled. “Daeva,” she murmurs, voice trembling, “this is... it feels like the same energy as your mirror.”

My blood chills. “Be careful,” I warn, lurching after her. My side throbs, strength waning. She moves closer, peeling the cloth away. Indeed, it reveals a large mirror, its surface black as midnight. Runes coil around its frame, flickering with a subdued light.

A static shock jumps from the mirror to our skin, and I hiss, stepping back. The runes

flare, and the reflection shivers. Then an all-too-familiar presence floods the chamber—a hateful, ancient aura that sparks fear deep in my bones.

“No,” I whisper, horror constricting my chest. The surface warps, and a shape appears—a distorted visage of the withered dark elf ancestor. His eyes gleam with malicious triumph. His voice, oily and resonant, echoes in our minds:

“Daeva. My cursed creation. You’ve wandered long. Did you think you could escape me?”

Calla gasps, pressing a hand to her mouth. The mirror pulses, tethering her attention. I can’t tear my gaze away, either. Every muscle shakes with the realization that he’s found us, reaching through this mirror’s magic.

His rasping voice continues: “Your blood seeps into the stones. The ritual draws near. Return to me. Submit, and let this finally end.”

Ice grips my heart. I recall the half-truth I told Calla about wanting to kill him, about our souls bound in twisted immortality. He’s more determined than ever to reclaim youth, or complete the ritual on his terms. My body trembles, freshly battered, mind spinning.

“You won’t have him,” Calla snarls, stepping forward, defiance in her eyes. “I won’t let you.”

A mocking laugh resonates. “You can’t stop me, girl. You’re the key to controlling him. Your contract forged his tether. I will reclaim what’s mine—your very souls—and use them as I see fit.”

Her face contorts with rage. My heart clenches— Don’t let her lose control. But I’m too weak to intervene as she raises a trembling hand. The mirror’s surface flickers,

and I sense the swirl of old magic threatening to suck us in, to drag us back to Vaerathis. A deep wind rakes the chamber, stirring dust into a maelstrom. Shards of stone vibrate underfoot.

Somewhere behind us, I hear the dark elves descending, their voices drawing near. Trapped from both sides. Calla's fury peaks. She channels her demonic power, black sparks dancing over her skin. The mirror pulses in response, runes blazing. The ancestor's face twists in cruel amusement, as though he beckons us closer. He wants us to step into his snare.

"Don't—" I croak, trying to warn her. "It's too strong?—"

But she won't heed. She roars, slamming her power into the mirror. The runes flare white-hot, and an ear-splitting crack reverberates. The glass fractures under the onslaught, spiderweb lines racing across the surface.

The ancestor's voice howls in outrage. "Foolish mortal! You—" His image warps, flickering. Then a final burst of energy explodes from the frame. Calla shields her face, but shards of mirror, sharp as daggers, burst outward in a lethal storm.

Time slows. I lurch forward, intending to shield her, but my wounded body falters. A chunk of mirror slams into my side, aggravating my injury, and I collapse to one knee. Horror dawns as I see smaller shards slicing across Calla's cheek—and worse, two lodging in her eyes. She cries out, a raw, agonized scream that rips the breath from my lungs.

"No!" My heart seizes. Pain forgotten, I scramble to her side, catching her as she staggers, hands flying to her bleeding face. The remnants of the mirror clatter to the floor, runes extinguished. The ancestor's presence vanishes, cut off mid-laugh. A swirl of dust chokes the air, and the overhead rock trembles dangerously.

Calla's screams echo, each note a dagger in my soul. Blood streams from her eyes, the shards glinting with residual magic. My hands shake as I try to pry them out, black tattoos flickering across my arms. "Hang on," I beg, voice cracking. "Calla?—"

Her body convulses with pain, tears mixing with crimson. "I—I can't see," she chokes, terror fueling her frantic grip on my cloak. "Daeva—help me."

Desperation claws at my throat. My demonic powers, chaotic as they are, might accelerate healing, but this is no simple wound. The shards are embedded with cursed energy, and I'm already near collapse. Still, I try, focusing on the swirl of black magic coiling under my skin, hoping to purge the foreign shards from her flesh. My hands tremble as I hover them over her face, chanting a low incantation meant to unravel curses. The bond throbs with my fear.

A wave of dizziness slams me. My own injuries flare, blood loss weakening me. The incantation fizzles. She sobs in agony, breath ragged. I cradle her, fighting back tears of my own. I'm failing her. Clashing footsteps echo from the corridor above—our pursuers, no doubt, regaining the trail. We can't remain here.

"Calla," I whisper, voice tight with anguish, "we have to move."

She nods through gritted teeth, tears streaking her cheeks. "I can't... see anything," she confesses, trembling. "Everything's dark."

Fresh guilt floods me. This is my fault. Had I not insisted on coming here, had I told her the truth earlier... But there's no time for regret. I force myself upright, dragging her to her feet. She clings to me, half-blind, half in shock. My own wounds scream protest, but I grit my teeth, guiding her through the crumbling hall.

Chunks of rock keep falling, the structure destabilized by our battle with the mirror. Dust clouds swirl, choking our lungs. We stumble over broken pillars, the floor



shifting beneath each step. Distantly, I hear shouting—dark elves, perhaps frightened by the collapse or still intent on capturing us. Either way, we have no path but forward, deeper into the ruins, hoping for an exit.

With each shudder of the walls, my legs threaten to give out. Pain from the crossbow bolts and sword slashes throbs mercilessly. Calla's hold on my arm tightens—she's disoriented, blindly trusting me to lead her. That trust tears at my heart. I must protect her, even if I can barely stand.

We edge around a corner, nearly plummeting into a pit where the floor's caved in. I catch her waist, pulling her back. She gasps, panic in her blind eyes. My mind reels, scanning for any safer route. The ceiling cracks overhead, raining stones. A surge of adrenaline propels us forward. We can't die here. My ancient foe might relish that, but I refuse to let the ruin bury Calla alive.

Finally, we find a corridor sloping upward, half-blocked by debris. Sucking in a breath, I push aside broken slabs, clearing enough space for us to squeeze through. She clutches my hand with trembling fingers, the only anchor in her darkness. My chest tightens. I mustn't fail her.

We emerge into a jagged passage open to the stormy sky above. Thunder rumbles in the distance. At least it's an exit. The moment we step out, a final tremor collapses the hall behind us. Dust plumes, sealing any return path. We're free from the ruins, I note, but the cost is dire.

Breathing ragged, I guide Calla to a rocky outcrop. We collapse together, both of us battered and reeling. The sun has fully set, leaving the world swathed in deep twilight. Rain begins to fall, pattering on the stone, a cold drizzle that clings to our skin. My entire body shakes with pain.

She curls into me, tears mingling with raindrops, her eyes pressed closed around the

shards. Blood still oozes gently from the corners. I cradle her head, careful not to touch the glass fragments. This can't be happening. I try once more to channel a healing incantation, but my magic flickers, spent. I'm too weak, the curse too deep. The shards seem to resist my efforts, embedding themselves in her eyes with necrotic malice. She whimpers, face contorted in agony.

Hopelessness sinks in. My mouth goes dry, words failing me. She's lost her sight, we've gained no answers, and House Vaerathis remains a looming threat. "I'm sorry," I rasp, voice cracking. I don't even know if she hears me above the drizzle and her own pain. "I'm so sorry, Calla."

She trembles against my chest, fingers fisting in my torn cloak. "I c-can't see," she repeats, desperation choking her voice. "What... what do we do?"

I shake my head, heart twisting. "We get away from here," I manage. "We find shelter, somewhere to heal." My mind scrambles for a plan. Maybe if we can find a skilled healer, mortal or otherwise, though I suspect no normal magic can remove these shards. The mirror's curse lingers, a legacy of that ancient tyrant. My blood boils at the thought. He's taken her sight now, while he still hunts for me, for us.

Gritting my teeth, I push myself upright and pull her gently with me. My vision swims, blood still seeping from my side, but I cling to consciousness. I must remain standing—for her. She leans heavily on me, tears streaking the grime on her cheeks. We stumble away from the collapsed ruins, each step a fragile attempt to survive.

Somewhere behind us, the faint echoes of dark elves fade, drowned by the wind and rain. We slip into the darkness, battered and defeated, no triumphant escape to show. Just two wounded souls, haunted by curses and illusions of hope. The bond between us throbs with mutual anguish, heavier than ever.

She clings to my arm, stumbling over unseen rocks, each misstep tearing a soft cry

from her lips. My chest tightens with guilt, anger, and something dangerously close to love. I swore I'd protect her, but now look at her—blind, wounded, broken. If I had told her everything sooner, if I hadn't insisted on searching these worthless ruins...

We keep moving, slow and grim, until the rains intensify. A small cave in a rocky cliff appears through the gloom, and I half-carry Calla inside, nearly collapsing from relief. The shelter is shallow, but enough to keep out the downpour. We drop to the ground. I tear strips of cloth to bind my injuries, though I can do little about the crossbow bolt's venom still coursing through my veins.

Calla lies there, curled on her side, silent tears soaking the bandage I place gently over her eyes. My breath shudders with every movement. I want to offer comfort, but the weight of our situation crushes me. What do I say? That it'll be okay? I can't even promise that.

At last, I find my voice in the dim, flickering shadows of stormlight. "We'll rest," I whisper. "We'll... find help. I swear it."

She doesn't answer right away. Then she lets out a low, broken laugh that stabs at my heart. "Help? Where, Daeva? No one can fix this. The shards are cursed—my eyes are gone." Her voice trembles with despair.

I close my eyes, fresh guilt choking me. My wounds burn, and I cradle her trembling hand. "I'll find a way," I insist, though it sounds hollow. My words ring with desperation rather than certainty.

Silence settles, punctuated by the steady drumming of rain. She drifts in and out of consciousness, pain and exhaustion dragging her down. I stay by her side, ignoring my own injuries as best I can, forcing myself to remain awake. I can't let the darkness claim us both.

Time crawls. Lightning flares occasionally, illuminating the cave. Calla whimpers, turning her face against the stone. I smooth her damp hair away from her brow, hating how feeble my attempts at comfort are. If only I had enough power to undo the mirror's curse. If only I'd found a solution in these ruins, or told her the truth sooner. Regrets swirl, threatening to drown me.

Eventually, in the dead of night, the storm lightens, and my gaze drifts to her slumbering form. My own eyelids sag, each breath a reminder of the crossbow bolt lodged near my ribs, the sword slash in my shoulder. We're both grievously injured. Yet, for all our pain, the worst wound is what's taken from Calla—her sight, her hope.

Despite my agony, I vow to keep watch until dawn. The world outside the cave is a black void of driving rain, cold wind howling. We're defeated, battered, forced to cower. And yet, something fierce refuses to let me surrender. She's blind, but I'm still alive. As long as I draw breath, I'll find a way to restore her vision or at least ensure she survives. No matter how bleak this is, I can't abandon her to despair.

I wrap my cloak around her, gently leaning her against my chest so she won't shiver so badly. Her breathing stabilizes somewhat. The bond hums with sorrow. Carefully, I press a trembling kiss to her damp hair, letting my eyes close. If she were awake, she might question this moment of tenderness. But I can't withhold it anymore, not when every heartbeat might be our last.

"I'm sorry," I breathe into the silence, the confession lost in the patter of rain. "I promise... I won't stop trying."

Her fingers twitch around my cloak, as if gripping a lifeline. My heart squeezes. In her unconscious state, she mutters a faint sound, half my name, half a plea. I hold her closer, ignoring the sting in my side, tears blurring my vision. The ghost of what I feel for her, the guilt and yearning, the bitter truth of my curse—they coil into a

singular resolve.

Tomorrow, we awaken maimed and lost. But tomorrow, I'll begin anew, scouring the world for a way to restore her sight, to break this chain that would see us both destroyed. Even if it means confronting the darkest corners of Protheka or returning to Vaerathis with a blade at the ancestor's throat. She gave up everything to stand by me—her freedom, her human soul, even her eyes. I owe her more than empty regrets.

Outside, thunder rumbles, the storm's fury waning. In the flicker of sporadic lightning, I glimpse the battered woman in my arms, a stark reminder that I've failed her so far. My mind drifts to the monstrous reflection in the mirror, the old tyrant's mocking laugh. He thinks he's won. But as I lean my forehead gently against Calla's, a simmering rage blooms in my chest—a vow of vengeance, tempered by the realization that I can't pursue it at the cost of her life. Not anymore. I choose her.

So I keep watch, ignoring the blood that seeps from my wounds, ignoring the tremors that threaten to drag me under. When dawn finally creeps across the sky, pale and cold, I remain awake, cradling Calla's hand in mine. We're broken, hunted, half-blind and half-dead. I finally find a spark that drives me beyond hate and self-destruction—a spark I'll do anything to protect.

No matter what the ancient ancestor has planned, no matter how he hunts us with cursed mirrors and dark elves, I'll tear the entire House Vaerathis down if it means saving her. She's lost her sight, but I'll be her eyes until we find a cure. If we fail, at least we'll fail side by side, defying fate's cruelty to our last breaths. It may not be hope in the purest sense, but it's enough to keep my heart beating for one more day.

### CALLA

I wake to the slow drip of rain through the thatched roof. The droplets plink on the dusty floorboards, a steady, hollow rhythm that burrows into my skull. Beneath it, my chest aches with each breath, and my bandaged eyes sting. It takes me a moment to remember where I am, to recall that the warm presence by my side—Daeva—has once again risen and left me alone.

Everything is black. That's my world now—a curtain of ink that won't lift, even when I blink. No shapes, no colors, only an unrelenting void that taunts me every time I try to shift my head. If I concentrate, I can sense a faint difference in the direction of the light; the left side of my face might be marginally warmer, but it offers no comfort. I'm as good as lost.

I exhale shakily. My tears come unbidden, and I feel the thick, sticky warmth of blood weeping from beneath the cloth that covers my ruined eyes. The pain is constant—a low throb that spikes whenever I move too fast. I try not to cry, but the tears slip free anyway. They course down my cheeks, mixing with the slow, searing drip of blood.

I lift a trembling hand, gingerly pressing against the bandage. My fingertips come away slick. Another day of the same. The hut around me—though I cannot see it—reeks of mildew and old wood. The walls must be sagging, judging by how the wind rattles them in the night. When Daeva found this place, we were both on the edge of collapse. A roof, however faulty, was better than open sky.

I'm not sure how long we've been here—perhaps a full day, maybe two. Time slipped away after the frantic flight from the cave and the mirror's shattering. My memories are tangled in fever and pain, anchored only by the echo of Daeva's voice, the warmth of his hands dressing my wounds. The guilt in his tone whenever he speaks...

A scuff of footsteps draws my attention. My head whips around, but there's nothing to see, only darkness. My pulse quickens, tension coiling. Then his voice—familiar, if frayed—fills the silence.

"I'm back," Daeva says softly. The sound of him dropping something on the floor, perhaps a bundle. "Sorry it took long. The forest's near empty of game."

He's been hunting or scavenging. Again, all for me, for us, while I lie here like dead weight. My throat tightens with shame. I force the words out, voice husky. "Any luck?"

A pause. "A hare, scrawny. Better than nothing." He moves closer; I feel his hand slide under my elbow, steadying me. "How do you feel?"

It's such a futile question, but the concern in his voice chips at my defenses. I swallow. "Same," I whisper. "Blind, hurting, and... cold."

He exhales. I imagine him nodding, regret etched into every line of his body. "Let's get you near the fire. I started it earlier, though it's burning low."

He coaxes me upright. My entire body protests. I clench my teeth against the pain. Daeva guides me carefully across the slanted floor, one arm braced around my waist. Every step is precarious. The slightest tilt and I might stumble, falling headlong into black nothingness. My heart races as he settles me on what passes for a seat—some crate or stool with a missing leg. It wobbles, but he keeps a grip on my shoulder until

I'm stable.

"There," he murmurs. I hear him crouch, possibly building up the fire with bits of damp wood. The hut is so cramped that the corners might be within arm's reach, but I can't be certain. All I know is the crackle of flames as they're coaxed to life, the slight warmth that tickles my face.

We sit in silence for a time. The hush weighs heavily, thick with all the things we haven't said since everything fell apart. At last, I break it, my voice trembling. "Daeva... do you think we can keep traveling soon? I—I can't see how."

He's quiet for a second too long. "Not in your condition," he admits softly. "And I'm not well myself. The crossbow bolt's poison is still in my veins. We push ourselves now, and we might not survive."

A lump lodges in my throat. We're stranded. "I'm sorry," I say, voice fracturing. "I know I'm slowing you down."

He hisses in exasperation. "Stop that," he snaps, though not unkindly. "You never asked for this. I'm the reason you lost your eyes. If anything, blame me."

A fragile laugh escapes me, hollow and sad. "I don't blame you. I chose to walk this path. I—" My breath catches. "I'd choose it again, even after all this."

He doesn't speak, but I sense him shift closer. The bond between us thrums, laced with guilt and something deeper. I recall how we sealed our contract with that savage kiss, how the mirror shards stole my sight. My entire future changed in a heartbeat, yet I can't regret staying by his side.

Time passes in hushed tension. Eventually, he leaves me alone with the guttering fire, mumbling that he'll try to cook the hare. My throat is so dry, but I don't have the will



to ask for water. I hear him rummaging on the side, likely scraping the last bits of salt from our dwindling supplies. The roof drips in the corner, each plop a reminder of how broken our refuge is.

I shift, feeling the creeping numbness in my legs. My chest feels tight, anxiety swirling. I can't just sit here, losing hope. Summoning courage, I push to my feet, ignoring the spike of pain. My arms extend, searching for a wall or a table to keep balance. My fingertips brush rough wood, damp and speckled with moss. Step by step, I inch forward.

My body protests every movement, but I grit my teeth, determined not to be a burden. If Daeva can hunt in his wounded state, I can at least stand. My foot catches on something—a broken chair? My heart seizes with panic as I nearly topple. My hands slam into the wall, scraping my palms. Pain flares, but I keep from crying out.

“Careful,” Daeva warns from across the hut, hearing the commotion.

“I’m fine,” I lie. My voice wobbles. “I just... needed to move.”

He hesitates, then I sense him returning to his task. Good. Let him see I won't surrender to darkness.

Shuffling along the wall, I feel the soaked straw stuffed between the planks. Each slow step sets my nerves on edge. My shoulder aches, my bandaged eyes throb, but I manage a few paces before I must rest. Breathing heavily, I lean on the wall. Then it happens.

A spark of pale luminescence flickers in my vision—like a mote of light dancing across a black canvas. I freeze. My mind reels. Did I imagine that? Then another mote appears, drifting ghostlike in the void. My breath catches. That's impossible... I can't see. Yet here they are, swirling flecks of faint silver glimmer.

They swirl faster, merging into patterns that ache behind my ruined eyes. And then the darkness cracks, not into sight but into memory —jarring, vivid scenes that assault me:

A grand hall, polished floors reflecting torchlight. Hooded dark elves chanting in a circle. Their voices resonate with arcane power. One steps forward, lifting a ceremonial dagger that glints ominously. A human youth is dragged into the center, wrists bound, eyes wide with terror. He's slender, his face gaunt with fear. He pleads in a language I don't recognize, voice cracking...

I gasp, lurching backward. The vision intensifies. I see the elves forcing the dagger to his chest, see shimmering runes carved into the floor. A mirror stands at the hall's far side—massive, etched with the same runes we saw in that cursed ruin. The boy's scream tears through my skull. Blood splashes, and in the mirror's reflection, I glimpse an older elf, his features twisted, leaning on a staff. He cackles as the youth collapses, life draining away. The hall swirls with dark magic.

"Stop," I choke, pressing my hands to my face, heedless of the pain. My voice trembles. "Gods, stop."

But it doesn't stop. The vision warps, plunging me deeper. That same boy—Daeva—writhes on the floor, hair matted with blood, eyes glazed with betrayal. I see arcs of raw power swirl around him, the chanting intensifying. The ancient elf presides over it all, grinning as though he's absorbing the boy's essence. Then blackness swallows everything.

I jolt, staggering until I hit the floor. My heart hammers as the motes of silver fade, leaving me panting in the real world—alone in the hut. My hands shake. What did I just witness?

"Calla!" Daeva's frantic footsteps approach. He kneels, voice taut with worry. "What

happened?”

I gasp, tears flooding behind the bandages. “I... saw,” I stutter. “I saw the day you were sacrificed, Daeva. When...you were human.”

His breath hitches. “How?—?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, voice shaking. “I think... the mirror shards in my eyes... they’re making me see fragments of your past.” I can hardly form the words, still trembling from the horror of that ceremony.

Daeva’s arms wrap around me, surprisingly gentle. “You shouldn’t have to bear that,” he murmurs, voice thick. “My memories... they’re curses unto themselves.”

I lean into him, seeking a moment’s solace in his warmth. He’s gone through so much. I exhale shakily. “It’s not just a memory, though,” I manage to say. “It felt like I was... there . Like I hold a piece of that mirror, letting me see your life as if it’s my own.”

He sighs, guilt radiating from him. “I’m sorry.”

I swallow, forcing back the tears. “We’ll figure it out.”

Before we can delve deeper, a sudden chill prickles my skin. The door creaks. My heart leaps in alarm—who else could be here? I push off Daeva, mustering a tense readiness. We can’t handle another battle.

A calm voice resonates from the threshold. “I bring news. No quarrel, unless you force it.”

A dark elf. I hear Daeva snarl, rising to confront this intruder. My pulse pounds as the

newcomer steps inside, boots scraping the floor, carrying an air of smug confidence.

“Speak fast,” Daeva growls, venom in every syllable.

The elf chuckles, unperturbed. “I’m but a messenger. My mistress sends word: You are expected at House Vaerathis in five days, demon. Bring your mortal pet.”

My heart drops. Vaerathis... they found us. I shift, struggling to stand, but Daeva’s hand steadies me, his grip firm.

The messenger’s tone drips condescension. “If you do not appear, your dear friends—Silas, Cole, Ryn, and Jenna, I believe—will be executed. Painfully.” He chuckles. “We have them in our dungeons, ready to serve as leverage.”

I clench my fists, rage surging. They have my friends? A wave of helpless fury coils around my soul, mirrored by the tense stillness in Daeva.

He speaks, words clipped: “You dare threaten us, worm?”

The elf snorts. “I come bearing a benevolent offer, if you can call it that. Return, let the House complete its ritual, or watch your allies die. The choice is yours.”

Silence. My pulse thunders. Ritual... so they do intend to harness Daeva again, using me as the tether. My friends are hostages in a monstrous negotiation. We can’t ignore this. We can’t run.

Daeva’s voice wavers with anger. “Leave,” he orders, though a tremor betrays how close he is to snapping.

A sneer laces the messenger’s voice. “Of course. My mistress expects your presence at Vaerathis. Five days, no more.”

I sense the elf turning to depart, but he halts mid-step. “Though, if you’re wise, demon, you should surrender. Or perhaps you’d rather see your mortal lover suffer. After all, we both know that if the old master dies, you die—and so might she.”

That’s the final straw. Daeva lunges with a guttural snarl. There’s a harsh clang, a brief scuffle of limbs. I cry out, lurching forward blindly. Metal hits flesh with a sickening squelch. The messenger’s scream chokes off, replaced by wet gurgling.

Then silence. A body thuds to the floor. Hot blood seeps into the old wood, the smell nauseating. My hand covers my mouth as I stifle a sob. Killing the messenger...

“Daeva!” I rasp. “What?—?”

He pants, voice trembling with unspent fury. “I won’t let them toy with us.”

I swallow hard, tears squeezing past the bandages. “But now they’ll send more, and they might harm my friends anyway.”

His anger crackles, then ebbs into despair. “I’m sorry,” he manages, pained. “I couldn’t... that elf threatened you again.”

Weariness drapes over me like a lead blanket. I sink to the floor, trembling. We’re in no condition to outrun Vaerathis. If we do, our friends die. If we go, the House might complete the ritual, killing me and Daeva. My breath shakes. “We can’t run away anymore,” I whisper. “We have to face them.”

He kneels beside me, voice low, anguished. “I’m tired, Calla. Tired of fighting a war that started centuries ago. But if the ritual is completed, you might cease to exist. If the ancient elf is slain, I die, dragging you with me. I... I don’t know how to protect you from every outcome.”

A wave of helplessness courses through me. He's cornered by the threads of destiny. My lips tremble. Memories of that sacrificial vision swirl, the hum of old magic in my blood. Something stirs—a faint echo of the mirror's voice, or the darkness behind my eyes. I speak words I barely comprehend, a cryptic truth welling up from the depths of my newfound ability:

“Fate isn't a blade that cuts only one way,” I murmur, voice distant. “Nor is magic a chain we can't break. It's an ocean—fluid, shifting, shaped by every drop of will we pour into it. You were cast into its depths centuries ago, and I followed you in. Now we're submerged together. We might drown, or we might find a current to carry us somewhere neither of us expected.”

He listens, silent. My heart races, fear and hope tangling in my chest. “Each ritual, each bond, it's a thread in a tapestry. The House wants to weave it to their design, but we can tug the threads free if we're brave enough. Yes, we're battered. Yes, every path seems doomed. But water changes direction when new rivers flow into it. So does destiny, when two souls refuse to be shaped by it.”

A tear of blood slips down my cheek. Daeva's breath hitches, his hand brushing against mine. I sense the conflict raging in him. “You're... too kind,” he whispers, voice raw. “After all I've done, all the pain this curse caused you?—”

I squeeze his fingers, ignoring the dull throb in my eyes. “I chose this. I chose you. Maybe it ends in destruction, but maybe not. We can't know unless we try.”

He bows his head, trembling. For a long moment, he says nothing. Then he exhales, a tremor in the sound. “Then we face them in five days,” he concedes. “We find a way to break their hold on us. Or we die trying.”

A wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. But relief, oddly, mingles with it—an acceptance that we'll no longer run, but stand. I lean my head on his shoulder, feeling

the rapid thud of his heart. Our bodies ache, but for an instant, we share a fragile peace.

Outside, the rain slackens, leaving only the drip from the eaves. We remain entwined in the gloom, the flicker of dying firelight dancing across the broken walls. I can't see the flames, but I feel their faint warmth on my face. I can't see Daeva, yet I sense the shape of his body, the tension in his muscles, the unspoken devotion in his trembling breath. He's as wounded as I am, trapped in this labyrinth of curses.

I rest my hand over his chest, sensing the slow rise and fall. "No matter what happens," I whisper, "we meet them on our terms."

He nods, voice barely above a breath. "We will."

When fatigue claims me, I let it drag me under, comforted by the steady drum of his heartbeat. The path ahead is bleak, but the faint current of fate stirs in my veins, whispering that the tapestry of magic might yield to our combined wills. I choose to trust that, no matter the cost.

Hours later—or perhaps it's the next morning—I stir from fitful sleep. My eyelids flutter, but the world remains dark. A sinking dread tries to take hold, but I force it down. Remember who you are, I tell myself. A blind woman with a demon's bond, but still alive. My shoulder throbs anew, the bandages stiff with dried blood. My lips are parched, and a haze of hunger lingers.

Daeva must sense me stirring. He shifts, his presence immediately at my side. "Calla?"

I nod, or try to. "Still here," I rasp.

He presses a cup to my lips. Water. I drink greedily, savoring the cool relief. My

body quivers with gratitude at the faint nourishment.

In the hush, I recall the messenger's final threat: five days. I have no sense of how many have passed. One? Two? Time is a blur in my sightless world. But Daeva and I will need every moment to regain enough strength to make the journey back to Vaerathis.

The thought twists my stomach. "We should plan," I say, struggling to mask my fear. "We can't just walk in unprepared."

He exhales. "Agreed. But rest a bit more. The more we push ourselves, the slower we heal."

A humorless laugh escapes me. "What good is healing if I can't see?"

His silence stabs me. For all his demonic resilience, he has no miracle to restore my vision. My breath shudders, tears of frustration pooling behind the cloth. Yet I must keep going.

I shift carefully, wincing at a jolt of pain in my shoulder. Summoning courage, I reach out, fumbling until my hand finds his arm. "Daeva, show me how to move around. I can't stay on this floor forever. I need... to adapt."

He hesitates, then his tone softens. "All right. Lean on me."

Thus begins a painstaking exercise: letting him guide me around the cramped hut, showing me the approximate layout. My hands slide along the splintered walls, counting steps from the corner to the meager hearth. He warns me of a rotten patch in the floor near the door, a tangle of broken furniture in one corner. My legs shake from the effort, but I refuse to relent.



At some point, I stub my toe on a hidden stool and nearly crash forward. Pain flares in my raw eyes, tears and blood trickling anew. Daeva catches me, arms around my waist, breath harsh in my ear. “Enough,” he pleads. “You’re hurting.”

I bite down on a whimper, frustration scorching my throat. “I have to learn,” I force out, swallowing tears. “If we’re returning to Vaerathis, I won’t be helpless.”

He sighs, lifting me as if I weigh nothing, depositing me carefully on a makeshift bedding of hay and old blankets. My heart clenches with both gratitude and longing—once again, reliant on him. “Rest,” he orders gently. “Or you’ll collapse.”

I yield, trembling. He covers me with his cloak. The taste of tears lingers, and I drift into uneasy dreams. In them, I see more flickers of memory: dark elves chanting, mirrors shattering, Daeva’s terrified eyes as the dagger sank into his flesh. Thunder booms, and my own scream merges with his.

When I snap awake, the shadows in my mind remain. My heart pounds. I have become a living mirror, I think in silent horror, reflecting Daeva’s darkest memories. Yet maybe these visions hold the key to unraveling the House’s ritual. If only I can decipher them.

An indeterminate stretch of time passes—sunset or sunrise, I cannot tell. Daeva hunts once more, leaving me alone. This time, though fear needles at my stomach, I force myself to move around the hut. Step by step, counting paces from the hearth to the door. The floor complains underfoot. My bandaged eyes burn, but I endure.

Midway through, a jolt of sharp pain spears my temples. I cry out, collapsing against the wall. The motes of silver float in the blackness. Memories strike again: flickers of runes carved into a mirror’s frame, the old ancestor chanting over Daeva’s limp body, threads of magic swirling like serpents. I see a younger elf woman crying in the background, her face contorted with guilt. Then it fades, leaving me panting, tears

streaking my cheeks.

My mind reels. Another puzzle piece. Were these actual events, or illusions conjured by the shard-laden darkness behind my eyes? My heart aches for Daeva, forced into this fate centuries ago. And for that unknown elf who wept for him. Did she regret his sacrifice?

Daeva returns soon after, to find me slumped in a corner, tears of blood staining my bandages. He rushes forward, cursing his slow pace. “Calla,” he breathes, voice shaking, “are you all right?”

I cling to him, trembling. “I saw more,” I whisper, explaining haltingly the images that flooded me. He listens, jaw clenched, guilt clouding his tone.

I breathe shallowly, heart raw with anguish. “We can’t keep running, you said it yourself. We have to face them. Whether it kills us or not.”

He groans, pressing his forehead to my shoulder. “I’m so tired, Calla. Tired of living under this curse—knowing if the old elf dies, I die too, and thus you. Tired of them holding your friends hostage. I—I hate it.”

My throat tightens. I cradle his head, ignoring the flare of pain in my arms. “We’ll do what we must,” I whisper. “Even if the ritual kills me, kills you... we can’t let them keep my friends in chains.”

I lean in, pressing my forehead to his. “I might be blind, but these shards let me glimpse your past, your pain—and maybe the ritual’s secrets. Perhaps that’s our thread, Daeva: a hidden path in the darkness. We still have time to twist fate a little. Five days, they said. Five days to muster what strength remains.”

He cups my face gently, mindful of my injuries. “You’re not giving up, even like

this,” he marvels, voice husky with awe. “You never cease to amaze me.”

A small, sad smile curves my lips. “You gave me my first taste of freedom. I won’t let it end in a Vaerathis dungeon.”

His answering laugh is choked with tears. “Then so be it. We go. We fight, or yield, or do something in between. But we do it together. ”

Relief mingles with terror in my chest. I let him pull me close, the stench of blood and sweat thick in my nose. My arms wrap around his torso, ignoring the pain. For a moment, we exist in a fragile embrace—two broken souls in a battered hut, the storm of destiny swirling outside.

We have five days to reach Vaerathis. Five days to plan an impossible rescue. Five days to defy an immortal tyrant’s hunger for vengeance. I feel the bond between us, pulsing with renewed resolve. Despite my blindness, despite his lethal injuries, we hold each other in the gloom, forging a vow to shape fate instead of bowing to it.

“Are you sure?” he asks quietly, voice muffled in my hair. “If the ritual completes, you’ll vanish with me. If we kill him, I might drag you to oblivion. I can’t—I can’t promise you’ll live.”

My heart trembles, but I steady it. “I made my choice long ago, Daeva. My life is bound to yours. No regrets. Let’s show them that a mortal and a demon can unravel their precious immortality.”

A shiver courses through him. Then he nods, breath shuddering. “We’ll leave soon, once we can stand, once we gather enough strength. And House Vaerathis will face the consequences.”

The flickering fire crackles, lighting the darkness I cannot see. My future is as black

as the void behind my bandaged eyes. But in my chest, a tiny ember of hope flares. The silver motes swirl in my mind, reminding me I've become something new—a living mirror, a reflection of an ancient evil turned against itself. If that power can help us, I'll wield it. If not, I'll still stand by Daeva, no matter what waits at Vaerathis.

I nestle closer, letting exhaustion claim me again. The steady beat of his heart lulls me, a promise that we're not alone in this nightmare. Outside, the wind moans, the corpse of a second messenger lies in cold pools of blood, and far away, House Vaerathis tightens its net. But we remain in each other's arms, forging our own path in the shifting currents of fate and magic.

Five days, I think, counting my ragged breaths. Let them come. Fate can tangle and snare us, or break under our will. We've come this far, after all—slaves no longer, but conspirators in a dance that might shatter an empire. I cling to that thought as the darkness deepens behind my eyes, drifting into uneasy sleep. And in my final hazy moment, I feel Daeva's breath whisper over my forehead, carrying a promise unspoken yet fiercely real.

### DAEVA

I stand at the threshold of the crumbling hut, inhaling the crisp morning air. My side still aches with every breath, and the faint burn of venom lingers under my skin. Yet the day feels strangely alive—cool wind brushing through the withered trees, fragile sunlight peeking through the canopy. Behind me, I hear Calla stir, her breath catching as she pushes to her feet. We’ve spent so many hours—or days?—in the dimness of that shack, recovering, planning, avoiding the inevitable.

Now, we have only a handful of days before we must return to House Vaerathis and face whatever monstrous scheme awaits us. But in this sliver of time, in our battered state, we have each other. She stands by my side, blindfolded with stained bandages, posture tense but head held high. For someone who’s endured so much, she radiates a quiet determination that stirs something protective in me every time I look her way.

I glance down at her. “Ready?” I ask softly, my voice carrying the edge of worry that never leaves me. She’s asked for something small, yet it feels enormous given our circumstances.

She lifts her chin, unseeing eyes hidden behind the cloth. “Yes,” she says, her lips curving in a faint smile. “Take me to the waterfall. Just... let’s be normal for a day.”

Her voice trembles, laced with hope and heartbreak. My heart clenches at the fragility of her request. Normal, in a life such as ours, might be a cruel illusion. But if this is what she wants—what she needs—I won’t deny her.

“I’ll lead,” I murmur. “Hold my hand.”

She nods, sliding her slender fingers against my palm. A jolt of warmth passes between us, the bond thrumming with our shared resolve. Carefully, I guide her from the hut’s rickety porch onto the narrow path that winds through the pines. The morning sun glimmers pale overhead, cutting through drifting wisps of low mist. The air smells of dew and damp earth—a pleasant scent despite the tension in my chest.

We walk slowly. Every few steps, I pause to warn her of a stray root or uneven stone. She stumbles once, and my arm darts around her waist to catch her. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, but she sets her jaw and keeps going, refusing to yield to her blindness. I admire that resilience—she’s lost her vision, yet not her spirit.

After a short trek, the silent forest gives way to the distant rush of water. Calla’s face shifts, her head tilting as she listens. She breathes a soft gasp. “It’s close,” she says, wonder slipping into her voice.

“It’s just beyond that bend,” I confirm, my own spirits lifting at her excitement. “There’s a small clearing around it—moss, stones... quite pretty.”

Her grip on my hand tightens. “Describe it more,” she whispers. “Tell me what I can’t see.”

A pang tugs at my chest. She shouldn’t have to rely on my words to witness beauty. Still, I muster a gentle tone. “The trees thin out ahead, giving way to a circle of smooth boulders. The waterfall is maybe twice your height, pouring from a rocky ledge overgrown with creeping vines. The water cascades into a wide pool that sparkles green and gold under the sun.”

I lead her around a final cluster of bushes. The roar of water grows, drowning out the rustle of pines. We emerge into the clearing, sunlight reflecting off the rippling

surface. It's no grand waterfall—barely more than a tumbling stream from a cliff—but the peaceful setting feels like another world compared to the gloom of the hut.

“Now we're here,” I say softly, halting at the water's edge. A breeze carries a fine mist that kisses our faces. “The sun hits the falls at an angle—makes a little rainbow in the spray.”

She sucks in a breath, turning her bandaged gaze upward. “A rainbow,” she echoes wistfully, her voice tight with longing. “I wish I could see it.”

Pain knots in my throat. “I wish you could, too.” I gently slip an arm around her, guiding her forward until her boots touch the damp stones near the water's edge. “Feel the spray on your skin... Hear the rush of the water.”

She reaches out, tentative. A soft laugh escapes her, tinged with tears. “It feels... alive,” she says. “Cold and invigorating.” She tips her face toward the cascading droplets. “It's beautiful, isn't it?”

“Yes,” I answer, my chest tight. I'm looking at her, ignoring the actual scene. The pool sparkles, but nothing can match the fierce glow in her expression when she experiences even a shred of happiness. I push the guilt aside—this moment belongs to her, to us.

We stand there in silence for a while, letting the water's music envelop us. She raises her arms slightly, as if embracing the waterfall's mist. I catch a glimpse of the faint bruises on her wrists, the flecks of dried blood near her bandages. Even so, her lips curve in a smile, and I realize how radiant she can be, even blind and wounded.

I clear my throat. “There are butterflies,” I say, noticing a pair flitting near the wildflowers by the bank. “Two, maybe—blue wings with black edges. They're

dancing by the blooms.”

She turns her head. “Describe them?” she murmurs again.

I watch the delicate insects flutter among purple blossoms. “They’re small, about the size of your thumb, their wings shimmering in the sunlight. They flit from flower to flower, tasting nectar. They almost look like little shards of the sky come to life.” A short laugh leaves me, a foreign sound in my own ears. “I... well, I’m not used to describing such things.”

Her face softens, a melancholic smile forming. “Thank you,” she whispers. “For telling me. I can almost imagine them... tiny living jewels.”

A hush settles. My gaze drifts to her face, noticing how tension lingers around her mouth despite the fragile smile. She tries to be strong for me. She senses my scrutiny, turning toward me. “Daeva?” she whispers. “Are you... all right?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “I’m—managing.” It’s a half-lie, but I try to sound reassuring. “What about you?”

She hesitates, tilting her face toward me. “It hurts,” she admits, voice trembling. “My eyes, my shoulder... everything. But I’m more worried about you. I know you’re pushing yourself. We only have a few days left, and?—”

Guilt flickers. I hush her with a gentle squeeze of her hand. “Don’t. This moment is supposed to be about us, without the ghosts of Vaerathis haunting every breath.”

Her lips part, tears shining behind her bandage. “Yes,” she murmurs, nodding. “Yes, just... us.”

The water sings as it tumbles over the rocks, the sunlight warm on our skin. I guide



her to a mossy flat stone at the pool's edge. We sit, legs brushing. My heart pounds. It's been so long since we had anything resembling peace or normalcy.

She draws in a shaky breath. "Daeva... there's something I want to say." She hesitates. "I've been thinking about it for so long, but it feels... complicated now."

My pulse quickens. "Tell me," I urge softly.

She lifts her bandaged eyes toward me, a slight tremor in her chin. "I... I love you." She releases a shaky laugh, tears leaking down. "I know we have a contract, and maybe the demon bond confuses everything, but it's not the magic I'm in love with. It's you. You, with your scars and your regrets and your protectiveness. You gave me freedom, gave me a choice when I had none." Her voice quivers. "Even though it cost me my sight, I... I don't regret staying."

Emotion slams into my chest. Love. A concept I barely dared dream about. For centuries, I lived in shadows, cursing the world, cursing the day I was sacrificed. Now, this mortal woman—blind and battered—speaks the word like a vow. I swallow hard.

"I... I don't know what love is," I finally say, my throat tight. "Once, I was a human boy who believed in hope, in trust. Then the sacrifice took all that away." A shiver courses down my spine, memories of that mirror's prison, the centuries of emptiness. "But if there's something real in this cursed existence, some feeling that outshines magic and fate... then it must be you, Calla."

Her breath catches. A watery smile trembles across her lips. "Daeva..."

I brush my fingertips across her cheek, being careful of the bandages. The bond between us resonates, not the savage lust triggered by battles, but a gentler pulse of yearning and devotion. "Let me," I whisper, leaning in.

She meets me halfway, our lips brushing in a tentative kiss. It's soft, tentative at first, our hearts laid bare in a way that goes beyond the demon's hunger. A wave of warmth floods me, every nerve alight with tenderness rather than violence. Calla's tears mix with the salt of my own. I part her lips gently, deepening the kiss, pouring all my pent-up regret and longing into that moment.

She sighs against me, tangling her fingers in my hair. The waterfall's roar fades to a distant hush, leaving only the beat of our hearts and the rustling breeze. My hands slip around her waist, drawing her close. She arches into me, unafraid despite the darkness claiming her eyes.

Time slips away. She clings to me as if I'm her anchor, and I hold her as if she's my lifeline. We're both so scarred, so unsure. But in this moment, we cling to each other, forging a shelter from the storm of fate.

We break apart, gasping for breath. A flush warms my face, an echo of the passion that once flared in blood-soaked nights. But this time, it's gentler, deeper. She murmurs my name, her lips brushing my jaw, and I shiver at the intimacy. My hand drifts to the clasp of her torn tunic. We pause, hearts thundering, and she nods slightly. We slip from the frayed confines of our clothing, letting vulnerability speak where words fail.

The world is a blade's edge tonight—sharp, precarious, a breath held too long in the dark. Then, with a sigh that shivers between us, it shatters. Calla's body is heat and hunger beneath me, skin slick with sweat and the cool kiss of river mist. The slide of her is like a prayer I've forgotten how to speak, my voice rough with disuse, my hands trembling as they trace the map of her.

"Slow," she whispers, her voice frayed at the edges, her fingers tightening in my hair. "Please—slow."

And Gods, I obey.

My cock finds her pussy with a reverence that aches, the first press of me into her so excruciatingly gentle it steals the breath from my lungs. She gasps—a fractured, broken sound—and her lips part against mine, her exhale a hymn against my mouth.

"You feel—" Her words dissolve into a moan as I sink deeper, my hips rolling in a rhythm older than time. "Oh— oh, you feel like?—"

"Tell me," I growl, my voice raw. My hands frame her face, thumbs brushing the tears already spilling from her sightless eyes. "Tell me how I feel."

She arches beneath me, her nails biting into my shoulders. "Like coming home," she chokes out. "Like— Gods—like finally being whole."

Her fingers tremble over my skin, tracing every scar, every ridge of old violence, reading me like a psalm written in blood. She doesn't need sight to see me—not when her touch unravels me, when her breath against my throat is the only scripture I'll ever worship.

I kiss her wounds in turn—the bruises, the split skin, the places where the world has carved its cruelty into her. My mouth is a confession, my tongue an absolution. I worship her like this, with lips and teeth and whispered promises, until her body is trembling beneath mine, until her cries are the only thing I hear above the roar of the waterfall.

This isn't fucking.

This isn't the desperate, teeth-bared rutting—the kind that left us bloody and hollow, two animals seeking solace in the dark.

No.

This is ruin.

This is the walls coming down, stone by stone, until there's nothing left but her breath against my throat, my name a ragged plea on her lips. The waterfall howls around us, relentless, deafening, but all I hear is her—the hitch in her voice when I sink deeper, the way her body clutches at me like she's drowning and I'm the only air left.

"Look at me," I murmur against her mouth, though I know she can't. Still, her lashes flutter, her face turning toward mine like a flower to the sun. "Look at me when you come."

And she does.

Her climax crashes over her like a storm, her back bowing, her thighs tightening around my hips as she shudders beneath me. Her cry is muffled against my skin, her tears cutting through the dirt on her cheeks—blood and salt and something too raw to name.

Mine fall too, lost in the dark tangle of her hair as I follow her over the edge, my groan swallowed by her mouth, our hearts hammering the same broken rhythm.

Every thrust is a vow. We're still here.

After everything—we're still fucking here.

After, we're wrecked. Sprawled in the moss, limbs tangled, breaths ragged as the river's pulse. She presses her face to my chest, her bandages damp with tears and the ghost of my touch. I stroke her hair, my hands unsteady, and let the quiet wrap

around us like a promise.

The night is soft now, the blade's edge dulled, the world stitched back together in the aftermath of us.

We are ruin. We are alive. And in this moment, that is enough.

Three days until House Vaerathis. Three days until hell. But here, now—there is only her. Only this. And for a stolen moment, it's enough.

Eventually, the chill of the morning seeps into our skin, reminding us we can't stay entangled forever. Gently, I help her back into her tattered clothes, pressing a soft kiss to her brow. She lingers against me, fingertips resting on my lips as though memorizing my face. My chest aches with tenderness and sorrow at the same time.

When we're dressed, we remain seated on the moss, water droplets glinting on our arms. I draw her into my lap, ignoring the dull throb of my injuries. I cradle her in my arms, and she rests her head against my collarbone.

She speaks first, voice quiet. "Thank you. For... for letting us be normal, if only for a moment."

I press my cheek to her hair. "Thank you for wanting that with me." A fragile smile tugs my mouth. "I never thought I could feel anything like... like real connection again."

She draws a shaky breath. "I was so frightened. I— I still am. But if this is all the time we have left, I don't want regrets." Her bandaged eyes lift toward me. "I love you, Daeva."

My heart constricts, that unfamiliar word stirring both warmth and fear. I rest my

forehead against hers. “I... love you too,” I manage, voice catching. “I don’t know if I can ever repay what you’ve given me, but I can... at least promise to try.”

She cups my cheek. “That’s all I need.”

We linger in the hush, the waterfall’s symphony swirling around us. Then, a conviction settles in my gut, heavy and certain. The vow I’ve been skirting around for days now crystallizes. I can’t let this contract doom her. I won’t allow the House to manipulate us. I swallow, gathering courage.

“I’ve decided,” I say, voice trembling with intensity. “I’m going to destroy our contract—forcefully, if I must. I’ll cut my bond to that ancient tyrant. Even if it means burning in an inferno. Even if it means I’ll never reincarnate. I’ll do it.”

She stiffens. “But... the consequences. The ancestor is tied to you. If you die?—”

I hush her, pressing a finger to her lips. “I can’t keep letting you bear the cost of my curse. This has to end. The old elf wants to complete the ritual for immortality, but I’ll tear that tether to pieces, with or without a ‘safe’ ritual. I’d rather face oblivion than watch you vanish.”

Her lip quivers. “But you— what if you vanish instead?”

“I’ve lived too long already,” I whisper, anguish clawing my throat. “You gave me a reason to keep going, but if it means you pay for my revenge... That I cannot bear.”

A tear of blood trails down her cheek. “We’ll find a way,” she insists, voice shaking. “But if you do this... let me help.”

I press my mouth to hers softly, longing to shield her from every horror. “You already are,” I murmur. “Your presence is my strength.”

She snuffles, nodding. “Then let’s face Vaerathis and carve our path in the tapestry you spoke of.”

I hold her close, the sunlight warming our backs. The water churns, a gentle lullaby. My heart hammers with the enormity of the vow I just made. I sense destiny swirling, and I pray that I can sever the chain binding me to that ancient fiend without dragging Calla to her doom. We’ll defy every law of magic and fate if we must.

We stay like that for a time, letting our breathing sync. She leans her head on my shoulder, and I rub soothing circles along her back, mindful of her wounds. The moment is painfully sweet—like the calm before a final tempest. I memorize the softness of her hair, the flutter of her heartbeat, the quiet determination in her posture.

At length, the sun climbs higher, the reality of our mission pressing in. We have limited days to recover, to gather what meager resources we can, then travel to Vaerathis to save her friends and confront the ritual. We can’t remain in this idyll forever.

I stand, helping her up. “We should head back,” I say gently, though I hate the idea of leaving this fleeting paradise. “We’ll need to prepare.”

She nods, letting me guide her away from the water’s edge. Her blindfold is damp from tears and spray. “Thank you,” she whispers, “for giving me a moment... to feel alive.” A shaky laugh escapes her. “Despite everything.”

I squeeze her hand. “Let’s find a way to hold onto that feeling, no matter what horrors come next.”

She leans into me, limping slightly, but resolute. We walk back through the pines, the forest punctuated by birdsong. My wounds burn with every step, yet a surprising lightness dwells in my chest. I love her, I think, the words both exhilarating and

terrifying. Maybe that love can fuel my final stand against the House that shaped me into a demon.

We return to the hut, the door squeaking in protest as we enter. Dust motes swirl in the shaft of sunlight that penetrates the holes in the roof. Calla turns her bandaged face upward as if sensing the shift from bright forest to shadowy interior. Her expression flickers with nostalgia for that brief freedom by the water.

I guide her to a seat near the hearth, rummaging for something to feed the fire. My injuries scream for rest, but we have too little time. She sits quietly, one hand tracing the battered floor, perhaps recalling the fleeting serenity we just shared.

Then I kneel beside her, letting the flicker of flames cast dancing shadows. “We have days—less than five, likely—to ready ourselves,” I say. “We’ll gather what supplies we can. We’ll rest. I’ll hunt if possible, might try to find herbs to lessen your pain... and when we leave, we’ll have a plan. Not just to surrender to Vaerathis’s demands.”

She nods, bandaged eyes unwavering. “We’ll fight, side by side,” she answers. “Even if the cost is everything.”

A pang of pride and sorrow hits me. What a fearless soul she has. I rest my forehead against hers, inhaling the faint scent of water and blood. My vow burns hotter: I will break this contract or die trying, ensuring she walks free—even if my own future is ashes. She’s lost her eyes, but not her hope. My chest tightens with renewed resolve.

We settle against each other, discussing bits of strategy in hushed tones. She asks about positions in House Vaerathis, about old passages I might recall. My memories are a hazy swirl, but I share what little I know: possible lesser-guarded entrances, the layout of corridors, antechambers that once stored arcane relics. She listens intently, occasionally pressing me for details, her voice steady despite her injuries.



Night descends slowly, and the creeping dread of our confrontation grows. Outside, the wind rattles the forest. I stoke the fire, mindful of how many logs remain—just a few, pilfered from the dead pines out back. We must conserve them for warmth. At least tonight, we have each other's presence. The memory of her lips, her soft moans by the waterfall, lingers in my mind. I cling to that intimacy like a shield against the storm that approaches.

She dozes off, head on my shoulder. I slip an arm around her, letting her rest. In her sleep, she whimpers sometimes, tears of blood seeping anew. My heart aches. I can't do anything but hold her and vow to rid her of this agony. I'll tear the House down. I'll tear fate itself if I must.

Much later, when the fire has dwindled to embers, she stirs awake. I feel her trembling, sense the flicker of her fear through the bond. I whisper comfort, pressing a kiss to her temple. In the gloom, I hear her murmuring, half delirious, about the reflections that haunt her blind eyes—memories of a mirror, of an ancient sacrifice, of a future not yet written.

I tighten my hold, letting her know she's not alone. "Sleep," I urge. "I'm here."

She settles, her breathing evening out. I remain watchful, ignoring my own weariness. My mind whirls with the decision I've already made: to forcibly break the contract. A thousand questions swirl—how to do it, what magic I must invoke, what final toll it might take on me. No matter. Calla comes first. She's chosen me, trusted me with her last shred of faith. I refuse to let her demise be the price of my vengeance.

Eventually, exhaustion claims me, but the vow burns bright in my chest, a blade in the darkness. Tomorrow, we'll prepare. We'll plan. Then in five days, House Vaerathis will see that they can't chain us anymore. Whether we all burn or we carve a new destiny, I hold Calla to me, letting the warmth of her body remind me of why this fight matters.

Outside, the wind carries the distant hush of water from the waterfall, as if echoing the memory of our stolen joy. It lulls me into a restless sleep, haunted by images of a final confrontation. But amid those nightmares, I find a sliver of hope, anchored by the quiet strength of the woman in my arms. We might be broken, but we choose each other—and that choice might just be enough to shake the foundations of fate.

15

CALLA

I stand at the precipice of House Vaerethis, my heart pounding so loudly I fear the sentries on the walls can hear it. The air tastes of dust and old magic, drifting from the ancient stones that have witnessed centuries of cruelty. Even with my eyes lost to darkness, I sense the looming spires overhead, the vast expanse of towers and courtyards that once spelled my doom. My bandaged gaze faces a fortress I can't see but know all too well. And by my side, Daeva's grip steadies me—a silent reminder that I don't face this horror alone.

We've chosen not to skulk through crumbling catacombs or scale forgotten walls. That might have been our plan if we were whole and uninjured. But I'm blind, and his wounds are still raw. Besides, the House demanded our presence, holding my friends as leverage. They expect us. So we approach through the main gate, footsteps echoing in the courtyard's hush, fully aware we step into a den of vipers.

The drawbridge is lowered, the tall iron portcullis open. Guards stand to either side—dark elves in gleaming black-and-maroon armor, bearing the Vaerathis crest. I hear their sharp intakes of breath when they see Daeva, sense their tension in the quiet shift of weapons. We walk slowly, my fingers clutching Daeva's arm. The midday sun glares down—if I could see, I'm sure I'd find the courtyard bathed in harsh light, silhouettes of spires cutting the sky.

Two days. That's how long it took us to limp our way here after leaving the abandoned hut, battered but determined. A day earlier than their ultimatum

demanded. Better to catch them off-guard. My heart still seizes at the memory of the endless miles, stumbling across forests and hills, guided only by Daeva's voice. Even he, despite his demon-borne endurance, grew weaker with every passing night. But we came. Because my friends remain in House Vaerathis's dungeons, and because we refuse to let the ancient tyrant twist our fates any longer.

A guard steps forward, clearing his throat. "We have orders to escort you," he says, voice taut. I hear the faint ring of chainmail as he shifts, glancing nervously at Daeva. "Follow me, demon." His tone tries for authority but wavers.

Daeva bristles, and I sense the darkness coil in his chest. He loathes being addressed like some beast, but he inclines his head in a tight nod. "Lead," he spits. His hand tightens over mine in a protective gesture.

We move into the fortress interior, footsteps echoing on polished marble floors. The corridors smell of incense and old stone, familiar scents that make my skin crawl. I used to scrub these very floors, I recall with a shudder, a slave among many. My breath trembles, but Daeva's presence anchors me.

Eventually, the guard halts before a set of ornate double doors. "You'll wait in here," he says. His voice shudders just a fraction. "The Lady—she'll come."

Daeva snorts softly. I hear the soft squeak of hinges as the doors swing open. We step inside, and the guard retreats hastily. A dull thud signals the doors shutting behind us.

I exhale, my stomach twisting. "Where... are we?"

Daeva's voice, low and tense: "A reception hall. Smaller than the great entrance chamber, but still gilded with trophies and tapestries." His tone drips contempt. "Vaerathis showing off their spoils."

I clench my fists. My friends might be rotting in some dungeon while we stand in a hall designed for pomp. I grip Daeva's arm. "I want to see them—my friends. That's our first demand."

He squeezes my hand lightly. "We'll push for it. But be ready... they might deny us or use them as bargaining chips."

A wave of anxiety floods me, but I swallow it down. My ears prick at the faint rustle of robes—someone approaching across the polished floor. Daeva tenses, bracing. I feel the swirl of magic in the air, a faint hush that suggests a powerful presence. A matriarch? An elite?

"Welcome back... demon," a woman's voice purrs, resonant with arrogance. "And you, dear mortal." I recognize that condescending tone from countless nights of forced servitude. A Vaerathis noble. "You took your time."

My heart clenches. She must be one of the House's leading figures. "Where are my friends?" I demand, trying to steady my shaky voice despite the tremor in my limbs.

She laughs lightly, a cruel sound. "Safe. For now. You'll see them soon enough—depending on how cooperative you are." She steps closer, heels clicking on the marble. "So, this is the creature who freed our dear demon from the mirror?" A pause. I feel her gaze on my bandages. "Ah, how tragic. You've gone and lost your eyes." Her fake sympathy drips with malice. "I suppose that's the price for meddling in dark powers beyond your station."

Rage boils in my gut. Calm, I remind myself, though I long to hurl shadows at her smirking face. My teeth grit. "I want to see them. Now."

She gives a theatrical sigh. "All in due time. But first, come. Our Lady awaits your presence. She has... plans for you." Her voice twists on the word "plans," sending a

chill up my spine. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer we toss your friends into the fire pit tonight.”

Daeva snarls softly. I press a hand to his chest, calming him. “Fine,” he mutters through clenched teeth. “Take us.”

A flutter of cloth, and the noble woman pivots. “Follow me, demon and mortal. Don’t stray.”

She leads us through winding passages. I focus on the click of her heels, the whiff of scented oils that swirl around her. My mind reels with memories of these corridors. Even without sight, I recall turning left at the statue of some long-dead Vaerathis champion, or stepping over a mosaic that used to be my assigned cleaning station. I used to cower here. Now, even blind, I walk upright, refusing to show fear.

At last, we reach another set of doors that groan on ancient hinges. A hush of cold air greets us, laced with incense. My stomach twists—this smell reminds me of the catacombs, of ceremonies and spells that echo with suffering. The woman steps aside, mocking courtesy.

We enter a vast chamber—call it a ritual hall or a throne room, I’m not certain. I feel the chill press in around me, sense an open space echoing with each footstep. Tension bristles in the bond between Daeva and me.

Then a voice—familiar in its cruelty—floats across the silence. “Ah, there you are.”

Ice floods my veins. Lord Kaelith. My old tormentor, the sadistic scion of House Vaerathis, or perhaps one of them. The one who relished punishing me for the slightest perceived disobedience. My fists clench involuntarily.

The woman guide answers, “Yes, my Lord. They came willingly, as expected.”

A short laugh. Kaelith's voice carries across the hall. "Willing? Hardly. They reek of desperation." Footsteps draw near. I shrink back, trembling. Daeva's presence steadies me, his hand on my shoulder. "My dear mortal, how you've changed," Kaelith murmurs, voice lilting with sadistic amusement. "And you—demon. Tsk. You look worse for wear."

Daeva growls, low and dangerous. "Get on with it," he spits. "We know you hold her friends. Show them, or?—"

"Or you'll do what?" Kaelith cuts in, mocking. "Kill more of our messengers? You're in Vaerathis now, demon. You can't simply slaughter your way through these corridors." He claps his hands once. "Guards! Bring the prisoners."

My heartbeat lurches. My friends. At last, heavy footsteps, chains rattling. I strain my ears, desperate to hear their voices. Then a shuffle of movement, muffled curses. The door bangs open again, and the scraping of metal shackles echoes. My breath catches at a ragged cough that sounds like Silas. Another voice, maybe Cole, muttering in pain.

My chest tightens. "Let them go," I plead, voice wavering.

Kaelith snorts. "That depends on your cooperation. We have big plans for the demon and his mortal tether. My master awaits the final ceremony. You'll attend it. Willingly. Or watch these pitiful humans die."

A spike of fury. Daeva's aura flares. But we can't lash out blindly. My friends are too vulnerable, and I can't see, can't fight effectively. We must be strategic. I grit my teeth.

Kaelith continues, languidly. "You see, the old master's had... developments. He grows stronger, close to reclaiming his youth, so long as we secure the demon's

essence. And you , dear mortal—” I sense him looming close, breath rancid with arrogance “—are key to keeping him in check. The bond you share. So you’ll do exactly as we say.”

Daeva bristles, voice taut with barely contained rage. “Never.”

Kaelith laughs, a cruel, hollow sound. “You’ll have no choice, demon.” He snaps his fingers. “Guards. Take them to the antechamber. Keep them under watch. The ceremony is in two days, at dawn. That’s all the time my master needs to... finalize preparations.”

Two days. My pulse thunder. Panic churns. We’re trapped. The guards close in around us, cold armor scraping. I hear Silas let out a muffled protest as he’s dragged away, presumably toward the dungeons again. My heart fractures. I can’t even see him, but I know he’s alive. We must rescue them. Daeva’s grip on my arm shakes with equal rage.

We’re ushered from the hall, forced down corridors. I concentrate on each step, refusing to stumble. Daeva breathes heavily, his tension radiating. The chain rattles as they clamp manacles on him—nothing magical, just thick iron. My mind reels. They fear he’ll lash out. They do the same to me, though the metal is smaller, enough to bruise my wrists. Cattle for slaughter. I swallow a sob.

At length, we arrive in a smaller chamber, the guards shoving us inside. The door slams, a bolt sliding home. I hear them station themselves outside, vigilant. The room is musty, the air stale. I flinch as Daeva tugs free from me, testing the iron bars on a window or perhaps a gate.

“Locked,” he mutters, frustration grinding in his throat. “We’re waiting for them to conduct a ritual. Damn them.”



My entire body trembles. “They said two days.” My breath hitches. “That’s too soon. We’re not ready.”

Silence from him, thick with dread. I sink onto what feels like a stone bench, pressing my chained hands to my bandaged eyes. The memory of my friends’ pained coughs replays in my head. We have so little time to rescue them, to sabotage this ritual. And I can’t see, which means Daeva must carry the brunt of any plan.

He paces, metal links clinking. “We must find a way out,” he murmurs, half to himself. “Or get to your friends before they move them to the altar. But how? Our injuries... my power is limited. They’ve wards all over this place.”

I exhale, summoning the flickers of courage I felt at the waterfall. “We can’t give up. Maybe we can exploit the House’s arrogance. They assume we’re helpless, that we’ll just wait. Could we trick them?” My voice shakes, but I cling to a thread of hope.

A bitter laugh from him. “Possibly. We have to be cunning. But first, we must endure these two days. If we can gather enough strength...” He trails off.

My fingers curl into the coarse fabric of my tunic. Time—two days. That’s all we have to find cracks in Vaerathis’s fortress. Or else the old master will seal his immortality with Daeva’s life and my soul as collateral. I must glean more from these visions. The thought sends a chill through me. I recall how the mirror-shard illusions battered me with glimpses of Daeva’s past. Perhaps there’s knowledge of the ritual in them.

I push the idea aside for the moment. Daeva needs calm. “Daeva,” I say softly, reaching out. He stiffens, then sets his chained hand on mine, letting out a ragged sigh. “We’ll find a way,” I promise again, forging confidence from desperation.

He bows his head, pressing our foreheads together. “I hope you’re right,” he

murmurs, voice cracked. “I can’t lose you. Not after everything.”

My heart clenches. “Nor I you.”

The hours blur. Guards deliver stale bread and water, ignoring our questions about my friends’ condition. Daeva tries to bully them for answers, but they refuse to speak. We’re left in the cramped antechamber, wrists bound by chains bolted to the wall, forced to sit or pace in stifling silence. Occasionally, we doze fitfully, jolted awake by nightmares or the chill that seeps through stone walls.

On the second day—or what we guess is the second day—they come for us. I feel the clamp of hands on my arms, dragging me upright. Daeva roars a protest, but more guards pin him, forcing him along. We’re led—no, hauled —through labyrinthine corridors, the echo of distant chanting growing louder with each step. My stomach lurches. The ceremony is about to begin.

We reach a grand hall, so vast that my footsteps echo for seconds. My heart races at the memory of a prior battle I glimpsed in a vision. Perhaps this is the same place. The tang of incense and old blood scents the air. My bandaged eyes burn, tears of blood stinging anew as dread coils tight in my chest.

A hush falls over the assembled dark elves. I sense their presence like a suffocating weight—nobles, guards, and at the far edges, maybe silent observers. At the center, I hear the drip of water or a channel of some fluid, possibly from a ritual font. My head spins. Where are my friends?

Then Kaelith’s voice booms, mocking. “Welcome, demon, mortal. Our master has awaited you.”

Daeva snarls a curse. “Where are they? The humans you took?”

Laughter ripples in the chamber. A second voice, lower and rasping with age, answers: “Closer than you think.” My blood chills. This must be the old ancestor or someone channeling his will. “Fear not, they’ll witness the moment of my renewal.”

I brace, hearing metal gates clank open. Soft cries—my heart leaps. Silas, Cole, Ryn, Jenna? They must be shackled behind us, forced to watch. A jolt of relief that they’re alive, but heartbreak that they’re used as hostages.

Daeva’s aura flares with barely contained rage. “Release them,” he demands.

A snide chuckle from Kaelith. “In time, demon, once the ritual completes. We need them to ensure your cooperation.”

My teeth grind. Cooperation. The word reeks of irony. I’m jostled forward, stumbling on unseen steps. Then cold metal encircles my wrists anew, pinning me to an upright frame—some kind of pillar or post? My breath quickens. I hear Daeva’s grunt as he’s secured similarly. My mind reels with memories of the mirror’s sacrificial scene. Is this the same arrangement?

The chanting begins softly, a dozen voices murmuring in archaic elven. A hush of magic thrums, making my teeth ache. Daeva struggles, cursing in a voice edged with panic. We both sense this is it—the final stage of the House’s twisted plan. If the old master emerges, if the tether forces Daeva to surrender, we might be done for.

My pulse roars in my ears. The chanting crescendos, torch flames flickering in my peripheral sense. The motes of silver move behind my eyelids. Focus, I tell myself. Look for an opening. But I’m bound, powerless. The illusions swirl again—like the mirror shards responding to the ceremony. Pain flares in my eyes. The chanting resonates, vibrating the very floor. My heart lurches as I recall how Daeva was once sacrificed in a scene like this.

A hush, then a triumphant voice booms—Kaelith’s or some matriarch’s, I can’t tell. “Behold, the old master approaches. The demon stands ready, his mortal anchor at his side. Today, Vaerathis claims immortality!”

Thunderous footsteps approach. A presence washes over me like a tide of decay—ancient, cruel. My blood runs cold. The ancestor. I picture a withered figure half-lost to time, clinging to life through dark sorcery. The chanting intensifies. My stomach twists. He wants to fuse with Daeva’s essence or finalize the immortality he sought centuries ago.

Daeva growls in agony, head forced back by some invisible magic. I hear him gasp, “Calla—” but his words cut off in a choked cry. My heart seizes. They’re attacking him with spells, draining him. Furious, I strain against my bonds, wrists burning. “Stop!” I scream, voice swallowed by the chanting.

Kaelith laughs over the tumult, smug. “Yes, demon, give him your power.” Another voice—I guess the old ancestor—hisses like wind across a tomb: “Your contract with her moors you, but we’ll break that tether and harness it for my restoration...”

My head throbs with violent pain. The shards behind my eyes blaze, unleashing fresh visions: runes swirling, dark blood, the mirror cracking. I gasp as a memory engulfs me—Daeva, centuries ago, pinned to a stone slab, an older elf’s triumphant sneer, the swirl of runic scripts forging a link between them. They forced him once. Now they try again.

No. Through the haze, I recall Daeva’s vow: he’d break the contract, tear the old tyrant from his soul, even if it means his destruction. My tears leak hot, mixing with the illusions of shattered glass. I won’t watch him die. Summoning every ounce of will, I focus on the swirling silver in the dark, the echo of demonic power that flows through the bond. My body quakes.

“Stop hurting him!” I roar, letting the anger saturate my voice. “Let him go !”

A wave of chaos magic bursts from me, unexpected and wild. The chanting staggers momentarily, an outcry from the circle of priests. My wrists burn, but the chains screech under the strain of my unleashed power. Sparks crackle around me, fueled by the mirror’s shard-laden energy. The runes in the hall flicker. A brief hush falls.

But the House’s sorcerers recover quickly, chanting anew, forming wards that push back. My wave of shadow fizzles. I sag, panting. No, I think desperately, we need more. Daeva’s groans echo, each one ripping a piece of my heart. The ancestor’s presence looms ever closer, power swirling with unstoppable might. The ritual is nearly unstoppable.

“Calla,” Daeva chokes, voice raw. “I... have... to do it now...” He coughs, fighting unseen bindings. “I’ll break... our bond.”

Terror lances me. “No!” I protest. Because if he tears that bond forcibly, he might vanish, lost to the demon’s curse. “We’ll find another way!”

The chanting crescendos again, thunderous. Kaelith’s laugh resonates. “You can’t escape your fate, demon. Or you, mortal. The House will claim your essence.”

My entire body convulses with fury and anguish. The motes of silver swirl behind my blindfold, forming shapes—like runes etched in my mind. I sense Daeva’s demonic power roiling, building to a cataclysm within him. A final act of defiance. The air crackles.

Suddenly, a scream echoes across the hall. It’s not Daeva or me—it’s one of the elves. I hear a clang of metal. Another voice yells. The chanting stumbles. What’s happening?

Then I realize: behind us, near the entrance, a clamor of steel on steel. My heart leaps. Could it be my friends, freed from their shackles? Or some ally? The House's focus breaks. The invisible force pinning Daeva lessens. He gasps, catching his breath.

"Now," he rasps, summoning every scrap of demon power. "I'll break the curse."

"No," I plead, but the swirl of magic around him intensifies. He's ripping at the tether that binds him to the ancestor. The floor trembles. "Daeva, wait?—!"

A thunderous pulse of demonic energy explodes outward, hurling elves off their feet. I strain my ears, hearing them crash into pillars. The air sizzles with raw chaos. My metal shackles quiver. The ancestor screeches in fury, a hideous sound that resonates with ancient bitterness. My head pounds. If Daeva severs the bond incorrectly, we might both die on the spot.

Sparks shower from overhead. Stones crack. The shrieking swirl of power builds. Daeva howls in agony, fighting some invisible chain that tries to yoke him to the old elf. I sense the old tyrant's dread, the House's wards faltering under Daeva's unstoppable surge.

My tears burn hot, words bursting from me. "Daeva! Let me help!"

He grits out a strangled reply, "I—can't—let you be bound... no more cost..." The pain in his voice tears at me.

Then a new voice breaks in from behind—Silas? "Calla!" He sounds breathless, as if he's wrested free. "Duck!"

I react on instinct, folding forward. A crossbow bolt zips overhead, missing me by inches. A swirl of boots on marble suggests my friends have come, possibly disarmed a guard. Cole, Ryn, and Jenna might be here too, battered but defiant. The Hall roars

with confusion.

Elves scramble, half of them pinned by Daeva's shockwave, others turning to face newly freed prisoners. A flurry of swords clashing resonates behind me. My heart thrums with hope. My friends are alive.

The ancestor's presence looms again, a malevolent hiss. "Demon... you won't break me," he snarls. "I am your cradle of existence, your eternal anchor!"

Daeva roars in reply, forcing more chaotic energy into the tether. The floor buckles. The front of my shackles cracks under the strain. I pull, letting the shards in my eyes feed the power swirling in me. Another wave of shadows blasts outward, freeing me from the post. I stumble forward, arms free but useless without sight.

"Calla!" Silas's voice calls, guiding me. I lurch toward him, nearly crashing into warm arms. Tears of relief surface. "Silas, you're all right?"

He coughs, supporting me. "Battered but breathing," he gasps. "We snatched a guard's keys... had to make a stand."

I cling to him briefly, then spin—my hearing locked on Daeva's strangled groans. The hall quakes. A horrifying shriek echoes, half man, half ancient specter. The ancestor, presumably, stands at the heart of this maelstrom.

Without thinking, I run toward Daeva's voice, Silas shouting behind me. The swirl of demonic magic is so thick it numbs my teeth. "Daeva!" I cry, voice cracking.

He's at the center, presumably locked in a spectral struggle. The ancestor's laugh keens, echoing off pillars. My mind conjures the image: a withered husk of an elf, connected to Daeva by a thread of black energy. If that tether breaks violently, we might lose him.

I can't allow that. Summoning what remains of my newfound mirror-sight, I focus on the swirling silver in my darkness. A wave of insight hits me: I can guide the severing of the bond if I harness the shards correctly. Like a mirror reflecting back his curse.

"Daeva," I whisper, stepping closer. My hand gropes, meeting the swirl of chaotic current. Pain lances me, but I push through, pressing my palm to his chest. I feel his heart racing. "Don't do it alone," I murmur. "Use me... my bond with you... let's shape the magic, not destroy ourselves."

He gasps, eyes flicking to me—though I can't see, I sense the disbelief in his aura. "Calla—I can't?—"

But we have no time. The ancestor howls, a surge of necrotic force slamming into Daeva. I thrust forward, letting the shards behind my eyes swirl, channeling the reflection. A wave of raw essence converges through me, meeting Daeva's demonic might. We stand in the storm, forging an act of defiance.

The air crackles with unstoppable force. I hear Kaelith's scream, the patter of fleeing elves. My mind reels as I reflect the ancestor's power back at him, letting Daeva's chaos meld with the mirror's stolen visions.

An agonized shriek tears through the hall. The old tyrant's voice cracks with sudden fear: "No... you can't?—!"

A pillar collapses with thunderous noise. The floor lurches. My entire body burns, tears of blood coursing under the bandages. But I cling to Daeva, refusing to let him vanish. The bond hums with violent crescendo, threatening to unravel.

Then... release. A tidal wave of black and silver bursts outward, rattling the walls. Silence crashes in, thick and suffocating. I slump against Daeva, knees weak. The ancestor's presence flickers, guttural curses trailing into nothingness. Is he dead? Is



the bond severed?

My mind swirls. “Daeva?” I manage, chest heaving. “Are you...?”

He sags, gripping my arms. “I’m... here,” he gasps, voice unsteady. “I think— I didn’t vanish.”

Relief floods me, tears spilling. Our bond remains, a faint pulse. The old tyrant’s aura is gone or severely diminished, maybe sealed. We did it.

Footsteps approach. Silas’s voice, breathless with awe: “Calla... Daeva... you destroyed him?”

I can’t answer, too dizzy, blood trickling from my nose and eyes. Daeva breathes raggedly. “Could be... we severed his link.” He coughs, body shaking. “But Vaerathis is in chaos. We must get out before they regroup.”

A new swirl of footsteps—Cole, Ryn, Jenna perhaps. They gather around, chattering in relief. I sense them freeing me from any remaining chain, helping Daeva walk. The echo of crumbling stone and panicked elf voices fill the hall. Some flee; others lie unconscious. Kaelith is nowhere to be heard, possibly escaped or pinned under debris. Good riddance.

We stumble through the corridors. My friends guide me, Silas supporting my right side, Daeva leaning on Cole’s shoulder. The fortress reels under structural damage from the unleashed magic, walls shaking. The stench of burnt incense and fear saturate the air. We must escape.

At last, we reach the courtyard, battered and half-limping. The portcullis stands open, guards absent or too panicked to stop us. Daylight floods my bandages with a faint glow, though I still see nothing but black. The wind hits us, so fresh it nearly brings

me to tears again.

We limp across the drawbridge, each step a victory over death. My knees wobble, exhaustion threatening to collapse me. Yet Silas and Daeva keep me upright. I can barely hear over the thunder of my heartbeat, but eventually we clear the fortress gates. The forest beckons, a sanctuary from this dreadful place.

We collapse in the shade of twisted pines, breathing in unison, ragged and broken. My bandaged eyes stream blood tears. Daeva cradles me, ignoring his own injuries. Silas, Cole, Ryn, and Jenna gather around, battered but alive, murmuring relief, exchanging stunned glances. We don't speak much, all of us trembling with the aftermath.

At length, I rest my head on Daeva's shoulder, hearing his heart still race. "It's over?" I whisper, hardly believing. "Is he... truly gone?"

He inhales shakily. "The tether... I cut it, with your help." A subdued wonder permeates his voice. "I don't feel him anymore. The ancestor's presence is... gone."

Tears slip from my ruined eyes. We survived. My friends are safe. The old tyrant's immortality snuffed out. I choke on a laugh that edges toward sobbing. "We did it," I breathe.

Daeva's arms tighten around me, voice trembling with unnameable emotion. "Yes. The contract might still exist between us, but the part binding me to him is shattered." He cups my cheek. "You saved me, Calla... again."

I bury my face against his neck, letting the relief wash over me in shuddering waves. My friends' voices murmur reassurance, though I catch fragments of their concern—my eyes, our injuries, the uncertain future. But for now, we've broken Vaerathis's hold. No more ritual. No more ancient tyrant looming in Daeva's

nightmares.

Night approaches swiftly, and we remain huddled at the forest's edge, too exhausted to venture farther. My blindness remains, likely permanent. My entire body aches. But the weight of doom is lifted. I sense Daeva's presence, free of that old malevolence. He's still a demon, I'm still bound to him—but it's our bond now, not some forced chain.

As the sun sets, painting the sky in colors I can't see, I curl against him. My friends gather in a circle, sharing rations, relieved tears glinting in their voices. No words can express the miracle of surviving House Vaerathis. We'll have questions, nightmares, regrets. But we'll face them as free souls.

Gently, Daeva tilts my face up, pressing a soft kiss to my bandaged brow. The hush of twilight envelops us. My heart swells, remembering how we made love by the waterfall, the tenderness that anchored our final stand. We might be broken, but we stand together—no tyrant's puppet strings controlling our fate.

He whispers in my ear, so softly only I hear: "I love you, Calla. This time, truly free."

Tears slip down again, no longer only of pain. "I love you too," I reply, voice quivering with both sorrow and joy. "And from now on... we shape our own destiny."

I rest in his arms, the forest cradling us with a gentle breeze. The future remains uncertain—my eyes beyond repair, our bond steeped in demon magic—but we won a victory here. We shattered the old tyrant's hold, saved my friends from unspeakable fates, proved that a mortal and demon can break the tapestry of a House that once enslaved us. There's no going back to who we were before. But perhaps, in the aftermath, we'll find a new beginning.

For now, the wind whispers through the pines, carrying the scent of distant rain. Daeva's warmth sustains me in the darkness. And though I cannot see the stars, I feel their light on my face—like a promise that even broken eyes can witness a boundless sky, so long as love and hope guide us forward.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:10 am*

I stand at the corner of our makeshift settlement, letting the early sun warm the back of my neck. A month has passed since we toppled the House that once shaped my curse, since we fled the ruins of Vaerethis and carved out a fragile peace deep in this ancient forest. It's hard to believe how quickly we've built a refuge here—a scattering of huts and lean-tos among towering pines and mossy boulders, a hidden sanctuary for those who survived the chaos.

Around me, the murmurs of morning life mingle with the hum of insects. Freed slaves and Vaerethis defectors once separated by chains and cruelty now labor side by side, raising shelter walls from felled logs, digging small irrigation trenches for a future garden. Smoke curls from a central fire, where a few folks prepare a communal breakfast. When the wind shifts, I catch the scent of roasting herbs, maybe some wild mushrooms we foraged. It's a humble feast, but more than many of us ever dared hope for.

My chest tightens with a strange blend of gratitude and wonder. I used to imagine the world beyond my cursed existence as a cold void. Yet here I am, in a clearing suffused with early sunlight, listening to the laughter of those who found a second chance. Through the tall pines, I spy a simple watchtower made from stacked logs—our only defense against prowling beasts or wandering elf patrols. Even that stands as a testament to shared resolve.

I turn, letting my gaze settle on the small hut at the clearing's heart. In front of it, a rough wooden table is draped with whatever white cloth we could scavenge, pinned down by stones so it doesn't blow away. My heart thuds with anticipation: today, we're to be wed. My lungs feel too tight, my mind whirling in disbelief that I—a demon—could share a mortal's life in such a tender, ordinary custom. But it was

Calla's wish. She wanted a human ceremony, a moment of warmth amid the ashes of our tumultuous journey.

A shape flits at the corner of my vision—Silas, his dark hair disheveled, hustling across the clearing with a handful of wildflowers. He notices me and lifts them in a sheepish sort of greeting. We've come to an unspoken truce, he and I; though we once clashed, the trials of Vaerethis forced us to rely on each other, forging an odd familial bond. He's the one who offered to officiate this wedding, despite his utter lack of priestly qualifications.

"Daeva!" he calls, jogging up to me. The flowers in his grip are a wild mix of bright yellows and faded purples, all found in the meadows beyond. "Thought I'd add... I don't know, a bit of color. It's a wedding, right?" He grins, breathless.

A faint smile tugs my lips. "Thank you. Calla will appreciate it." My voice cracks slightly, betraying my nerves.

He lowers the flowers, studying me with solemn empathy. "How's she doing?"

My gaze shifts beyond him, toward another hut where she prepared earlier. "She's... anxious," I admit. "But happy, I think." A hush of warmth stirs in my chest. "She's trying to accept that this is our life now."

Silas nods, his grin more genuine. "Good. You two deserve this." He clears his throat. "Well, I'll go... set these up. I guess that's what wedding officiants do?" He laughs, shaking his head at the absurdity.

I watch him go, the sincerity of his gesture easing some of my tension. A wedding. The word still feels surreal. We've spent the last month healing, physically and emotionally. Calla's eyes remain lost, the shards irreversibly entrenched in her flesh. The scarring on her cheeks is still raw. But with each day, she's honed her other senses, navigating the forest paths with the help of a carved walking stick.

Sometimes, she calls it her sword, a wry nod to the fighter she's become despite her blindness.

She wanted me to wait for her at the clearing's center, so that's what I do now, letting the morning breeze tug at my cloak. Freed slaves and refugees from Vaerethis gather in a cautious circle around the makeshift table, whispering excitedly. They've never witnessed a demon's wedding, nor has a demon likely witnessed a human one in living memory. But here we are, forging something new. My heart races, half fear, half exultation.

At last, a hush ripples through the crowd. My breath catches as I see Calla emerge from a small hut across the clearing. Silas must have told her it was time. Her bandaged eyes are turned forward, and her lips are parted in a soft, trembling smile. She wears a simple tunic dyed pale gray, the closest we have to a gown. A thin garland of leaves crowns her hair, courtesy of Jenna—someone told me Jenna insisted on that, for the sake of a “proper wedding.” The green leaves contrast starkly with Calla's pale features, but it suits her. She looks both otherworldly and heartbreakingly vulnerable.

She uses her carved stick to guide her steps, but two of our new allies walk beside her, offering subtle support. Dried petals scatter under her feet, thrown by a child who giggles with excitement. My eyes sting with emotion. I recall how Calla once trudged these same woods blind and in pain. Now she strides with regal grace, forging her own path with each step.

She stops a few paces away, uncertain. Silas steps forward, offering her his arm. I move too, heart pounding, gently laying my hand over hers. Her lips curl into a radiant smile at the familiar contact. She tilts her head to catch my scent or my presence, and for a moment, the darkness behind her bandages seems inconsequential—she sees me in ways beyond sight.

“You look...” I falter, throat tight. “You're beautiful.”

She blushes, tears glistening behind the bandages. “I— Thank you.” Her voice is soft as a breeze.

Silas clears his throat, stepping to the makeshift altar—the battered table draped in cloth. A hush spreads among the onlookers. He sets the wildflowers on the table, next to a small jug of water. No rings, no grand ornaments. We have only sincerity and a handful of treasured bonds.

He raises his voice, awkwardly formal. “We gather here,” he says, “to witness... the union of Calla and Daeva.” He glances between us, then at the crowd, as though expecting laughter at the absurdity of officiating a demon’s wedding. But no one laughs. Many wear expressions of hope or wonder.

“I’m not a priest,” Silas continues, forcing a wry grin, “but I’ve seen enough births and funerals to guess how these things go. We celebrate life and love—two survivors who found each other in the darkest times. And though I once doubted them, I’ve come to see they belong together.”

My chest constricts. I recall how Silas once tried to kill me, how we glared at each other over Calla’s safety. Now he stands in front of us, bridging two worlds. My gaze shifts to Calla; her expression is soft, tears tracking across her cheeks. She can’t see the crowd, but I know she feels their presence.

Silas gestures for us to join hands. I take Calla’s trembling fingers in mine, ignoring how my own injuries still ache. She releases her walking stick to do so, trusting me to hold her upright.

“In times past,” Silas says, “we might have recited vows under some grand temple or before an official. But we have none of that. All we have is each other and the promise you make here, with your friends as witness. Are you ready to speak?”

Calla’s breath catches. “I... yes.” She squeezes my hand, turning her face toward me.



Though her eyes are hidden, I swear she peers into my soul. “Daeva, from the moment I touched that cursed mirror, my life changed. I fell into darkness and found you in it. I lost my eyes, but I gained freedom in my heart. You showed me that even in curses, there’s choice—there’s love. I vow to stand with you, demon or no, until our final breath.” Tears slip down her cheeks, bright against her skin. “I love you,” she finishes, voice trembling. “Always.”

My throat feels strangled. She loves me. In front of these people, in front of my own battered conscience, she declares it. I gather my breath, my voice hoarse with emotion. “Calla,” I murmur, “I once thought I was nothing but a weapon of vengeance, shackled by an ancient curse. Then you came, forging a bond that wasn’t about chains but choice. Even in your blindness, you see me better than I see myself. I vow to guard your hope, your spirit, just as you’ve guarded my lost soul. If the world tries to tear us apart again, I’ll stand between it and you—forever.”

A hush falls, broken only by a few soft sniffles among the gathered crowd. Calla’s tears mingle with blood, and I cradle her cheek, wiping them gently. She leans into my touch. My own eyes burn with unshed tears.

Silas lifts a small leather thong—simple, but carefully knotted. “We have no rings, but we made these tokens.” He sets them on the table, then picks up one. “Calla, hold out your hand.” He ties the thong around her wrist, murmuring, “A sign of union.” Then he ties a matching thong around my wrist. The cords are plain, but each sports a little carved bead shaped like a leaf, signifying rebirth.

After a moment of quiet reflection, Silas grins sheepishly. “I guess that’s it. You’re, uh, married.” Awkward applause ripples. Laughter and cheers rise from the crowd—a small celebration, but earnest. My chest feels ready to burst.

I pull Calla into my arms, pressing my lips to hers. It’s a gentle kiss, suffused with relief, love, and a final acceptance that we’ve chosen each other beyond curses and mortality. She trembles, returning the kiss with equal fervor. The crowd whoops and

claps, a joyous sound that echoes through the clearing. For a moment, I let go of every fear, every memory of Vaerethis's darkness.

We break apart, breathless. She clings to me, a luminous smile lighting her face. "We're married," she whispers, voice quaking with awe.

"Yes," I reply, voice just as unsteady, "and I won't let anything undo that vow."

A short while later, the communal meal unfolds around us. People pass wooden bowls of stew, meager but warm, and share scraps of dried fruits. Someone finds a battered lute, strumming a tentative tune that morphs into a cheerful melody. Children dart among the huts, shrieking with laughter, chasing each other in a game that tosses flower petals in the air. Even the battered remnants of House Vaerethis's guard—those who defected—join in, relief etched on their faces. The war is over, the old tyrant banished.

Calla and I sit under a pine tree at the clearing's edge, letting the flickers of sunlight filter through the needles. She leans against my shoulder, absentmindedly running her fingers over the simple thong on her wrist. I stroke her hair, feeling the closeness of her body, the heat that's always simmered between us. Soon, the festivities will wind down, people returning to their tasks or sleeping off the day's excitement. My heart throbs with a new, deeper desire—to share a private moment, as husband and wife, away from watchful eyes.

She senses my tension, tilting her face toward me. "Daeva?" she says softly, her voice a gentle caress.

I brush a lock of hair from her bandaged forehead. "Yes?"

Her cheeks flush, a delicate pink. "Can we... slip away? Just for a bit?"

A wave of warmth floods me, recalling how we last made love by the waterfall in a

moment stolen from the world. Now, as newlyweds, the memory sets my pulse racing. I stand, offering her my hand. She rises too, leaning on me for guidance. We murmur a quick farewell to Silas, who winks conspiratorially, stepping aside. My lips curve at the realization that even he supports our private escape.

We walk deeper into the forest, weaving among pines until the sounds of celebration fade. Birds trill in the canopy, and the afternoon light filters in gold-green rays. Eventually, we find a small grove near a trickling stream. Leaves scatter on the mossy ground, forming a soft bed. The hush of nature wraps around us, intimate and calm.

I help her settle onto the moss, bracing her as she lowers herself. Her breathing quickens, matching my own. I kneel beside her, brushing my fingers through her hair. The tension of the last month melts into a tender hush. She tilts her chin up, offering me her lips in a silent plea. I oblige, pressing my mouth to hers, slow and reverent.

She exhales into the kiss, her hands finding my shoulders. The memory of our shared nights, our fierce embraces, floods me. But this time, the stress of curses and looming battles doesn't overshadow the moment. We are husband and wife—no mirror-bound menace, no House controlling our fate. Only the forest's quiet watch as witness.

Her lips part, allowing me deeper access. Heat blooms in my chest, sweeping away lingering aches. Carefully, I lower her onto the moss, mindful of her bandaged eyes. My hands drift to the ties of her simple tunic. She shivers but nods, and I loosen them, grazing my palm over her scarred skin. She lets out a soft sigh, arching into me.

“Daeva,” she whispers, voice trembling with raw emotion. “We’re free, aren’t we?”

My throat constricts as I plant a tender kiss on her jaw. “Yes,” I breathe, letting my mouth travel down her neck. “Free to love each other without fear.”

Her arms enfold my waist. My body responds, warmth pooling in my core. Each touch is a pledge, each kiss a vow. Her small sounds of pleasure quicken my pulse.

The forest hushes, as though giving us the privacy we crave. Our clothes peel away, baring old wounds, fresh scars, and the honest vulnerability of our battered bodies.

Yet in each other's arms, there's no shame—only hunger, only worship. Her fingers skate over the ridges of my demon's markings, tracing the raised scars like scripture. Every touch is a confession: I see you. I want you anyway. Her breath shudders as she maps the hard planes of my abdomen, the brutal history written into my skin. I let her explore, my cock already stiff against her thigh, aching for the wet heat I know she'll give me.

When my mouth finds her collarbone, she gasps—sharp, sweet—and I drink the sound like a man starved. Her skin tastes of salt and pine, of tears shed in the dark. Mine. My teeth graze the delicate curve, and she arches into me, her pussy grinding against my hip in a silent plea.

"Daeva—" Her voice fractures.

I silence her with a kiss, deep and claiming. Her nails dig into my back, scoring fresh marks over the old ones. Pain sparks bright behind my eyelids, but it's nothing compared to the slick, molten need between us.

"Tell me," I growl against her lips. "Tell me what you want."

She doesn't speak. She shows me.

Her hand slides between us, fingers trembling as they wrap around my cock, guiding me to her entrance. The heat of her is intoxicating, her breath hitching as the head of me presses against her slick folds.

"Please—" Calla's whisper is ragged, desperate. "Don't make me wait any longer."

The first press is torture—her cunt so fucking tight, so wet, clenching around me like

she's been waiting centuries for this. I groan, forehead pressed to hers, teeth gritted as I sink deeper, deeper, inch by unbearable inch, until there's no space left between us, until she's gasping my name like a prayer.

"Gods—" Her voice is a broken thing, her nails biting into my shoulders. "You feel—impossible. Like you were made for me."

"I am made for you," she gasps, clinging onto me.

I know. I know.

She's blind, but her body reads mine like a vow, every shift of muscle, every ragged breath. I pull back just enough to thrust again, and the sound she makes—half sob, half moan—sends fire through my veins. Her legs lock around me, heels digging into the small of my back, urging me deeper, harder. I oblige, my hands gripping her hips, fingers pressing bruises into her skin as I set a relentless pace.

The rhythm builds—a slow, consuming tide. Her nails rake down my spine, and I hiss, fucking her harder, chasing the friction that makes her sob. The forest air is full with the scent of her arousal, of sweat and sex and the raw, untamed thing between us. Her breath comes in sharp, uneven gasps, her body arching against mine, seeking more, always more.

"Tell me," I growl against her lips, my voice rough with need. "Tell me what you want."

"You," she whimpers, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Just you. All of you."

My thumb finds her clit, circling in tight, merciless strokes. She cries out, her thighs shaking, her cunt clenching around me like a vice.

"Come for me," I snarl, my own control fraying. "Let me feel you."

She shatters with a broken scream, her body tightening around me, pulling me under. The pleasure is a blade, sharp and bright, carving me open. I follow her over the edge with a groan that shakes the trees, spilling deep inside her, my hips jerking helplessly as she milks every last drop from me.

For a moment, there's nothing but the hammer of our hearts, the shared breath between our lips, the way her body still trembles beneath mine.

We collapse onto the moss, limbs tangled, sweat cooling in the evening air. Her fingers trace my jaw, feather-light, as if memorizing the shape of me.

"You're not just a demon," she murmurs, her voice soft but sure. "You're mine. My husband. My mate. My forever."

The words lodge in my chest, sharper than any curse, more binding than any spell.

I kiss her—slow, reverent—and let the world fade to nothing.

Eventually, I find my voice again. "I've never known such peace," I confess, trembling. "I didn't think it possible for a demon cursed centuries ago."

She caresses my jaw, her lips brushing close. The word sends a shiver of warmth through me as she says, "I love you, demon or curses be damned."

A faint laugh escapes me, throaty with emotion. "Then curses be damned," I agree. "We'll keep forging our future in these woods or wherever we wander next."

She nestles against my chest, letting out a contented sigh. "I'd like that. And maybe, in time, we'll find new ways to help others. If more enslaved souls escape, they'll need a home. We can build a sanctuary here—bigger huts, farmland, a real community."

My heart flutters. A sanctuary. Yes, we can make a safe haven for those who only knew chains. If there's any atonement for the bloodshed of my cursed existence, it might be found in offering others a chance to heal.

I hold her close, feeling her steady heartbeat. The forest around us breathes quietly, sunlight shifting as the day advances. This fleeting moment lingers, draping us in serenity. We might face unknown perils tomorrow, but for now, we have each other, wedded by Silas's well-meaning officiation, forging a bond no dark elf ritual can sever.

After a while, the wind picks up, rustling leaves overhead. We dress again, helping each other with the ties. Calla laughs softly when our fingers fumble, teasing that her "blindness" doesn't hamper her dexterity nearly as much as my trembling nerves. My cheeks heat in mild embarrassment, but I relish her playful tone. This is a side of her that glimmers with hope, free from the weight of fear.

We rise, fingers entwined. "Shall we return?" I ask gently. She nods, though she keeps her face lifted as if gazing at me, trusting me to guide her steps. I brush my lips across her bandaged forehead once more, then lead her out of the grove.

By the time we approach the settlement, the sun's high overhead, illuminating the humble huts and the watchtower in golden light. A few folk spy us coming and wave, a mixture of knowing smiles and warm acceptance. Word spreads quickly in our small community—everyone senses we took a brief private moment to seal our vows in a more intimate manner.

Silas steps from a half-built cottage, a grin splitting his face. "Welcome back, newlyweds," he teases. Calla's cheeks flush, but she laughs. I can't help but smile. Yes, newlyweds. Even the demon in me savors that thought.

Jenna hurries forward, fussing that we missed the midday meal, offering a bowl of hot stew. Ryn and Cole approach with heartfelt congratulations. Freed dark

elves—those who once served under House Vaerethis—bow their heads shyly, forming a circle of acceptance around us. The sense of belonging nearly crushes me with gratitude.

Calla listens to each voice, responding with gentle words, asking about how the fields are shaping up or if we need more foragers. She's blind, but her presence radiates leadership. It strikes me that together, we might not just survive, but guide others who share our scars. A new life, a new path. The bond we share hums with quiet satisfaction.

At last, we step aside from the cluster of well-wishers, drifting to the quiet edge of the clearing again. She leans against me, breathing in the forest air.

“You okay?” I ask, brushing a hand along her shoulder.

She nods, her face serene. “I am. Tired, but... happy. We're free, Daeva. Truly free.”

“Yes,” I echo, voice thick. “And we have each other.”

A hush passes between us, the hush of two souls who found love in the darkest of nightmares. Now, as husband and wife, we stand on the cusp of a future that might hold fresh trials, but also a chance for peace. She clings to my arm, and I sense her silent vow to keep forging ahead despite her blindness. I bow my head, letting an exhale of relief slip free. We're alive, we're together, and we have a home—even if it's just a cluster of huts in a wild forest. That's enough.

My mind flickers to the vow I made at the waterfall: I'd free her from any vestige of the curse. The ancient tyrant's hold is broken, but vestiges of demon magic remain. Perhaps in time, we'll unravel that, or maybe we won't need to. Because for now, love and a shared life matter more than old spells. She leans into me, unafraid of my demonic heritage, and I hold her close, unafraid of what the future holds so long as she's by my side.



A breeze rustles the pine boughs overhead. Within the hush, I sense the murmur of possibilities—of building a real village, of forging alliances, of living free from the nightmares that once bound us. Calla's hand twines with mine, steady and warm. I press a kiss to her temple, listening to the quiet contentment in her sigh.

No words pass between us for a long moment. But we don't need them. In her quiet heartbeat, in my resolute embrace, we've said enough: we choose love over the curses of the past, and we choose a future carved from hope rather than fear.

And thus the day ends, a new life begun—for me, a demon who found redemption in a mortal's unwavering spirit; for Calla, once a slave, now a fierce warrior of her own destiny. In the golden glow of this hidden settlement, we walk forward hand in hand, forging a path that no dark elf tyrant can ever steal from us again.