



# The Hellbeast's Queen (The Hellbeast King #12)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Hope can be a dangerous thing.

It can be all consuming.

Can be the only thing you think about.

The only comfort you have when locked to the darkness of your own mind.

The hope to find light at the end of the tunnel.

A guiding hand to led you out of the nightmare.

But what of love?

For Ella it is the thing she clings onto when all that hope is lost.

A love that is always worth fighting for.

Even if it means losing everything.

Because love is worth the sacrifice for...

A HellBeast's Queen.

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Where there is Heart, there is Hope

Jared

I couldn't move.

I just couldn't seem to force myself to leave this place. The sight of my defeat. The proof of all I had lost. My heart ripped to shreds and was left barely beating.

The battle was over and neither side could claim victory. But the loss for me was immeasurable. Not only had I lost Ella once again, but this time the cost of my failure had been my brother. And for the first time in my life...

I didn't know what to do.

Because I had always been a planner. I had always been the one to fix the unfixable. To plot out the next course of action, where most others were still questioning what had happened. I had been the one with the next step already in motion. But this time...

I had nothing.

The broken remains of the statue of Hades were nothing more than a cruel irony for what I felt now.

Because I had been so sure that it would work.

So sure, that once she had felt the branch connecting with her, that she would come back to me.

But bitterness was my only reward for my foolish hope.

Bitterness and heartache. As I would never forget the hatred I had seen in her eyes.

The moment she wanted to end my life, as if her mind had been poisoned against me. Against everyone but that fuck, Garmr!

And now, he not only had my woman, but he also had my brother. My vow to rip his head off was growing stronger by the second and was the reason why I said sharply,

“I am not in the mood for company,” as I felt the presence of two others joining me on the mountain ridge. The same one that Lucius’s brother, Dariush, had returned me to. The one I had been unable to bring my own brother back to.

“That may be so, but you will have it all the same,” Dom replied before coming to sit next to me.

“And I am here to witness Dom receive a punch to the face when he tries to offer you words of wisdom,” Lucius replied, taking my other side and making me scoff when Dom growled at him.

“I can’t believe it didn’t work,” I said, despite my earlier comment about not being in the mood to talk.

“That is not to say that nothing will, we must not lose hope, Jared,” Dom replied, making me grit my teeth, my hand fisting where it was resting at my bent knee.

“That’s easy for you to say, your Chosen One didn’t just try to kill you,” I snapped,

making Lucius laugh.

“Then you missed the amusing show of Keira trying to do just that at the War of Souls and as for me, well, I had my own little Hellion to deal with,” Lucius replied.

I sighed, realizing that when fighting Garmr at that same battle, I had indeed missed that part.

“Don’t forget, Jared, neither of us had an easy path to walk when it came to our Fated and keeping them safe,” Dom added, making me shake my head before pointing out,

“And how does that help me now? Because last time I checked, your Fated Ones are still safely by your sides.”

“That may be so, but even you know this was not always the case. You were there, Jared, you know what I went through and as for Lucius, how many times did he have to search Hell to find my daughter?” Dom replied, making Lucius grumble,

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“The point is, our prophecies came to the natural end the Fates had planned for us, and as hard as it is for you to face now, they are not yet done with you.”

I gritted my teeth, knowing Dom was right, despite how hard it was to face what had just happened.

“Then what am I to do?” I asked, now looking to him, seeing he was no longer wearing his demonic battle gear but casual attire like Lucius and me.

The material was similar to what I wore, and it held a leathery appearance.

Only his wide black pants were more in the style of Hakama, a traditional Japanese attire, which he wore with a tunic shirt in dark purple.

As for Lucius, like myself, his pants resembled the leather of fire salamander, that were tighter on the skin and offered more protection.

I could tell that his long sleeve T-shirt was made from a creature known as a Vipera.

A Hellish grass snake that spent most of its time burrowed underground.

And like the fire salamander, it was the softer underbellies that were used for material.

Shit kicker, plated boots completed the look for both of us, ones scuffed and covered in battle dirt like Dom's were.

"What am I to do when Fate seems as if it is only against me?" I asked again, making Dom sigh at my outburst.

"What us Kings always do, fight for our people, fight for our way of life, and most of all, fight for the woman we love. We fight for our Fate," he replied firmly.

Gesturing to the destruction in the valley with a flick of my wrist, I asked, "And the battle?"

"We may not have been victorious, just as we expected not to be, but the war is far from over. More legions are on their way to fight with us."

"And what will be the point of our numbers, if Ella can just bring back the dead and control their souls?" I said, reminding him of our greatest challenge, and the one likely to cost us any chance of victory.

“Our goal remains the same, we just have to find another way to bring her back,” Lucius said, making me stand up in my anger.

“Don’t you think that is exactly what I have been trying to do?

! Why would Fate lead me to Hades if giving her that fucking branch wouldn’t work?

! We are fucking engrained with the belief that everything that happens is Fated to be, but that belief is falling pretty flat on its fucking face right now!

” I ranted, making both Lucius and Dom sigh before they too got to their feet.

“She is not lost to us completely, there has to be a way,” Dom argued.

“You didn’t see what I did, Dom. I handed her that branch and there was nothing!” I argued, pausing long enough to run a rough hand through my hair in frustration.

“She uttered the word mother , like offering me some cruel shred of hope before snapping the thing in two like it meant nothing to her!” I told them, making Dom sigh, whilst Lucius looked deep in thought.

“Perhaps that’s because it didn’t,” he said, making me narrow my gaze at him. Yet despite this, the seed he planted quickly started to grow before I finally uttered,

“It wasn’t her mother.”

“What do you mean?” Dom asked as Lucius started to smirk.

“Fuck!” I snarled, feeling like a fucking idiot!

“Think about it, we are not trying to get the memories back to her first soul but that of

Ella... human Ella, the one whose parents are Frank and Libby, the one filled with dancing, riding her bike, working on trucks with her dad, climbing trees in the woods and pretending to be a wolf. That is the Ella we are trying to bring home,” I said, casting a dawning light to Dom’s features.

“The anchor was wrong,” he muttered as if to himself.

“Exactly! That branch might have worked before, but why would it work now when our Ella has no real memories of the mother we were trying to reconnect her with... it all makes perfect sense why it didn’t work!

” I said, feeling my heart racing with the possibility that we finally had the answer on how to get her back.

“And what of you?” Dom asked, and although it pained me to think that I wasn’t enough to bring her back, I couldn’t let that factor in to how I was going to achieve this. Which was I why I could only try and make sense of it.

“All I can think of is that I haven’t been in Ella’s life long enough.

That our memories made together are still too fresh, especially when we are trying to get to the core of her.

That’s why just having Lerna there and back when she was first taken, wasn’t enough either.

It’s core memories of where she came from.

That’s what we must need,” I said, now feeling hope bloom once more.

“That makes sense, which now begs the question of how we can accomplish this,”

Dom said, his thoughtful expression now mirroring my own.

“There has to be a way to link her back to her mortal life,” I said, making Lucius say,

“What about Frank?”

Dom and I both looked at him at the same time.

“Frank?” I asked.

“Well, he is her father,” Lucius pointed out in an obvious tone.

“He is also an Angel,” Dom was quick to point out.

“Yeah, and I don’t think handing her a wrench from his garage is going to cut it,” I added.

“Nor is there a possibility to get him into Hell,” Dom said with a frown, one which Lucius smirked at. And it was one of those cunning, ruthless kind of smirks that usually came with pain and blood. Which in the end wasn’t that far off when he told us...

“Not if I turn him into a Vampire.”



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### Family Ties

I had to admit, the very last place I thought I would find myself was standing outside Ella's family home so soon after battle. But this was literally my last hope.

Before coming here, we first had to make our way back to what was left of our army.

To be honest, we all knew that it could have been a lot worse.

Because if Ella hadn't passed out, then the fight would have gone on for far longer, until the numbers would have overwhelmed us.

Even in that short time, we had lost over half of our men, numbers that would have been much higher had we not had a backup plan to end the battle quickly.

Adam had been that plan.

But as for next time, we had no idea if it would work again.

Because Abaddon was too unpredictable to let loose for too long and there was no saying he wouldn't just turn against our own army.

After all, it wasn't like his beast could be reasoned with.

Which meant that more than likely, it had been a one-shot deal.

As for the battle, it had been one we'd had no choice but to fight, doing so with the

aim to get Ella back and out of Garmr's clutches.

Because we all knew something far bigger was coming.

Garmr was waiting for something, we just didn't know what yet.

Whatever it was, it was powerful enough to release Ragnarok upon the world.

Something we couldn't allow to happen.

Despite this failure, it hadn't been without any gain.

Because we had managed to annihilate some of Garmr's army, their bodies completely crushed beneath the tons of stone, thanks to the fall of Hades' statue.

Lost souls even Ella wouldn't be able to bring back, for the time to do that had passed and with it, their souls.

Bodies she could not get to, bones crushed to dust and therefore the unseen could not be brought back.

As for me though, the bitterness I felt was still far too fresh to see any good outcome from the battle. And now that fucker had my brother! My connection to him felt severed, and I was trying like fuck to believe it wasn't the reason I feared the most. That death had taken him.

Hope... this was the only thing I had left to cling onto now.

Of course, the first people to rush to me when entering the camp had been the women.

Keira, Amelia, and of course, Lerna. They had all wanted to know what had happened and let's just say, talking about my failure hadn't been an easy task.

I was physically shaking by the end of it, something Keira noticed first as she threw her arms around me and held me to her.

Her whispered promise in my ear feeding that hope.

“We will get her back, Jared, I promise you this, we just have to trust in Fate.”

My reply to this was a nod, as no words would make it past my lips.

My damn throat felt as if it was closing up as tears started to blur my vision.

Tears I would not allow to fall, for now was not the time for me to lose myself to the depths of my misery.

I had the next mission to plan for. We needed something strong enough to anchor Ella back to her old life and despite how painful it was, I knew that it wasn't me.

But then, Garmr had ensured that, hadn't he?

Because I was his biggest threat. The one he would have considered first. Then he would have done anything to rectify his mistake, as he must have realized how Lerna had got her out all those years ago.

Which meant he knew that in order to prevent that, he needed to stay close to her so as to stop it happening again.

Because I had seen that recognition hit her eyes before he had called her name. Before he had snapped her out of it.

Therefore, we had two problems on our hands. The first being how to get her away from Garmr. Because no matter whether we had the anchor she needed or not, unless she was free of that maniac, we wouldn't have a chance.

Which was why the moment we made it through the portal Dariush created, I turned to Dom and pointed out this fact.

“You know this may not work unless we get her far from Garmr's influence.”

Dom gave me a look of understanding, before looking to Keira who had insisted on following us through.

“I agree, but first things first,” he replied, looking back to Lucius and Amelia, who completed our party.

Everyone else had stayed at the camp, as time worked differently in Hell than it did the mortal realm.

The short time spent here would mean much longer where we had just left.

Which meant time was literally of the essence as in, we couldn't afford to lose any.

Hence why we all lived in hope that by the time we made it back, our numbers would have increased exponentially.

As we had armies from neighboring realms on all sides trying to get to us to join in the fight.

Our saving grace was that we knew Garmr would not risk another battle with fewer numbers than before.

Which meant that he too would need to find reinforcements.

Especially if his spies brought back word that we were growing in number.

But then, he did have Ella. Someone who could bring back the dead and also had the use of her own souls. Souls which could be stopped only for a short time but never truly beaten. Not when they could simply regain this power by returning to the book of souls.

“Well not exactly the family get together I was expecting,” Amelia said with a sigh as we all faced the house. One that no one had yet taken a step toward. Because neither of us were eager to see how this was going to play out, least of all me.

Of course, I wanted Ella back, but to know that I was going to have to admit to her father that I had lost her, was not something I was looking forward to.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” Dom said, clearly feeling the same way, as I knew he was also struggling with this. It was his niece after all, so he felt the weight of that responsibility just as I did.

“So, what are we expecting here? Do you think Frank told my sister yet?” Keira asked as we started to make our way to the front of the wrap-around porch.

I wondered how Dom’s conversation had gone with his wife, seeing as until recently, none of us knew that Frank was one of us. Or should I say, an Angel.

Speaking of Angels...

“Where is Vincent?” I asked, despite not being surprised not to have not seen him in Hell. Not when it was a place he was forbidden to enter. Yet having him here might have been helpful, seeing his position with Frank’s kind and all.

“He has been traveling to each of our Enforcers, so as the ones that can will aid us in battle. Greed is now doing the same, as the son of Wrath has already started to aid us by sending word to his father’s armies.

“Helpful that so many of them have fathers ruling parts of Hell... what? I’m right, aren’t I?” Keira said, adding this last part when Dom raised his brow at her.

“Speaking of which, just how are we planning on getting an Angel into Hell again?” Amelia asked, making Lucius grin down at her and say,

“Leave that to me.” His wink made her groan and comment,

“Last time you said that, we were in the bedroom.”

At this Dom released a heavy sigh and said from up ahead,

“Please try and remember that as your father, I would rather not be the first King known to need therapy from listening to you two remind me that you have sex.”

Amelia laughed, whilst Lucius simply looked smug. As for Keira, she patted her husband on the arm and whispered,

“Yes, but how else will they give us grandbabies?”

“The supernatural stork... now let’s get this over with,” he replied dryly before knocking on the door.

We all collectively braced ourselves for when the door opened and I had to say, Ella’s mother Libby looked a lot healthier than she had the last time I had seen her.

Something that gave us hope that Frank had done as he said he would, by having

what was no doubt a difficult conversation with her.

Although clearly, none of us had thought to look at the time, as Libby was still wearing a pair of frog pajamas.

Little frogs and lily pads to be precise, with the white T-shirt part having a larger frog across her chest with the words, 'Let's have a Froggy Great Time' written below. Again, the irony wasn't lost on me.

"Er... hey... everyone," she replied in shock, as obviously answering the door to us all had been the last thing she had expected.

"Hey, sis, I know this looks a little odd us all turning up like this and so early, but is Frank home?" Keira said, stepping forward and giving her sister a hug. Libby frowned in question before turning and shouting,

"Frank! We have company... lots of company." She mumbled this last part as she opened the door to let us all inside, before quickly telling us she obviously needed to get dressed. Something she looked embarrassed about. This fact causing Keira to mutter to Dom,

"And suddenly I am back to thirty years ago."

His response was to wink down at her and ask,

"I can carry you inside, just give the word and you're in my arms again, Vixen."

She gave him a playful nudge with her elbow before Frank shouted,

"Be right down, honey!"

“Oh good,” she mumbled, tucking her red hair behind her ear nervously, hair that seemed to have considerably less grey in it than the last time I had seen her.

“Hey, Libby,” I said, giving her a hug when she saw me, one it was nice to see was received warmly. However, it was easy to see her weariness that quickly turned into concern when she started looking for her daughter. Something that brought a pang of pain to my chest.

“Is Ella not with you?” she asked, making me shake my head and try to mask my features from the heartache I felt.

“Not this time,” I replied, before Keira placed a hand at her shoulder and suggest quietly,

“Why don’t you go upstairs and get yourself sorted, sis, then we will explain.”



## Page 3

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“Is she alright? Her disease, did something happen?” Libby asked with a panicked expression.

I swallowed hard and couldn’t help myself when I turned away, walking toward the living room window so as I didn’t add to her panic.

The sight of the driveway was one that played out the past, as I saw myself there with my bike.

Ella standing in front of me as I placed the helmet I’d had made for her, on her head.

The sight an endearing memory that I wished I had the power to return to.

A memory that faded as I closed my eyes and lowered my head, as the fresh agony rippled through me. But then I felt both my hands uncurl from fists as soft, feminine fingers entwined in them, making me look to see both Keira and Amelia at my side, giving me strength.

“We will get her back, Uncle, won’t we, Mum?”

I swallowed hard before nodding when Keira squeezed my hand and agreed.

“We will, love, as a family.”

I nodded, holding back the tears I felt trying to push past the walls of my emotions. Because I couldn’t lose it now. Not when I had so much to focus on. The plan. The war. The rescue. All of it...

My personal battle.

It felt like all my life had built up to this point.

All my experiences being who I knew deep down I had always meant to be.

Who the Gods had chosen for this beast inside me.

Cerberus, the one who I had once believed had made me feel complete, had made me feel whole for so long.

And now there was so much more to that than I ever thought possible.

Because now I knew that all this time there had been a piece missing.

And now we had both found her, we knew how it felt to truly feel whole.

To feel complete.

She was my everything and I would fight to the death to get her back.

Her and my brother. Which was why I gave both their hands a squeeze in return.

The extension of my family were with me.

So, without words, I told them what this union meant to me.

Because I wasn't alone in this. We all had a piece of our hearts taken from us with Ella gone.

We all wanted her back. And as I turned to face the other Kings in the room, I knew

that we had each been in this situation before.

But there was one man who hadn't, and he appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"If this is about Libby, then I haven't told her yet... wait, where is Ella?" Frank said, stopping after scanning the room and finding it empty of the one person he would have wanted to see the most.

"Why don't you take a seat, Frank," Dom suggested, making him frown before every muscle started to tense in his posture. This as he narrowed his eyes at his brother-in-law and stated,

"I don't need to take a seat, what I need is someone to tell me where my daughter is!"

Keira took over and walked over to him, placing a hand at his arm, one that was now folded over his chest.

"She is alive, Frank, but she has been taken by Garmr like we feared," she said softly and like me, a range of emotions flicked over his features, anger being the main one.

"No... No... NO!" he roared, making me flinch.

"I know it's hard but..."

At this he pulled from Keira's hold and stormed outside, but when she went to follow, I held a hand up.

"Not this time, Doll face, this time, it's on me," I said. She nodded in response, the tears in her beautiful grey-blue eyes clinging on and making them look like glass.

I turned away and followed Frank outside to find him near tearing his hair out, as he

hunched over, speaking in another language. Some ancient sounding Latin I, admittedly, didn't understand.

“Frank.”

“How the fuck did this happen, Jared!” he snapped, making me tense but taking the blame like a hit to the gut all the same.

“There are no excuses here, Frank, only the truth when I tell you that I wasn't strong enough,” I admitted, making his head whip around, showing me now the other side of him coming through.

My first glimpse of his true self. His eyes losing their dark brown and now glowing like light beneath the ice.

His veins like navy ink branching out around his eyes, the tips of his fingers as if frozen after held too long under some icy lake.

“Then I will kill him for you!” an unholy voice promised, at the same time a pair of heavenly wings burst from his back.

The tips of each feather was a midnight blue that faded into the purest of white.

But this wasn't the only change, as a long, clear glass sword grew from his hand, one that crackled with a blue electricity inside the center with a twist of his wrist. The long blade grew the length of my arm and was soon swung around toward me until the tip was inches from my face.

“Now where is she?!” he demanded in a deadly tone.

I took a deep breath, pained to explain the truth but forcing myself to all the same.

“She is somewhere you can’t go,” I told him, making him grit his teeth.

“I will lose my wings before I see Hell take her!” he vowed venomously.

“Good, I was hoping you would say that,” I told him in a calm tone that was enough to tell him that I was unfazed by the fact he had a weapon still pointed at me.

His expression changed to one of questioning, but before he could ask, the very human aspect of this situation suddenly ran out of the door.

His ice white eyes snapped to his front door where a gasp of shock came before the fearful sound of his wife as she started...

Screaming.

## Page 4

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### A Thousand Lifetimes

As soon as Frank saw his wife's reaction, he lost the Angelic side of him and ran toward her, making her quickly back away with her hands held out in front of her. Which meant that by the time Keira ran outside, all it took was one look at her sister to know what had happened.

"What... what are you!?" she stammered, making Frank flinch before raising his hands up as if she held a gun on him.

"It's me, baby... don't be afraid," he tried, making her shake her head at him.

"I'm going crazy... this... you... tell me I didn't just see what I did... I..." Libby faltered, her words fearful and clearly confused.

"Oh Frank, why didn't you tell her?" Keira said, making him grit his teeth before admitting,

"It wasn't the right time."

"And this is?" Keira argued, making Libby snap her head to her sister, accusing,

"You! You knew about this!?"

Something that made Keira sigh before admitting,

"There is a lot to tell you, Libs, things that you should have been told a long time

ago.” The last part of this was aimed at her brother-in-law with frustration, before she continued on.

“But we are now past that and have no choice but to throw you straight into this, because something has happened to Ella, which means we need you to understand this quickly so we can get our girl back.”

“Ella! What happened, where is she?!” Libby looked to each of us, as now Dom, Lucius, and Amelia, had all joined us on the porch, and were watching this play out.

“Frank... what the hell is going on, tell me?!” she shouted when no one spoke. He swallowed hard, tears in his eyes that now matched his wife’s, before telling her,

“You were never supposed to find out this way, baby, but what Kaz says is true. Someone had took our girl and we need to get her back.”

A sob tore through her as tears fell, making me put a fist to my mouth, the emotional scene coming to its crashing finale.

“No... No... this can’t be happening... this...” She never finished as Keira ran to her sister and pulled her into her embrace, cradling her sister’s head on her shoulder as she cried.

“It’s going to be okay, I promise, we are going to get her back,” Keira assured her as we all looked on, no doubt wishing we had the luxury of time to gift to them.

“I... d-d-don’t... understand,” Libby stammered again, making Frank look nothing short of pained.

It was clear all he wanted to do was wrap his arm around his wife and comfort her. But the fearful way she kept looking at him was the only reason he left his distance.

“I know, honey, and we will explain everything but first, you need to know that no one here is going to hurt you, especially not Frank.”

Libby pulled back from her sister, her glassy eyes going to her husband who had his hands fisted by his sides like he was holding himself back from taking Keira’s place. His plaid shirt stretching around his tense muscles that looked close to tearing.

“What are you?” she asked, giving Keira cause to take a step back, so as she could face her husband. I watched as he swallowed hard before taking a deep breath. The decades old lies now unraveling in this single moment and the weight of it looked crushing.

“I couldn’t tell you... I... didn’t know how,” he admitted.

“What are you?” she asked again, her tone more forceful this time.

“Perhaps we should give them...”

“No! No one is going anywhere! Now tell me, what are you!” she shouted the second Dom made his suggestion for us to leave them, doing so at the same time reaching for her sister’s hand.

As it was clear that right now, Keira was the only one she trusted.

Frank looked to Keira, who nodded before telling him,

“Go on, tell her... she can take it.” Then I watched as she squeezed her sister’s hand and told her, “Us Williams girls are tough.”

A shudder ran through Libby before she nodded. Frank looked torn by this but with no other choice, he took another deep breath before telling her,



“I’m an Angel, honey.”

She scoffed as if he was joking before looking to the rest of us to see that our reactions were all the same, telling her what he said was the truth.

“But... but that’s impossible... you can’t be, I mean you don’t even go to church.”

Amelia snorted before covering her mouth, and whispering,

“Sorry.”

“Is this true?” Libby asked her sister, ignoring her niece’s outburst.

“How about me and you take a walk?” Keira suggested, making Frank say,

“No, we need to...”

Libby held up her hand and said,

“Thirty-one years, Frank... for thirty-one years you have been lying to me.”

Frank flinched back like she had struck him.

“It wasn’t like that, Libs,” he tried, making her scowl at him.

“I... I don’t even know you.”

“Yes, baby, you do. I swear, I didn’t have a choice, I couldn’t tell you,” he tried again, making her snap,

“And now, what changed?!”

“Everything... you... your illness... I couldn’t lose you,” he said, now with tears in his eyes. At this a realization dawned on her.

“The treatment... it’s not the drugs, is it... it’s you,” she whispered, and at this he lowered his head and told her,

“I can’t let you go... I couldn’t... I couldn’t live without... I had to... I had to do something, even if it meant facing the consequences... saving you, it would be worth my life.”

Realization again dawned on her as Frank looked to Dom.

She followed his gaze and saw the truth in the King’s eyes.

To which she let go of her sister’s hand and with tears streaming down her face, she walked to her husband.

We all held our breath wondering what she would do next, my heart in my throat for Frank.

He tensed, as if preparing himself for the backlash of her emotions.

Tears now falling freely from both their eyes.

His face full of sorrow and shame, whereas hers, none of us could tell.

Yes, there was pain there. There was hurt and the bitter sting of betrayal.

But there was also something else. Something that didn’t fully come to light until she stepped up to him and placed her hand on his damp cheek.

“Look at me,” she demanded softly, and I honestly don’t know how he did it. It was as if it pained him to look down at the evidence of what his lies had caused. But when he finally forced himself to look at her, she asked,

“You risked this secret, risked all the lies and the life you built, all of it to save me?”

I couldn’t help mirror his actions as he swallowed hard. But then as if unable to hold it back any longer he lowered his forehead to hers and told her softly,

“I would exchange a thousand lifetimes for a single one with you.” At this a sob tore through her before she threw her arms up around him, hugging him to her as he did the same.

Both Keira and Amelia had tears in their eyes, and we were all affected by this emotional scene.

One that proved that love was the most powerful force in all our worlds combined.

“Come, let’s give them some time,” Dom said, holding his hand out to Keira, who patted her sister on the shoulder as she passed.

This before Dom folded her to his side the second she was within arm’s length.

As for Amelia, she was already in the arms of her Vampire, which forced me to look painfully to my side.

Because there should have been my beautiful Red.

My Wild one.

My Ella.

The girl that I too would have traded...

A thousand lifetimes for.

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### Love and Lies

After this emotional scene, we left the two alone, retreating back into the house, trying to ignore the voices we could hear.

Libby's shocked reactions to Frank as he explained the unbelievable to a mortal he had been married to for over thirty years.

And as for Keira, she made everyone drinks and played host as all the men were left sitting in the living room thinking the same thing...

Thank the Gods it wasn't us.

In fact, out of all of us, only Dom knew how Frank felt, and even that was on a small scale.

Because he had no doubt had to explain his world to Keira early on in their relationship.

Whereas for Lucius and I, we'd had our own demons to expose, and in the form of our pasts to each confess to.

Although after thirty years, I could only image the betrayal Frank's wife felt, despite his reasons for keeping it secret.

But it did make me wonder how Ella was going to take the news of who and what her father truly was.

Yet even that conversation seemed a million miles away right now.

As for me, I was anxious to get this shit to the next stage.

More specifically, to the point where we could tell Frank our plan in getting his daughter back.

Particularly, what his role was to be in that plan.

When Keira came out with a tray of mugs I had to say, we were at a point where we were in need of something stronger than tea and coffee.

Circumstances being different, I would have laughed at the sight of three Kings all sitting around a coffee table with a mug in our hands so soon after facing a battle in Hell.

“Well, good news is there were chocolate biscuits in the tin,” Amelia said, following her mother out with a plate, and when no one made an attempt to take one, Keira added,

“Don’t worry, they were shop bought.”

Immediately, all of us reached for one. Because it was well known that Libby wasn’t the best cook, something Ella had teased her about.

“How do you think Auntie Libs is going to take it all?” Amelia asked after sitting next to Lucius, who instantly picked up her hand and started playing with her fingers.

A habit I had seen him do often and, well, it wasn’t surprising.

As even Dom instantly wrapped his arm around Keira, who snuggled in close.

And here I was, sitting in the armchair alone, feeling the pang of emptiness at knowing I couldn't just reach for my own girl.

Because that connection meant everything to us and without it, it honestly felt like losing a limb.

"I don't know, honey, it's a lot to take in but I do know this...

love can overcome the hardest of times. And each of us in this room have all known our fair share of them," Keira replied, making all the men nod, including me...

The only one who couldn't follow that agreement up with granting their lover a kiss like Dom and Lucius did.

"Just as we all know that love and lies can also go hand in hand if fear of losing someone is the motivation for those lies," I added with a sigh, making the others agree with just a look.

"Well let's pray my sister can see it like that," Keira added in a hopeful tone.

Yes, and soon , was what I didn't add, as we didn't exactly have the time to wait.

"Any news on Theo?" Keira asked Dom.

"He is with Vincent, helping him reach out to our Enforcers before joining us for the next battle," he replied, making Keira flinch.

"Perhaps he is better staying in the mortal realm. You know, incase things go pear shaped... along with Fae," Keira added this last part over the rim of her mug, making Amelia scoff.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen... and don’t you dare even try to agree. We have talked about this,” Amelia said when Lucius started to open his mouth and say,

“But...”

“No buts, this is Ella we are talking about, and I don’t care if she has some other sister now, she is practically my sister and has been all my life... so no, it’s not even up for discussion, Mister.”

At this Dom turned to his wife, making her instantly give the same argument.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Dom and Lucius each gave the other a look as if to say a silent, ‘we shall see about that’ but they wisely chose not to say anything further on the matter.

And not that they would have had the opportunity, because it was clear the second the door was opened, that Frank’s martial storm had passed.

Because the next thing we knew, Libby stormed into the room and faced us all.

Her slim hands fisted under the long sleeves of her pale green sweater that brought out the color in her green eyes, that were currently all puffy from the tears she had obviously shed.

“Right, just so we are on the same page here, you’re the Vampire King that is married to my niece, you’re the half Demon King who married my sister, and you’re the HellBeast King who is engaged to my daughter... that about cover it or you want to tell me my brother-in-law Justin is an Elf?”

Dom snorted a laugh at this and muttered under his breath,



“More like a fucking fairy.” Something that Keira elbowed him for, making him cough and say, “No, that’s about the gist of it.”

“Great, dandy, wonderful... so let’s move on to the part where you tell me how you’re all going to get my daughter back,” she replied tensely, as Frank followed her inside and said,

“I second that.” And this was where I took over, now putting down my mug before standing up to face them before laying it out straight.

“In a nutshell, I fucked up and now we need your help getting her back.”

“Jared, that’s not true, there was nothing you could have done to...”

I was quick to cut Keira off, no matter how much I appreciated her support in this.

“No, this is my shit to own, and this is me owning it. She is my girl and I should have protected her better. She got taken because...”

Dom interrupted me, picking up where his wife left off.

“Because she sacrificed herself to save you by going into that portal, you are not to blame, Jared, no matter how much guilt you feel about the situation we are in now. The fact of the matter is that Ella is...”

Once again, it was my turn to cut him off.

“Stubborn, yes, but the fact of the matter is that I never should have left Ella before that battle.”

“A battle I hear would have been lost without you in it,” Lucius added calmly.

“Jesus!” Frank hissed whilst Libby cried out,

“Battle?!” This was when Frank took his wife in his arms as she started crying in panic.

“What are we going to do, Frank, our baby girl... she’s... she’s...” Libby sobbed, making him cradle her head to his chest.

“Ssshh, I know, sweetheart, we will get her back... I promise you,” Frank assured her, squeezing her tight before looking to the rest of us.

“Now I don’t care who wants to take the blame in all of this, and knowing my daughter the way I do, then she no doubt had a stubborn hand in making her own damn decisions.

But it seems to me, that there is only one who is to truly blame in all of this and that’s this fuck Garmr!

” he said, making me release a heavy sigh I felt come from my bones.

“On that, we all agree on,” Dom added.

“Good. Now as for you,” Frank looked my way.

“Well, Son, you can stand there and take all this on your shoulders until it brings you to your knees and that shit buries you, but that ain’t going to help us get her back,” he told me, making me swallow down the emotion, especially when he tapped Libby to let him go so as he could walk over to me.

I held myself still, waiting for the hit, but what I didn’t expect was for him to put his hand to my shoulder and say,

“Now I know a man in pain when I see one. I know you would exchange places with her if you could or you would die trying. I also know that you love my girl like no other man but the father you’re looking at.

But right now, you’re gonna bury that guilt before it buries you, and you are going to do what I know you are rumored to do best... You’re gonna fight, HellBeast.”

I swear I was close to choking on the lump in my throat, forcing myself to say in a heavy tone,

“I give you both my vow, I will fight with my last breath to get her back.”

Frank nodded at this, giving my shoulder a squeeze before turning to the rest and asking,

“Now tell me the plan.”

“This is not exactly what I had in mind when you said you needed my help,” Frank commented as we once again stepped outside.

We had not long ago finished what was a difficult conversation for all of us.

Especially Libby after we explained all that had happened.

But then again, no parent wanted to learn that their daughter’s first life came with other parents and a sibling they had no idea she had.

Nor did they want to hear how she had been kidnapped by her uncle to be used as a weapon to bring about the end of all our worlds.

Needless to say, there was a lot of tears and even more questions from the only

mortal in the room.

One that had only an hour ago learnt of our existence.

But the time for keeping Ella's mother in the dark had well and truly passed.

As for Frank, like I, he was eager to get to the part where we told him the plan.

More specifically, the part that included what we needed of him.

Something we all thought wise not to let Libby witness, as she had most definitely endured enough for one day.

Which was why we recommended that this next part happen outside, whilst Keira and Amelia stayed with Libby to reassure her that Frank would be fine. And giving them the opportunity to answer what was most likely a million questions that Libby still had.

"I'm assuming you've done this to an Angel before, Vampire," Frank said, no doubt feeling some unease about this.

"The Vampire has a name and yes, Frank, I have done this before," Lucius replied wryly, as we walked toward the natural path into the wooded area that surrounded their home.

Because we knew with one glance out the window, that Libby would freak out if she saw what was about to happen.

Learning that her husband was a fallen Angel was one thing, but watching as he became one of Lucius's Vampires was quite another.

“I think this is far enough,” Dom said as the four of us came to a natural clearing.

“Alright, so what do I have to do?” Frank asked, now removing his plaid shirt and tossing it to the ground.

“I am surprised you don’t know,” Lucius said, making him grit his teeth and say,

“Didn’t hunt any Vampires.”

“A good job too, or we might have met under quite different circumstances,” Lucius replied with an unnerving grin.

“Yeah, no doubt... so like I said, what do I need to do?” Frank repeated, and Lucius’s grin grew bigger when he said,

“That’s easy...”

“All you have to do is bleed, Holy One.”

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### A Bloody Plan

“ A

re you, Frank, ready to declare your soul into my ownership, sealed with your very blood, branding you as one of my own?” Lucius said in a serious tone, making him grit his teeth before replying,

“I am.”

“Good, then let’s get on with it, shall we?” Lucius said before grabbing Frank’s wrist and biting into it in a blur of movement, making Frank hiss before he knew what hit him.

Damn, the Vampire was fast, I would give him that. His fangs embedded in his flesh in a blink of an eye, as his own seeped from icy blue-grey to crimson before then sinking into black obsidian. The feeding didn’t take long, as he released his claim before then tearing into his own skin.

“Now take my blood and allow yourself to be reborn, Holy One,” Lucius said, holding out his bleeding wrist to Frank, who took a deep breath before taking hold. He then brought Lucius’s offering to his lips and drank down his blood like... well, like his daughter’s life depended on it.

Lucius’s expression remained impassive, up until the point that he must have felt another soul tethering to his own. He breathed in deep and let it out in a controlled way the moment it was complete. Then he gripped Frank’s shoulder and told him,

“That’s enough, it is done.”

Frank let him go, stumbling back as this new connection hit him, his blood lust shown as his eyes turned crimson for the first time.

He landed on his knees as the darkness of Hell overwhelmed him.

For I knew it was much harder on one born from Heaven than one born of Hell.

His whole back tensed as he hunched over, every muscle straining through the change.

His fists clawed the earth, as his veins pulsated from a blue glow to black, like an infection was taking hold.

He cried out, before gritting his teeth once more as he tried to hold back his reactions to the pain.

“Easy now, just breathe through it,” I said the second Frank started to come back to his senses.

His eyes snapped open and once again glowed crimson as he battled his way through the change. But with each new breath taken, he started to come back down. His eyes eventually calmed back to their glowing ice white before simmering back to the dark brown of his human form.

“You did well,” Lucius said, offering him his hand to help him back to his feet. The change had looked brutal, yet despite this, he shook it off enough to say,

“Is that it, can I get into Hell now?”

Dom laughed whereas Lucius smirked.

“That eagerness will serve you well where we are going, and yes we can, but may I first suggest putting your wife’s mind at ease as knowing Libby, she is no doubt glued to the window waiting for you,” Dom said, slapping him on the back.

Frank shook the dizziness from his head before looking back toward the direction of the house.

“And what of my wings?” he asked, now looking behind him and after concentrating, his wings erupted, no longer white and blue but now ink black, with a deep red hue at the tips.

Then he looked down at his hands, fisting them as black spikes grew from his knuckles at the same time his veins pulsated with a blackish, crimson glow.

Threadlike ropes of red liquid rose to the skin before forming together like pliable lava floating above his hand, one he started to control with every movement of his fingers.

“Interesting,” Lucius commented with intrigue. Frank looked down in awe before saying,

“I feel... strong... much stronger... more powerful.”

“Yes, and you can thank me for the upgrade,” Lucius replied with his usual smug grin, before holding out his arm and saying, “Shall we?”

Frank grinned in response and said,

“If I get to use this on that fucker that has my daughter, then Hell yeah, let’s fucking



go.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said with my own grin, one that was full of hope that finally, having Frank there meant this was the key to bringing Ella back to herself.

But even I knew this was only the first part of that plan.

And with many more steps to take before getting us to that point, it once again meant that time was of the essence.

Something we all felt as we made our way back to the house in half the speed.

Wisely, Frank had regained his mortal vessel back before entering the house, quick to reassure his wife that he was fine.

After that, I didn’t know what was said between them, as we respectfully gave them time alone to say their goodbyes.

Because we knew that time in Hell would be far longer for Frank than it would be for Libby.

No doubt a blessing that it was this way around.

As I doubted Libby could have coped waiting too long before hearing, not only of her daughter’s return, but now that of her husband as well.

As for me, once Frank joined us outside again, Libby called my name.

“Jared, bring my daughter home, you hear...? After all, we have a wedding to plan,” she said with tears in her eyes, keeping them from falling and trying to be strong. I stepped back up to the porch, taking her hands to give them a squeeze as I vowed

once more,

“I give you my word, I will do all in my power to get her back or die trying.”

She swallowed hard and nodded, before gifting me with her kindness by raising my hands up to her lips to kiss. Then she told me,

“I know you will.”

The moment meant more to me than words could say, causing that rising emotion to clog my throat once more as I let her go.

As for Lucius, he had already used the portal key his brother had given him.

Doing this so as we could call him back to get us and take us back to where we needed to be.

The shimmering portal was a swirling midnight blue looking more like we were about to step into space than Hell.

One that had Libby’s eyes widening in wonder as a man stepped through it.

Dariush was at the ready to take us where we needed to go but before that, Frank said,

“So let me get this right, our aim here is to get my daughter back to herself... right?”  
I nodded, reminding him,

“She needs an anchor to her mortal life.”

“Then we need to get something before that happens,” he told us.

“I take it you mean more than a wrench,” I replied wryly, making him scoff.

“If only. But no, we need to go to Nelson, now can we do that?” This was aimed at Dariush, who replied,

“I see you have been pimping out my services again, brother.”

“Answer the man, ?e?,” Lucius replied with a sigh, and I took this to be either a nickname or the word brother in a language I didn’t know.

“If you don’t mind bleeding and have been there before, then yes, I can do that,” Dariush told him with a fold of his arms. His attire no doubt just another element to the man that looked unusual to poor Libby.

His navy-blue tunic style jacket was sleeveless, and its piping of silver thread matched the gleaming blades hanging at his sides, held there from multiple straps of black leather around his waist. The way he was dressed, with his chest bare and his muscular arms on show, he looked more like he had stepped from an Arabian Night novel.

Especially with his warm bronze skin tone, his long dark hair pulled back into a man bun, and his almond shaped olive-green eyes gleaming playfully at the way Libby watched him.

Which was no wonder it was shocking when Lucius introduced him,

“Frank, this is my brother, Dariush.”

Frank didn’t look surprised, as he knew the way our world worked, or should I say, our vessels.

But Libby comically looked between the two and automatically tried to find any resemblance where there was none to find.

Just like between my own brother and me.

Although we often found it amusing when getting this same look when telling people we were brothers.

“Another Vampire?” Frank asked, making Dariush scoff, before producing a wicked curved blade from his sheath.

It was a weapon I knew as a shamshir, meaning ‘Lion’s Fang’ in Persian.

Not that I knew the language enough to speak it, but I did, however, know my blades.

A one-handed sword with a curved, slim blade that had barely any taper to the fine tip.

Due to its shape and how slight the sword was, it was a difficult weapon to master due to how hard it was when it came to accuracy when thrusting into your enemies.

Which just proved how much skill Dariush must have in the art of sword fighting, for him to choose such a weapon over all else.

“No Holy mix blood, I am something else entirely,” Dariush replied, before he nodded for Frank to show his palm and it had no one questioning why. All except Libby.

“Oh no! Don’t hurt him!” Libby called, making Amelia go and comfort her aunt before her mum could, as Frank did the same.

“He won’t hurt him, Auntie Libs,” Amelia said before Frank advised,

“She’s right, babe, now you go on in the house and don’t worry, we will bring our daughter home.”

At this Amelia steered her away from what was about to happen, something that would have only added to Libby’s distress no doubt. A few minutes later and Amelia returned, telling her mum,

“She will be alright, I think we just need to get this over with and quickly, before she finds her way to the window again.” At this Frank nodded to Dariush, silently telling him to get on with it.

“Eww, God, I hate this part,” Keira commented, making her daughter chuckle.

“What? It wasn’t exactly fun for me two thousand years ago... and yes, before you say anything, I know it didn’t happen for you, Dariush,” she replied making Frank stare at her.

“Clearly I have a lot to catch up on.”

“Says the Angel who married my sister and let me work for Mr. broody Demon boss man here,” she replied, making Dom playfully growl down at her.

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“Yes, well with that twisted fucker Morgan after you, I thought it was the safest place around. Especially after declaring his love for you, outside my door not long after meeting you,” Frank replied, making her look shocked.

“Wait, you did?!” she exclaimed looking up at her husband.

“Yes, of course I did,” he replied with ease.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Keira asked, and this time it was aimed at her brother in law.

“Erm, no offense but can we save this little family dispute till after we rescued my girl and saved the world from total ruin?” I suggested, making Lucius comment,

“Oh, I don’t know, I am finding this most entertaining.” At which Amelia elbowed him and warned,

“Not helping, Vampy.”

“I could talk about our sex life if you wish to divert attention.” Frank and Dom both turned to him and shouted at the same time,

“No!”

“NO!” Naturally, Dom’s argument was louder, something that only made Lucius grin harder.

“Then can I suggest that Frank meets us at the encampment once he has retrieved what he needs, so as we can use this time to make a plan,” Lucius said, and I couldn’t agree more, as I was eager to return to hear if there had been any news of Ella.

Dariush nodded, replacing his blade in his sheath before creating a portal back for each of us to use.

This before remaining with Frank in order to get him to Ella’s trailer.

Of course, I had an idea what he was referring to, so knew that it wouldn’t take long. Which was why after a nod from me, I was the first to step back into Hell. A Hell that now held greater meaning for me, as I was literally living my own personal version of it at the moment.

Especially when once we returned, there had indeed been news on Ella and well... it wasn’t fucking good.

“It’s good you’re back,” Koro said the second we walked inside what we had been using as the war room.

As for the camp, it had vastly grown in size.

Because for as far as the eye could see it was an ocean of bodies, transforming the land into a moving entity.

I could also see larger structures had been erected as well as other tents to house the newcomers as we now had thousands join our forces.

Demons of all species, no doubt each led by Kings and Generals that were making battle plans in their own war rooms, ready for the moment we were all to come together.

But as for now, we all walked into the space to find Koro, Clay, Marcus, Tyr and Asher all stood around the center table that still held a map of the Underworld upon it.

“What news has there been?” I asked, my tone eager and verging on desperate.

“Equal parts good and bad I am afraid,” Koro replied calmly, making me grit my teeth as I tried not to bark orders at him, waiting for him to say more. As for Dom, he knew no such patience.

“Tell us.”

“As you no doubt saw, our numbers have increased significantly, and plans are being put into place for the next battle,” Koro said, taking the lead with this information.

“And the bad news?” I asked, looking to each of the men but focusing on Marcus, who for once, didn’t look so cocky, and I was soon to find out why.

“Garmr has been doing the same,” Clay said, making Amelia point out,

“But surely he can’t have as many allies as we do.”

But this was when Marcus stepped up and placed his gloved hands on the table. The permanent red lines on his pale face pulled in strained angles as this time, he wasn’t smiling.

“It’s bad, J.”

“How bad?” I asked, making him point to the mountain we had traveled through when trying to break Ella out the first time.



“Remember all those bones we found.”

“Hard to forget,” I commented dryly.

“Turns out Garmr has been planning this for a long time, as he has been hording the bones of not only his own fallen Hellhounds, but what looks to be the remains of every battle ever fought in Hell since the day he first discovered his niece’s powers.”

My eyes must have bugged out, as even I felt them straining at the news.

“You’re shitting me!” I shouted, as my brain tried to comprehend those types of numbers.

“Gods, but that must be...”

“Hundreds of thousands,” Lucius finished off for Dom, his voice hard and calculated.

“Bill led our spies on a recon mission, they managed to sneak inside the mountain and when they saw what was happening, they reported back to us after seeing Ella herself bring them all back to life. Souls, I will remind you, cannot be fought like those of the living we had not so long ago battled against,” Koro said with a shake of his head.

“And you, do you see any outcome from this?” I asked, looking to Marcus, who let his head hang before raising it to look at me.

“There is only one outcome that brings us victory, a single thread among a woven tapestry that they already consume.”

“Okay, so for those of us in the class that hate riddles, what does that mean exactly?” Keira asked.

“It means we have one shot in a million, that’s what it means, Keira girl,” Lucius replied, a tick in his jaw visible as he spoke.

“Not if we pull on the right thread,” I stated firmly, making all eyes turn to me.

“The plan is to get Ella out and back to herself. We do that, then the war is won before it’s even begun, as without his souls, we will hold greater numbers... right?” I asked, making Koro nod, but it was Tyr who spoke next.

“We will outnumber them, yes. But how are we to get her out, for if memory serves me right, HellBeast, it didn’t go so well the last time?” I wanted to punch him, despite knowing he was right. Which is why instead of regressing to violence, I argued,

“That was because we were unprepared. But now we know what to expect.”

“You mean her trying to murder you?” Tyr added, making me grit my teeth once more and force my fists to uncurl.

“He’s got a point, Jared,” Asher said, making me release a sigh.

“Well, she can’t try and murder me if she’s asleep now, can she? And after last time, we now know that she can be knocked out, all we need to do is get close enough to do that without causing harm,” I told them, gaining a few nods of acceptance. However, the girls of the group didn’t look so sure.

“Then what?” Keira asked.

“Then we bring her back here and...”

“I will do the rest,” Frank added the second he appeared through the entrance, his

eyes glowing crimson as he no doubt tried to control the urge to give into his new Hellish side. Then he walked toward the table and said,

“And if a hug from her father doesn’t do it, then this might,” he added as he placed the object he had wanted to retrieve from her trailer in Nelson in the center of the table. The sight of the tiny flecks of snow falling around the howling wolf at the base felt like a sign.

But now the question was...

Was it a sign of life or...

A sign of death?

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Breaking Through

Ella

H ell.

This was Hell.

I wasn't even talking about the place I was in, but more like the personal Hell I was living through.

I didn't even know how long it had been as time seemed to be endless.

I was still trapped within my own mind, playing passenger in this train wreck of the life the other me was living.

Of course, I continued to try and take control but the most I had accomplished was pissing her off.

Something that was obvious when Anástasi would grab her head and scream for me to leave her alone.

But then I could also tell she was exhausted and it was no wonder with the shit that Garmr was making her do.

He'd had her working non-stop at bringing back all those souls in the mountain, creating such an immense army, I honestly didn't know how they were ever to be

defeated.

If I thought our odds were bad before, then now they seemed unfathomable.

As for my shitshow situation, it still felt weird referring to myself in a third person but when I was helpless to stop her and had no control, then in my eyes, she was now the enemy.

And speaking of the enemy, she was currently pacing inside the room, as if restless and irritated.

This was after she had fainted from exhaustion again in the caves where Garmr had no choice but to carry her back to the bedroom.

“Yeah, well I would be pissed off as well if I was being used as a fucking weapon!” I snapped, making her groan and hold her head as if she could hear me.

But this was something I was noticing happening far more recently, making me wonder if it was because she was so tired.

As if her walls at being able to block me out were crumbling more and more each day.

“Can anyone say, Little Miss Muggings.” I sniggered because I swear, bullying myself had become my only pastime.

“But then you probably don’t know what that means, so let me spell it out for you. S.T.U.P.I.D what do we get, STUPID!” I shouted, making her suddenly shout,

“STOP!” I started laughing at this point before telling her,

“Why would I do that? It’s my body you stole’ .’

At this she walked over to the cracked mirror where I could see myself.

“I stole nothing!” she said and I had to say, I was shocked. Because she may have responded to me a few times before, but this felt different. As if we were about to have an actual conversation.

“I am Ella and I don’t care if my first life used to be you, this is wrong!’ ”I told her, making her frown.

“I am and always will be, Anástasi.”

I scoffed at that and told her,

“Yeah, ‘cause that first life worked out so well for you.”

“This is my destiny,” she argued, and I laughed without humor once again, and no doubt not for the last time.

“Yeah, so why is it your sister risked her life to get you away from that asshole uncle of yours?”

At this she turned her face away and told me tensely,

“She did it to protect me, but it was a mistake.”

“No, the only mistake she made was trusting you would be strong enough to see the truth!” I threw back at her, making her mock,

“Ha, and what do you know about truth!?”

“A fuck load more than you, that’s for damn sure! Just like I know that Garmr has been lying to you. That all he cares about is using you to build his armies ,” I told her.

“That’s not true! The rest of Hell, the ones that rule it are the ones who want to use me! The last battle proved that when that HellBeast tried to kidnap me for them.”

At this I actually got angry enough that something in me must have broken through. As suddenly my fury built enough that I made her punch her hand into the mirror.

“LIES! That HellBeast is mine! He is our Fated and YOU, you tried to kill him, you BITCH!” I screamed, making her cry out as if my voice had rattled her mind.

She was also in utter shock at what I had managed to do, as she pulled her fist from the broken shards and brought her shaky hand down to look at.

The blood seeping through the cuts causing her eyes to grow wide.

“Impossible,” she uttered, making me practically growl at her,

“Clearly not! And I swear if I get the chance, I will slit that fucker’s throat the second I can! You can’t keep me locked away inside this mind forever! I would rather kill both of us than let you hurt innocent people!”

She continued to look shocked before defending herself.

“I only hurt those that wish to do me harm!”

“Oh, so the HellBeast hit you, did he? Attacked you, hurt you?” I threw at her, making her flinch back as if I had struck her. You could see her now playing it back in her mind as her eyes frantically looked elsewhere. Every second of the fight, she was reliving through her memories.

“He would have hurt me,” she responded weakly, as if she doubted her own words.

“Ha! You don’t sound so sure of yourself there, because from where I was watching, it was you attacking him, hurting him, trying to kill him!” I shouted, getting angrier with every word and with it, she took more steps away from the mirror as if afraid of what I might have the power to make her do.

“Be quiet!” she tried, but I’d had enough.

“You are the only one hurting people!”

“No... No, that’s... that’s not true,” she stammered, making me sneer,

“Just like Lerna! Just like our sister!”

At this she shook her head and argued in a weak tone,

“That’s not true, I love my sister... I tried to protect her.”

“Lies! But you know who did protect her... the HellBeast,” I said, dousing her doubt under an ocean of truth. Truth she still tried to deny.

“No! that’s not true!”

“Yes it is... that’s where she is now, with the good guys trying to find a way to save you from Garmr, just like last time, trying to save your ass because you won’t do the right thing and try and save yourself for once!

” I argued, pushing her more and more, hoping that eventually something I said would snap her out of her delusions.



“Stop talking! Stop talking!” she pleaded, but she would get no such pity from me.

“And now you betrayed her by falling right back into Garmr’s control!

” I said, making her walk further away from her own reflection, as if it was me she was looking at, no longer herself.

She continued to back away right up until her knees hit the edge of the bed.

But I couldn’t stop, I didn’t think I ever would when I lashed out at her,

“Because you are weak!” I shouted, making her stammer,

“Stop it... stop it!”

“No, I will never stop! You will never shut me up and I am going to haunt you for the rest of your life until you finally realize the truth!” I vowed venomously. All the things she had done, the pain she had caused and would continue to do. She had hurt the man I loved and that was unforgivable.

“Please stop,” she begged again, but it fell on deaf ears.

“And that truth, the one you are so afraid of admitting, Garmr lied to you! That HellBeast, he is CERBERUS!” I bellowed, making her suddenly scream,

“NOOOOO!” At the same time she threw her hand out to the mirror and shattered it completely, doing so until every last shard had fallen from the frame and landed on the floor.

“He is dead,” she said, letting her head hang, and the tears I could feel falling on our face.

“He left me,” she added in a hopeless tone, making me finally take a minute to feel her pain.

“Then in that, you have also been lied to,” I told her more calmly this time.

“And why should I believe you?” she asked, and I felt my inner core sigh.

“Because I know things you don’t,” I told her, making her shake her head.

“Or you have been lied to, just as you believe I have,” she disputed, making me wish it was possible for me to shake some sense into her.

“You haven’t seen or experienced the things I have but if you were only to try and access my memories, then you would see them too,” I tried, making her grit her teeth, before admitting,

“I can’t.”

“Why not, because you’re afraid to?” I pushed, making her fist the covers and surprise me when she said,

“I have tried.”

At this I must have forced her to suck in a quick breath before realization hit me, making me hiss one name,

“Garmr.” To which she flinched enough for me to say, “I think I made my point.” Because her reaction was telling as she tensed, telling me all I needed to know and making me feel for once as if I had won a battle.

As if I had finally managed to plant that little seed of doubt I was hoping to nurture

enough for its roots to spread.

But then as she sat holding her head in her hands, she started to even out her breathing until finally standing back up.

“And now it is time for me to make my own,” she said in a hard and final tone before storming toward the door.

Then she yanked it open and started to make her way down the long, dark hallway.

Because her door was never locked now, meaning she was free to go wherever she pleased.

That was how much Garmr trusted his influence over her.

Which made me question where she was going now and just what she was going to do to prove her point.

I would have held my breath had I complete control over my body, but I was left as just a bystander to her show.

I found myself hoping that she wasn't going in search of Garmr, as just the sight of him left my soul shaking.

I felt equal amounts sickened and fearful, because the control he had over us was one that no matter how much I tried, I couldn't break from.

She saw love.

I only saw control.

Control over a lonely, heartbroken, vulnerable girl he had manipulated all those eons ago.

Because this was what Lerna hadn't wanted to tell me.

The true depth of how at fault her sister was in all this.

How she had fallen for the villain and believed every single lie he had ever told her.

How she had chosen the easy path of hate over heartbreak.

Because it was easier to get over someone you hated and believed had left you, than losing someone who loved you till the end.

It was clear Garmr had lied to her in both aspects.

Because Cerberus hadn't left and nor had he died.

He had been taken and all of it, by Garmr's doing.

Something I knew I needed to convince her of, but I also knew that I couldn't push too hard too soon, as she would only get angry like she was now.

Because like she said, she had a point to prove, and the second she made it to the lower levels, dread started to flood every fiber of my consciousness.

The prison.

That was where she had led me to.

But not only that, to one cell in particular.

Again, my feelings overwhelmed me. Feelings so strong that when she finally opened a solid metal door, I gasped his name at the sight of the beaten figure I saw hanging there...

“Orthrus.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### A Part to Play

I instantly felt like crying at the sight, and no doubt would have done if I had the option. However, all I could do was accuse her in a desperate tone,

“What have you done?”

She scoffed at this and told me,

“I have done nothing to this vile creature that was sent to aid in my kidnapping.”

I wanted to scream at her so loud it would make her ears bleed and her head feel like it was being ripped open. Because she might not have done this with her own hands, but she had still been the cause.

“Is that you, Cookie?” The second Orthrus spoke, a gasp slipped through, making me wish I had the power to run over to him.

He was hanging by his wrists from a chain bolted to the ceiling.

I instantly recognized the runes and symbols around the cuffs being like the ones I had used on Jared when preventing him from getting off the bed.

Only, with no circle of salt on the floor, I knew they must have worked differently.

He looked in bad shape, as if he had been tortured for hours, and those cuffs were obviously preventing him from healing.

The blood stained his bare torso, the scraps of material on the floor in pieces like half his clothes had been ripped off him.

Long, deep cuts looked like a wild beast had gone at him, slashing over and over again at his chest and abs.

His face was bloody and swollen, making me want to cry and reach out to him to do anything to ease his pain and suffering.

“Please... oh please tell him I am here. Please don’t hurt him anymore, ” I pleaded with her, making her flinch before asking,

“Who is he to you?”

Orthrus flinched at the sound, lifting his head up slowly like it was made of lead.

“He’s... he’s like my brother.”

She reacted, taking a step as if shocked.

“Brother?” she repeated.

“Hey, Cookie, it is you. Good, I’m glad they didn’t hurt you,” he croaked out.

“Why would you care, HellBeast? You were sent to kidnap me,” she snarked, making me shout at her,

“NO! You are wrong! He would never hurt us... can’t you see that?!” ”

She whimpered in pain and held her head as my agony broke through. As for Orthrus, he drew in a painful breath and muttered weakly,

“Not kidnap... rescue you.”

“The girl you knew, the mortal who had this body, who was she to you?” she snapped out the question, getting frustrated as, clearly, this wasn’t going to plan for her. Although I didn’t know what she had expected, but it definitely wasn’t to hear him say the single word...

“Sister.”

Again, she gripped her head in pain as I cried out, a silent sob locked inside her mind. Because now she knew the truth, that I hadn’t been lying to her. And this obviously was enough to spark the seed of doubt I had been hoping for, because she calmed enough to ask,

“And the other HellBeast, the one who tried to take me first, what of him?”

Orthrus raised his bloody face and said in a pained way,

“My brother... the man who loves you... Cerberus.”

She staggered back, her body shaken the second she heard his name. The name she had refused to acknowledge still held life and always had, despite the lies she had been told.

“No... No... it... it can’t be,” she stammered, giving me cause to tell her,

“You see. I told you that I don’t lie. So why not look into my memories and see for yourself?” I said, trying again. To which she simply shook her head and said,

“I told you... I... I can’t.”



“Then at least ask yourself why? Why wouldn’t you be able to if Garmr isn’t the one controlling you?”

She turned to the wall and braced her hands there, hunched over as if in greater pain.

“No, he wouldn’t... he wouldn’t do that... he loves me.”

I scoffed at that.

“No, Anástasi, this isn’t love. Love isn’t control or some possession he can use as he sees fit. His love has only ever been a lie, one told to control you,” I told her, this time with far more compassion than ever before. But when she started to shake her head, I decided to push a little more.

“He was the reason that Cerberus was taken, he told you the lies that your HellBeast left you, when in truth, he was the one who tried to have him killed. But it didn’t work and by the time he made it back, you had already been taken by Garmr.”

“No... No... it’s not true,” she protested weakly.

“Then ask yourself why he would kidnap your sister, if not to use her against you, to use her as a way of control,” I pointed out, once again trying to force her to see the truth.

“He told me she needed to be protected,” she countered, and if I had been in control, I would have shaken my head or closed my eyes in frustration. But in the end, all I had the power to do was to sigh.

“Even more lies.”

“You don’t know that!” she snapped, and I could feel her own frustrations mounting.

“I do though, because I have heard it from her own lips, but you know the only thing she didn’t tell me?” I asked, despite knowing she wouldn’t want to hear what I had to say next, and I was right.

“I don’t want to listen to this,” she said defensively, something I ignored.

“That may be so, but you will listen all the same, because if I am to be a prisoner in this mind of ours, then nothing short of killing us both is going to shut me up ,” I threatened, making her grimace as I continued.

She knew I was right, there was no way of silencing me right in this moment and if I had to haunt her for the rest of our days, then I would until she finally saw sense!

Because I was getting stronger by the minute and in turn, she was getting weaker.

And without knowing how long that would last before she found a way to shut me up permanently, I knew I had to take my chance while it lasted.

Which is why it was time I used the one person I knew she loved against her.

“Lerna... our dear sister... the one who has always tried to save you to the bitter end, do you know what she told me, or should I say, what she didn’t tell me... she didn’t speak of your betrayal.”

“No... No, I didn’t...” she argued, and I had to wonder at this point what Orthrus would have thought of hearing this one-sided conversation.

Could he hear how she fought with herself?

Did he understand that I was trapped inside her mind?

A prisoner just like him, only my jail cell was in fact my own body.

If he did, then he made no response to it and that fact worried me even more.

Which was why I knew that time was of the essence.

I had no choice but to try and fight her even more.

“Oh, but you did, because Lerna only told me of Garmr’s crimes, not that of your own.”

“I... I... never...” she stammered, tears falling down her cheeks as she felt the pain of betraying her sister’s love.

“You chose to believe him over your own sister. She tried to tell you, didn’t she... tried to get you to see the truth, but you ignored it. You told her that she didn’t understand that she had never felt love before, so couldn’t see it...”

She gripped her head and shook all over. Because the truth was, I didn’t know how I knew this but the words flowed from me, all the same. Our shared consciousness aiding me in this battle, like reaching out and catching echoes of the mind.

“You chose to believe his lies over the truth she needed you to see, so you could save them both. You let her down, until in the end, she had no choice but to take you by force and even when telling me this story, she still protected you, protected us from knowing what we had done,” I told her, making her cry out in desperation,

“Please stop... stop it!”

“You know it’s true, you recognized the pain in her eyes when she saw what you had become. That you had chosen the villain over your own blood, your own sister.”

“SHUT UP!” she screamed, taking no more and hitting her limit as she hit a palm to the side of our head. The sound of her anguish rattled the walls, even making them crack and with it, Orthrus swayed on the chain that kept him hung from the ceiling.

“And once again, I made my point,” I told her quietly, knowing that I had. Because she was now shaking all over before lowering to her knees and crying, huddled over, and muttering only one name,

“Lerna... Lerna...”

“Hey, Cookie, it’s okay... don’t cry...” Orthrus said, trying to comfort us, making her raise her head to look back at him. Then she raised back to her feet and I felt myself try to tense, now concerned she would take our argument out on him. Which is why I pleaded,

“Please don’t hurt him!”

She ignored me as she walked closer until she was looking up at him. His huge, bloodied frame almost lifeless as it shadowed over her.

“How were you captured?” she asked, and had I had control of my body, my heart would have been in my throat.

“Save... my brother,” he said faintly, and the sight pained me. I had never seen Orthrus as anything but the easy-going mountain of a man that seemed unbeatable. Unbreakable. Undefeatable.

But now...

He looked broken.

“But you are surely to die here, HellBeast, so was it worth it, when many believe he should be here in your place?” she asked, making me snarl at her,

“Fucking fool!”

She hissed at the pain my disdain caused. But then he raised his head slowly to make eye contact. His once beautiful amber eyes were bloodshot and swollen. Eyes he kept focused on her as, with the last of his strength, he told her,

“I would die for my brother, and I would smile as this life left my vessel if it meant knowing he would live on. That’s what family does... what Ella would do.”

A whimper broke free of her as I cried out his name.

“Oh Orthrus.”

Again, my high emotions were able to take back a tiny amount of control as she stumbled a step in retreat. It was as though his words had struck her with a knife to the heart. One straight to the core as he recognized the difference between her and I. The good versus the evil.

And now...

She was starting to recognize it too.

But then as she stepped back up to him, she was just raising her hand to cup his cheek when suddenly her name was called, instantly putting me on edge.

“Anástasi! What are you doing in here?!” Garmr snapped angrily, making her lower her hand. But before turning to face the bane of my existence, I heard her whisper something to Orthrus. Something I missed at first. As if her mind was playing tricks

on me.

Garmr looked as pompous as ever, wearing a long, old-fashioned suit jacket. One that made him look like a mix between a pirate villain and some 17 th century English gentleman. As for his face, it was easy to see that he was less than pleased to find his precious commodity in here with his enemy.

“Am I not allowed to go where I please?” she argued, making him flinch a little at her tone.

“The prison is no place for you,” he replied, quickly having to mask his irk. But clearly this wasn’t good enough for her as she snapped,

“Why not?”

“It is dangerous.”

She turned and gestured to the prisoner.

“Dangerous, how exactly? Can his words hurt me?” she countered, and I swear I wanted to clap, making me tell her,

“That was a good one.”

I felt her grimace before smoothing out her features.

“His lies can,” Garmr threw back, to which Orthrus started laughing before saying,

“Says the biggest liar of all.”

Garmr gritted his teeth before thrusting out his hand. Some unseen force made

Orthrus start thrashing on his chains, screaming out in pain just as fresh, deep claw marks appeared. But then something happened because, this time, it wasn't just me screaming for it to stop, it was Anástasi.

“STOP!” she ordered, throwing out her hand and preventing Garmr from inflicting any more injury. Garmr took a step back as if he had been struck by our interference. But at least it worked, as Orthrus promptly stopped screaming.

“Anástasi, what are you...?” Garmr started to question, taking pause the second she interrupted him.

“He is mine to kill and mine alone. Any pain he receives will be by my hand, for I warn you, I will not be happy to hear this has been taken from me. In fact, I don't know what I would do if I was to find him dead one day by another's will.”

Garmr narrowed his gaze, as if at first he didn't believe her.

But then she turned to face the prisoner, who lifted his head up seconds before she held out her own hand and fisted her fingers.

Orthrus bellowed in agony, writhing around his chains like a fish on a hook.

Then he opened his mouth and blood poured from his lips.

“No... no...!” I cried in horror, knowing now that nothing had gotten through to her. As for Garmr, he looked pleased, before holding his hand out to her, which she took with a grin.

“Very well, my love, no one but you will touch him again.”

She beamed up at him, kissing his cheek. And just as I thought I had lost, she started

to close the door, but not before looking back at her prisoner. Orthrus looked straight at her, spat his blood to the floor before grinning. Then he winked at her with a nod of his head.

Which was when her whispered words finally came to me.

The words finally giving me hope like never before.

Because it proved the most important thing. That her heart was not as lost as I thought it was.

Not when she had told Orthrus to...

Play along.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Witch Way to Go

Jared

I don't know why I tortured myself coming back here.

Back to where Dariush had brought me after my brother had sacrificed himself to save me.

Perhaps because it allowed me space to think.

To replay all the things that went wrong over and over again, and to do so away from all those that would tell me I wasn't at fault.

Yet despite their words, I would still ask myself how I could have handled it all differently.

And not just since our time in Hell, but all of it.

I had made so many mistakes when it came to Ella, and I felt like the biggest fool when I thought back to all the times I had tried to deny myself of her.

How I had been lying to myself for far longer than just when she had first turned up at my club in Germany.

Lies told for over the decade, because I had kept my mind tethered to her life.

Ever since she had first danced at Devil's.

I knew every milestone of her life after that.

When she had graduated college, her first job, her second job, the last one when she packed up her newly acquired trailer and moved to Nelson.

And with each morsal of new information I received, I remember feeling the ache in my chest as I turned the page.

Each labored breath taken as I saw what I hoped would be new pictures of her.

A breath that left me on a relieved sigh when seeing no mention of a man in her life.

Of course, I questioned why I felt this way, but before delving deep enough to search for an answer, I would push it down like a stubborn float I could never hope to fully sink.

One that kept popping up throughout my life without her.

Every red-head that walked through the cave of Devil's had my heart hammering in hopes that it would be her.

I remember once, my irrational temper, when a show on the stage reenacted Red Riding Hood once more.

My anger at someone playing her part had me roaring out mid-performance, before threatening Marcus by fisting a hand in his jacket and dragging him closer, warning in a dark tone,

“Unless you intend for someone to die in that red cloak, then never again, do you

understand me?!”

But of course, he had understood. After all, it was why the bastard had done it. To push me towards what he had always known was my destiny. Well, he wasn't laughing now, because that destiny wasn't speaking to him anymore and I knew why.

One more fuck up from me was all it would take.

One chance in a million to get this right.

Just one.

The odds were not exactly in our favor here, and I still didn't know how I was going to get her out of that damn fortress. Because the only way this was going to work was to get her as far away from that fucker Garmr and his dark, sadistic influence. But that was easier said than done.

“They told me I would find you up here.”

So much for my solitude.

At the sound of Lerna's voice I closed my eyes and sighed. This, despite no longer holding any ill will towards her. Not now I knew why she had done the things she had.

The knowledge of such now felt like a three-hundred-year-old burden that had been lifted from my shoulders... finally.

I didn't respond, other than to pat the grass next to me, telling her silently she was welcome to join me. And if anyone ever told me all those years ago that I would be here, sitting like this with all we now faced, I wouldn't have believed them.

We both looked out to the destructive evidence of the battle that had happened not that long ago, one that had laid waste to the once peaceful landscape.

The crumbled face of the father neither of them had ever truly known was like a mocking reminder of how pointless finding him had been.

A sight that no doubt prompted her to say,

“For so long I buried my anger toward him.”

I turned towards her, my arms still resting at my bent knees, and her own were huddled toward her chest, reminding me of a child.

Even after all she had been through, all she had witnessed, she still seemed so innocent to me.

She didn't seem jaded by all that life had thrown at her and her sister.

All that life had continued to take from she had never given up.

I couldn't help but admire her for that.

“Buried it a lot better than my sister ever did,” she added with a laugh, no doubt touched by a particular memory, making me ask,

“What was she like?”

Lerna laughed and told me,

“Would you believe me if I told you exactly like she is now?”

I grinned, preferring that answer over all others she could have said. Because I struggled believing her as someone else. Like two people, one born to love the beast in me and another the man I still was at my core.

“But she was restless, always wanted more than the confines our father had set against us. She always believed it nothing more than a pretty cage, one she dreamed of breaking free from.”

“And was it?” I asked, giving her cause to sigh before admitting,

“It was. Knowledge that I buried deep but she never could. Like our mother, she lived in hope that our father would one day return and set us all free but when our mother died, we finally were forced to admit the truth to ourselves.”

“And what was that?”

She gave me a sad smile, as if to ease my own pain rather than focusing on her own.

“That we had been forgotten.”

I winced, hating how that must have felt like for them. To just be cast aside as if only ever existing for a short moment of Hades’ life. A living memory lost to the years that followed in the wake of them being born.

“The forsaken daughters, she used to call us, and she had been right.”

“So, she broke free,” I said, already knowing this but saying it anyway. She nodded before telling me,

“I guess it was always supposed to be this way, because had we remained, we would be safe, yes, but at what cost?”

I frowned before asking,

“What do you mean?”

“Our mother died of a broken heart, but at least before she died, she knew what it was like to love. And in the end, I too learned what it meant.” The face of the man flashed in my mind and a flickering of what I had seen so far of the two of them together.

“Koro,” I said, making her eyes light up and, no doubt, in the same way my own did whenever speaking of Ella.

“Yes, which was why I always made excuses for my sister after that.”

“Excuses?”

She sighed again before explaining,

“I should have told you everything but, as always, I wanted to protect her.” Her answer surprised me enough to push for more.

“Protect her how?”

“Heartbroken people can do stupid things. Cling to those who are not what they truly are.”

At this I felt my body tense after turning to face her again, the scattered remains of Gods long forgotten.

“What are you trying to tell me here, Lerna?” I asked, bracing myself for what I knew was most likely to be a bitter pill she was going to force me to swallow.

“Anástasi fell in love with Garmr.”

I sucked in a quick breath and shook my head.

“No... he was manipulating her... he was...”

“He was there for her during her heartbreak, the one that your HellBeast caused when he left her. Of course, Garmr didn’t tell her the truth behind it.

Didn’t tell her that he had been the cause, instead telling her that her precious Cerberus was now dead, warping her mind against her reasons for loving him in the first place. ”

My whole body felt tight enough to split skin as my muscles grew in my anger. My hatred growing for the fucker even more than I thought possible.

“He offered comfort in his arms and manipulated her to love him. Made her feel things, see things that weren’t real.”

I frowned. “Made her feel things?”

“I tried to tell her, to reason with her. He told her he had me taken so as to protect me, that I wasn’t a prisoner at all, but it wasn’t true.

I saw so much more than her, and Koro only confirmed my suspicions.

He was only using her as weapon, to grow his army, to increase his power,” she said, but even I could see there was more.

As if she kept trying to gauge my reactions.

As if to assess on how much more she could tell me before I lost my shit to the point of no return. So, once more, I pushed for it.

“Why do I get the feeling there is more you’re not saying?”

“I believe he loves her, in his own crazed way, but it wasn’t enough to choose her.”

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself not to snap and point out that someone without a heart can’t love shit! But in the end I kept a lid on it and instead admitted,

“I don’t understand.”

“As their relationship developed, my sister wanted more... sexually.”

This time I gritted my teeth hard enough that I was surprised they didn’t shatter.

So close to begging her to stop to save myself the pain.

But I was glad I didn’t, as she had much more to reveal.

Because in truth, this had been another bitter and twisted thought that plagued me.

The thought of him touching her, making love to her and now that I knew she would not fight him, I was torn.

I was happy that she wouldn’t be sexually attacked that way, but the thought burned like acid in my gut at the idea of her willingly becoming his.

The painful thoughts warred inside of me, with neither side winning.

“Go on,” I forced myself to say, and I swear that it took everything in me to do so.



“For the longest time, he told her that she wasn’t ready for that step in their relationship, but my sister grew restless.

She wanted to feel something more growing between them, something more than just his flowery words of love.

I guess, in the end, she was looking for what she had with you, or should I say, with Cerberus,” Lerna said, and I couldn’t help but shiver.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

My whole body reacted to what I knew would be important to know. As if something was coming and I only knew the impact it would make, but not yet the cause.

“And did she ever get it?” I pushed the words out, and my questions were getting harder to ask. That was until, finally, Lerna gave me a gift in return for my silent suffering.

“No,” she said after taking my hand and squeezing it, a comfort she knew I would need. I even closed my eyes as I asked,

“Why?” A single word uttered as I felt my heart hammering in my chest.

“Because if he did, he would lose all control over her. Because he would no longer be able to hide his true intentions, would no longer be able to hide the truth of all he had done. All the manipulation, the lies told would be seen through his memories, for every barrier he had erected around her would crumble the moment they were intimate.”

I literally gasped as all the air left my lungs in one escaped breath. One that took time to return to me as she continued on.

“He would have potentially lost his weapon and he couldn’t trust that she would just continue to do what he asked without question.

Koro explained it all to me, how Garmr could never risk it, because he knew if she ever told him no, denied him or worse, turned against him, then he would lose everything.

” I let my emotions overwhelm me at this point, letting my head hang down as I uttered the words,

“So, he has never...?”

“No, for like I said, not unless he is ever willing to lose control over her. But that doesn’t mean he didn’t find another way.” I narrowed my eyes and asked with a single growl,

“How?” She released a heavy sigh before snatching back some of my hope and relief,

“He simply made her believe that he had.”

“What?!” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“He planted images in her mind, times of them together, making love. After that, he would plant other things there, like his ambitions for power, about making her his queen once he had taken over the realm. How he would punish our father’s wife for what she had done to our family.

And after so many years of it... well, it... ”

“It what?” I pressed when she paused.

“It changed her. She was no longer the sister I knew, Jared. And in the end, I barely even recognized who she had become,” she said, and the pain was easy to hear in her tone.

“He groomed her into what he wanted,” I conjectured, my jaw tight, gritting through the thoughts of what he put her through.

“He did and yet, every time I tried to get her to see the truth, it would only end up pushing her away from me. It was why I had no choice.”

“No choice?” I asked, making her shake her head as if she was replaying it all out again in her mind.

“To save her the way I did. To save her from herself. As I knew if given the choice, she would have just kept going back to him. She was in too deep, his influence over her too great to break through,” she told me with a sigh, swiping at the few tears that escaped and were making their way down her cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

She turned to face me and reached for my hand once more.

“Like I said, I wanted to protect her. Protect the person I once knew and loved. Not the bitter, resentful person he had turned her into. I didn’t want you to think of her like that, or anyone for that matter.”

I nodded in understanding, because I had done the same for love.

I had protected the memory of Lerna all this time, despite the doubt my brother tried to cast in my mind.

Because even he had tried to question Lerna’s actions when he first learned of what had happened and how I came to be his brother.

Cerberus may have been Hades’ first protector of the gates, his first HellBeast born, but he hadn’t been the last. My brother had just been appointed elsewhere.

That was until I found him.

“You’re a good sister, Lerna,” I told her, as it was my turn to offer comfort where comfort was needed. She looked off into the distance, her hand falling from my own after giving it a squeeze in thanks. But then she told me,

“And I will continue to be one, which is why it has to be me, Jared.”

I frowned, my expression easy to read as she turned back to me and explained, “I have to be the one to bring her back this time.”

I started shaking my head, but she grabbed my arm, preventing me from getting to my feet, telling me,

“I am not asking, Jared.”

I felt my gaze narrow at the sight of her resolve.

“She won’t hurt me, no matter what I do or say. She would never fight me, which means I am the only one that can get close enough to do whatever it is we need to do in order to make her sleep,” she said, because of course, she had heard the plan, no doubt through Koro, making me ask,

“And what does Koro think of this plan?”

This time, however, Lerna wasn’t the one to answer.

“He thinks it is dangerous and reckless... but, it is also our only option,” Koro said, adding this last part in a strained voice that spoke of his true feelings. Lerna’s hand slipped from my arm, allowing me to get to my feet, as she did the same.

“And if she is taken and used as a tool against Ella in case she fights back against Garmr? What then?” I asked him in a hard tone, one making him clench his fist by his

sides. His jawline jumping as he gritted his teeth.

“That is why she will not be alone,” he told me firmly.

“And what if he sees you? Your cover will be blown,” I said, pointing out the obvious.

“It is worth this risk and, besides, I think by now that ship has sailed, as he has not yet received word back from me and it has been long enough to no doubt suspect my involvement here,” was his reply, making me sigh before shaking my head.

“I can’t let you risk it.”

“And like I said, I am not asking for your permission, I am just asking for your help to achieve our goal,” Lerna stated, her resolve easy to hear as it was the most demanding I had ever heard her.

“I don’t like this,” I told them both, raking a hand through my loose hair.

“No, neither do I, but we have to face facts here, because if she sees you, she will fight, and that could alert everyone to your presence, meaning your chances of getting her out, even after you have somehow managed to make her sleep, would be fruitless if you are caught,” Koro replied, being the one to point out the obvious.

“But if she sees me, she won’t fight, and I will have a chance at getting her out,” Lerna added once again and I knew I had no more arguments left to fight her.

I turned away and looked out to the place Ella had fought me for the second time, before finally conceding.

“Fine, but we still don’t know how we are going to get her to pass out, and quickly at

that... it's not like we have any mortal drugs that would do the trick," I said and just like Koro, a new voice entered in on our conversation.

"No, but we do have magic," Marcus said as he joined us, and well, naturally, he wasn't alone.

"What are you all doing here?" I asked as Dom, Lucius, Keira, and Amelia also joined in the search for me.

"We have news from our spies," Dom said, and I half dreaded hearing it, because I swear, we couldn't take another hit to our army.

We may have been growing in numbers, but we weren't the only ones.

Garmr had been doing the same with his army, and with Ella by his side, we would have no hope, regardless of how many we had fighting on for us.

"What now?" I asked, my frustration easy to hear.

"Something large has been spotted making its way through the veil between this realm and that of Helheim," Lucius replied, before Dom added,

"And with it an army of unknown origins, one traveling toward Thanatos castle."

"What is it? Do we know?" I asked, thinking what more could we be up against for fuck sake!

"We don't know. It is covered under sails, but it is big enough that it takes hundreds of bodies to pull it," Dom told me, making me question,

"A new weapon of war, perhaps?"

“That’s what I thought at first, but our spies think not,” Lucius answered, making me raise my brow.

“What makes them so sure?” I asked, my mind running on overtime just trying to make sense of what else it could be.

“One spy said that he thinks it looks... organic in nature,” Lucius replied, the strain in his words evident to how little he liked this.

“Then I suggest that our plan to rescue Ella happens as soon as possible, and before whatever this is arrives at the castle,” I told them, making Lerna say,

“Koro and I will be ready to leave as soon as we figure out the means for her to be put to sleep.”

“What about a spell of some kind?” Amelia suggested, making me reply with little hope,

“A spell against someone as powerful as Ella... it would have to be something made by a pretty strong witch.”

To this, Lucius grinned down at Amelia, who shared the same look before she leaned into him, crossed her arms in a cocky manner, and told us,

“Lucky for us...”

“...We know just the witch.”



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### Dainty Little Problem

“G

od’s bollocks! Come on, Dainty, I need these jars refilling, before customers think we are having a closing down sale!” This was the first voice we heard after pushing open a black door that held a hand painted sign on it that said, ‘Open to Bitches, Not Bastards!’

The small shop barely fit Lucius, Amelia, and I inside, and with the amount of stuff in the place, I wondered why the woman at the counter had cause to complain.

Every inch of it was covered with everything you would ever need to create spells, along with those already made for customers to buy.

There were shelves full of jars, pots, and every shape of glassware containing Gods only knew what.

Baskets full of bare sticks, feathers, horns, and was that a whole dried demon foot?

Dried flowers hung in bunches near the bay window that was also displaying an array of items for sale.

Semi-precious stones, as large as my fist, along with three-foot shards of what looked like volcanic rock.

A cabinet that reached from floor to ceiling was filled with small, tiny draws.

Too many to count, in fact, and each held an alchemist symbol painted on the wooden handle.

In front of this was obviously a workspace and where most of the ‘tame’ spells were likely cast, as it no doubt held all the items needed for making potions. For the most part, the shop looked organized, if it wasn’t for the random books that seemed to be stuffed into any place available.

As for the person I gathered we were looking for, she had her back to us, holding open one side of a curtain of small bones that looked to have been painted gold.

She also had a riot of wavy hair that started off as navy blue near the root before fading to stark white at the ends.

Some pieces of her loose hair were plaited and decorated with silver thread and brass cuffs.

“Hello, Nero,” Lucius said, making her tense before turning around to face us. Navy-blue eyes that matched the top of her hair widened at the sight of us, until they homed in on the shortest member of our group as she jumped out from behind her Vampire and shouted,

“Surprise!”

The witch called Nero jerked back in shock before running around the counter and meeting Amelia halfway to hug her.

“They grew close whilst she was here,” Lucius told me, grinning at his wife’s joy as both women conversed in an animated way.

“I can see that,” I commented as the two looked quickly absorbed in chatting.

Nero's peach toned lips moved at what looked like a million miles an hour, and Amelia kept pushing up her glasses as her excitement was making them slip down her nose.

The unusual white line down from Nero's chin was painted with symbols down the center, and when I didn't see the paint crack with her words, I realized it was a tattoo.

As for the way she was dressed, her slim figure was wrapped up with a grayish-blue cropped top, that looked as if this look had been achieved from a single, long strip of wide, silken material.

Her wide harem-style pants were tight and low on her toned belly, with floaty material in deep-blue hanging from her waist. This before being gathered tight and tucked into laced brown boots.

Multiple belts also hung low to the side of her hips, with little leather satchels and small bottles in net carriers attached to the straps.

"Not that I am not pleased to see my bestie from the topside, but gotta ask, whatcha doing here and who's Mr. tall, dark, and smoldering over here?" Nero asked, folding her arms and making the white bone bangles on her wrists jingle.

"I'm Jared," I said, introducing myself, and had I not been totally in love and obsessed with my Chosen One and therefore sworn off women, I would have probably expressed my interest in the pretty witch.

"Cerberus," Lucius added, making her eyes go wide as she shook my hand, one she pulled back a little quicker after Lucius's helpful aid on to my introduction. One I nearly rolled my eyes at.

"We need your help, Nero," Amelia told her, making her reply,

“I guessed as much, what d’ya need?”

“I need the most powerful sleeping spell you have, something that will work instantly,” I told her, making her look thoughtful a moment, and if she had been surprised at all by my request then she didn’t show it.

No, instead she held up a single finger, one painted with white and blue symbols like her chin, before shouting suddenly,

“Dainty, get your cute butt out here!”

All eyes shot to the curtain doorway, widening the second ‘Dainty’ ducked his head and walked out.

And well, if the place felt small before, now it felt fucking tiny!

Because Dainty was what we soon discovered to be a clearly ironic nickname.

The Demon was fucking huge. So tall, in fact, that we all looked up in what most likely was a comical way the closer he came toward us.

Amelia even made a choking sound in the back of her throat, at the same time backing up a step closer to her Vampire as if on instinct.

As for his features, a pair of ram’s horns started from his forehead, taking up most of the space seeing as they were as thick as my biceps.

Horns that curled either side of his head with the blunt tips eye-level.

And speaking of eyes, his were an unusual glowing-lime color, with thin slits at the center like that of a snake.

Violet patches like birthmarks marred his pale grey skin, covering his eyes like a mask.

Long black hair hung down either side of his horns with a thin goatee hanging down his chin all the way to his chest. And with a permanent scowl on his face, thanks to the wrinkled bridge of his nose and a pair of thick narrowed brows, he looked about as happy as a Goth at Disneyland.

Now as for his body, holy fuck, the guy looked made from granite, with purple streams snaking across his muscular frame.

I mean, this dude would make my brother look small...

and as for that Viking bastard I knew, then Sigurd would also be looking up at him.

The tops of his horns barely even fit under the ceiling, making him at least eight-foot high.

But the strangest thing about him had nothing to do with his features.

No, it was that he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, of all fucking things!

A shirt that had a gothic print, mixing red hibiscus flowers, with skulls entwined with thorny vines.

This was rolled at the sleeves that looked stretched to the cotton thread count's limit, and was worn unbuttoned for the same reason.

Cut-off denim jeans that were frayed at knees, and a pair of flip flops showcasing his jagged yellow toenails, completed this strange look.

One that now had me wondering if I had missed Hell's vacation memo.

Was there some kind of new holiday destination in Hell that I had never heard of before, or had Nero picked his outfit for him?

"Dainty, meet my friends."

He silently nodded his horned head at us before she asked,

"Do me a solid and check to see if we got any more Hellebores and Shadow Veil Valerian, would yah?"

He grunted before disappearing out the back.

"Gods, Nero, where the Hell did you find him...? And yes, pun definitely intended, and tenfold at that," Amelia asked, making Nero smirk.

"Would you believe me if I told you he just walked in one day and handed me his resume?" Nero said, making her choke back a laugh in response.

"For what? As the guy who deals with customer service?" Amelia joked, making me mutter,

"I sure as hell wouldn't complain."

Lucius scoffed a laugh.

"And he is dressed like a cruise ship rep why?" Amelia said, making Lucius frown down at her and mutter dryly,

"You would know." A bitter comment I knew referred to when his sneaky little

Chosen One outsmarted him, evading him when he was hunting her after she temporarily went AWOL. The look she gave him in return said it all, despite her words that followed when she rolled her eyes and said,

“Let it go, Vampy.”

“Well, I thought it would help in making him less intimidating, although I have to say, his presence definitely helps with my less desirable clientele who are stupid enough to think pissing off a witch is a good idea,” Nero answered.

“Yeah, but why do you call him Dainty?” Amelia asked, after first having to clear her voice.

Nero winked. “You’ll see... any luck Dainty?!” Nero shouted, and what returned her call was the sweetest, and yes, most dainty voice I had ever heard. One that would even put Pip to shame.

And had I not already witnessed the great, massive behemoth, I would have sworn the sound was made by a bloody fairy or pixie! Amelia looked as if she would soon choke as she held in what I could tell was the verge of a laughing fit. As for Lucius and I, we both looked just as shocked.

“We got the Shadow Veil Valerian, but not the Hellebores.” Dainty’s reply made Nero sigh before she looked to me and said,

“Ah well, lucky for us we have something better. However, the tricky part will be the bleeding black hearts, everything else I have here in the shop.”

“Can you acquire more of them?” Lucius asked, making Nero wince slightly.

“Not unless you can wait about twenty-two moon circles,” she replied, making my

jaw tense.

“Why, where is it grown?” Amelia asked now she had composed herself.

“Well, the good news is that it’s not too far from here, and in this realm.”

“And the bad news?” I asked.

“It’s too difficult to get to quickly, and before you ask, no, there are no portals near it, nor can they be created as there is a particularly angry sorcerer that lives on the top of the mountain where they grow,” Nero informed us in a hopeless tone.

“And he prevents the portals?” Lucius guessed, making Nero shrug her shoulders and say,

“Well, he wouldn’t be a very good businessman if he didn’t, not if people could just climb a mountain and steal his shit. Which means he has wards in place acting like a wall. These wards also prevent portals and other magical means of getting inside.”

“Jeez, and he’s a farmer?” Amelia griped.

“Well, some of this shit sells for more than gold does, so again, I am not surprised, and as for his own dark spells, I dread to think how much he sells them for,” Nero admitted.

“And is there any reason we can’t just contact him and buy it direct?” Lucius asked before I could.

“Because the creepy dude only comes out once every twenty-two days, that’s why.

And only a select few are trusted to buy off him before then distributing his goods



onto people like me.

I don't even know his real name, only that he goes by the nickname Hemlock, for obvious reasons," Nero told us, making me growl low at the next fucking roadblock we faced.

"And what about other suppliers?" Lucius asked, giving me hope that was shattered the moment she shook her head.

"There is no one else, not with the type of rare ingredients he grows. Hence why I sell out of this shit so fast," Nero said in a deflated tone.

"So, are you telling us there is no way inside his farm?" Amelia asked.

Nero opened her mouth, no doubt on the cusp of telling us that there wasn't a way, when suddenly she snapped her mouth shut.

Holding up her hand, she silently told us to give her a minute.

Then suddenly she went into a flurry of activity and ran to her shelves, rummaging through them like a crazed witch on a mission.

"Damn, but where is it... nope, not with herbology for beginners... fuck a Gorgon but why is that here...? Sumerian castings... cryptic witch by Mother Shipton... Witch shop owners guide to a life of poverty... ha, not fucking wrong there... fuck, come on, where are you, damn it!"

"Er, Nero?" Amelia called her name as her friend muttered her way through the names of the books she was yanking off the shelf and tossing behind her.

However, Amelia's concern went by unheard as Nero simply moved toward another

shelf before creating her next pile on the floor.

“How to transform men into pigs by Circe... Oh, I have been looking for this one... but wait, what is Jason and the Assonauts by Medea doing here... hmm, Hanging onto hope in Salem by Margaret Jones, nope, not that one either... damn it, I know you’re here somewhere...

Voodoo for beginners by Marie Laveau... oh, and hell no, Baba Yaga can keep her chicken legs... ”

“Nero!” Amelia shouted, finally breaking through just as Nero shouted,

“Gotcha! Here it is, right between ‘Telling an unfortunate fortune and getting paid for it by La Voisin’, and ‘Eating your auntie is wrong by Stephen Arnott’. I knew it was somewhere here.” She came back to us with a piece of tattered parchment in hand.

One that looked so old I swear it was one sneeze away from disintegrating in her hand.

“What is it?” Lucius asked.

“It’s a list,” Nero said as if we should already know.

I glanced at it but that was pointless as I didn’t have a hope in reading whatever strange language it was written in.

“Okay, gotta give us a bit more than that, honey,” Amelia added before my blunt self said it differently.

“Right... so this is a list, a very rare list I obtained by... well let’s just say by questionable means... anyway, back to why... so this is a list of rare items that

Hemlock would be willing to trade for,” Nero told us, her beautiful navy-blue eyes wide with mischief.

“Trade for?” Amelia repeated, giving Nero cause to say more.

“Anything, apparently, and what’s better, it doesn’t have a time restriction on it as he would no doubt give his left hairy bollock for anything on this list.”

“I feel like there is a big but coming up,” Amelia pointed out, and again before I could say something similar.

“And you would be right, as most of this shit is harder to get than what we actually need,” she replied, making me sigh in my growing frustration. She glanced warily at me as, clearly, my name got around in Hell.

“Please tell me there is a point to this, Nero,” Lucius interjected, and for him she grinned before tapping her tattooed finger at one item on the list in particular.

“That there is my friend’s, however, it just comes with a catch... or should I say three of them.”

Lucius and Amelia both looked at each other before their reactions became the mirror opposite. Because as she smiled, he started shaking his head, before groaning,

“No... oh no, my Khuba.”

Amelia’s grin got bigger before replying, “Oh yes, Vampy.”

To which Lucius’s response was to curse under his breath...

“Fucking McBain Brothers.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### The Spiked Monkey

“S

o, which is it this time, the Spiked Monkey or the Devil’s Cup?” Amelia asked, making Lucius frown down at her question and Nero shrug her shoulders.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

A strange look was exchanged between the girls before Nero rolled her eyes and said,

“Come on, let’s try the Spiked Monkey first, I hear they drank the Devil’s cup out of rum the last time they handed in their bounty.”

I had a feeling I was going to like these McBain brothers.

Now as for this unspoken issue that Nero had with these shifter brothers, it started to come to light as we walked towards the pub.

Especially as one name became the focus.

I didn’t know what this Vern had done, but I could hear them talking about him as I followed behind.

For it soon became clear that there was some history between the witch and this shifter.

Lucius seemed to have his own issues with them, as let's just say, he wasn't all that fired up to involve them. But with little choice, we found ourselves in search of the brothers, despite whatever beef he had with them.

Naturally, I didn't give a shit as long as it got us what we needed.

And as for the brother's McBain, all I knew was that they were one of a kind.

Each of them a shifter of a type, a Cockatrice, a Gryphon, and a Wyvern.

Yet, together, they became so much more, having the ability to join as one.

An undefeatable creature that had certainly aided us in the War of Souls that day.

I just lived in hope that they would aid us one more time, as I didn't want to think about how limited our options were if they didn't. Hence why we were walking the cobbled streets and weaving our way through the first town found when entering Lucius's Kingdom of Death.

The crammed collection of buildings all stood different and unique with only one thing in common...

the question of how they were still standing.

Unstable wooden structures were precariously added above stone dwellings.

As if being only an afterthought and a way of adding more space in what was an already overcrowded street.

Most looked to be made from scrap pieces, no doubt made from whatever they could get their hands on.

“Well, that’s cheery.” Amelia was the first to comment when we finally came to stop outside a mismatched building, one built like all the rest.

Although, it had to be said that this one was significantly bigger than those around it.

But she hadn’t been referring to the Tudor-style building, with its warped glass windows that sat in arched wooden frames.

She had been referring to the crude sign above the paneled door we were all standing in front of.

The top half of the building was jettying out from the bottom floor, increasing the space above where they no doubt had rooms for rent.

Rows of curved horizontal beams known as breastsummers supported this upper floor, creating that typical Tudor style.

An important structural feature, seeing as their purpose was to bare the weight above.

Although with the way the whole building was leaning to the left, then I wouldn’t say it was doing a great job at preventing future collapse.

Under this jettying was an arched door, its frame was one made of stone slabs to match the walls of the ground floor.

“I thought the name Spiked Monkey meant he would be drunk, not run through with literal spikes,” Amelia said, looking up at the hanging sign that had a taxidermy monkey attached to it.

One that was wearing a little striped jacket and an eye patch.

It was also pinned into a dancing position with spikes through its limbs and the biggest spike through its head.

“And why is it dressed like a pirate?” Amelia then asked, making Nero laugh before pushing open the rickety, wooden door, whilst telling her,

“Come on, you’ll see.”

And see we soon did, which then led Amelia to once more voice my thoughts before I had the chance.

“Oh... well this is... not what I expected,” she admitted as she stopped dumbstruck in the doorway.

“Welcome to the Spiked Monkey,” Nero said with a chuckle.

One glance around the place and I had to wonder why the pub wasn’t called Davy Jones Locker, as it would have been far more fitting. Fuck, but I almost expected Johnny Depp to come staggering around the corner dressed as Jack Sparrow.

The large room was a mixture of stone and exposed wooden beams, which wasn’t surprising. No, what was unexpected was the pirate theme that decorated the whole place. The bar facing us was a whole wall made entirely of wooden barrels turned on their sides and stacked to the high ceiling.

Each one was tapped and ready to be drained dry.

This matched the barrels that had been used as stools, positioned in front of the long planks used as the bar top of polished wood that was being wiped down by a barmaid, who wore a buttoned-down Victorian-style black jacket.

Her cravat of ink black silk was tucked close to her neck so that no skin was showing.

She also wore a high-top fedora hat which looked like it had seen better days.

The black material was covered in burn marks and scratches, while the thick dark ribbon at the base was frayed around the edges.

Her hair was replaced by that of curling black tentacles that were as thick as my wrist and tapered down into pin points.

Tentacles that were very much alive as they curled seductively around her breasts, with one even coiling in her pocket and one stroking at her chin.

Her skin was white as snow, making the obscure shadows under her glowing bronze eyes appear even darker and therefore giving her an unwelcoming and malevolent aura.

This theme continued with the rest of the clientele, as each demon seemed to gravitate towards the pirate theme in some sort of way. Whether it was wearing the tricorn hat, with its three-pointed embellished wide brims, or some other element referring to the sea.

Demons and Hellish souls of all shapes and sizes filled most of the room and were sat on long wooden tables. And for those that couldn't find a seat, their only option was to stand around more empty barrels. These acted as makeshift tables for customers to set down their frothy ale down.

Old ship lamps hung down from the exposed beams by thick chains, the burnt glass barely clear enough to show the flickering of candles within. Added to this lighting were glowing orbs hanging in net baskets, as well as wax-covered bottles at the centers of each table that held bleeding red candles.



There was also what looked like private rooms off to the right and a stage area off to the left.

A raised platform with smaller round tables arched in front of it for those that wanted to be closer to whatever act was about to play.

The stage was framed with a curtain of fishing nets and used sails hanging from old ship masts above.

On this raised dais was a varying number of demonic looking instruments. Each sat waiting for the band to appear and pick up their tuneful weapon of choice, as clearly these were to be no conventional musicians.

There was a harp made from a giant spine, with its strings wound around each vertebra.

There was also a pair of tall drums made from skin stretched over the top and held into place by crooked finger bones glued to the sides.

A battered looking harpsichord sat off to the side of the stage, with its white keys made from what looked like crudely carved horns, and the black keys were talons curled between them.

Needless to say, one look at the place and it was enough to make me clap my hands once and rub them together.

“Now this is my kinda place.”

Amelia gave me a wry look and said, “But of course, it is.” Which she finished off by rolling her eyes.

“Hey, just be glad Marcus isn’t here,” I pointed out. And I wasn’t wrong, as he would have been the first one up on that stage, band or no band.

“Good point, but hey, for what it’s worth, Uncle, I think you would rock a pirate hat.” I smirked down at her, nudging her shoulder before winking.

“Thanks, kid.”

“Let’s get this over with, should we?” Lucius suggested in an irritable tone.

Amelia and I exchanged a grin before scanning the crowd, one that seemed to move in sync. However, it wasn’t to look at us. No, it was to look towards the stage area as a staggering cloaked figure stepped up to the center, just as the musicians emerged from the sides of the curtains.

A skeletal demon was first to appear, jumping to the stage and tapping his high heels made from barnacles over to the harpsichord.

Tossing the tails of his long jacket behind him as he took his seat on the torn leather stool.

Then he blew the dust off the keys before cracking his bare fingerbones out in front of him.

The next one to take the stage was a human male vessel. One dressed in a Victorian Steampunk outfit, complete with metal top hat and patchwork-leather military style jacket. He carried with him a long ivory horn, one hollowed out with holes drilled at the top.

He then removed a pouch from one of the many belts at his waist before pinching out some tobacco.

He used this to start packing inside the horn before using a long, gnarled stick he plucked from his hat to push it all down.

After he was satisfied, he clicked his fingers and created a flame big enough to light the end between his fingertips.

To which he was then free to smoke it, inhaling it a few times from its narrowest point.

This caused the holes at the top to emit little plumes of smoke, making them rise up in puffs with every note he played.

A female dwarf was up next, stepping towards to the tall drums. A pair that ended up barely under her chin, making me wonder how she was expected to play them.

Like many of the customers, she too was wearing an oversized tricorn hat. One that she kept in place by tying her two long braids up and over it. Something that ended up squeezing the sides of the hat tighter together.

As for the harpist, a tall, gangly, yellow-skinned demon walked out on two peg legs that looked to have been carved from hard coral.

He wore a trilby hat that had a feather sticking out of a spine bone on the side.

A hat that sat off to the right of his head so as to make way for the single bull's horn sticking out of the left side.

His goat-like features gave him a permanent scowl, as if there were a million other things he would rather be doing right now.

Added to this were three other musicians and like the horn blower, they all had

human vessels.

Each of which were dressed similar too, adopting the steampunk style in their own unique way.

Like the slim, tall, Black man whose persona was clearly a crazed watchmaker.

As the time pieces were either hung from each item of clothing he wore or sewn into the material.

This theme continued to his top hat which was covered in time faces, with the minute and hour hands spinning around quickly as if time was on fast forward.

And as for his instrument of choice, he stepped up to a large cello that looked more mechanical than anything else.

It even had a steam pipe coming from the side that was puffing out red smoke rings.

The next was the guitarist, a man dressed entirely in black, with long, twisted black dreads half tied back from his broody face.

He had a trimmed goatee and looked more like a villainous pirate than any other person here.

His black eyes held not a speck of white, making him look void of all emotion.

He swung the guitar around from his back, before stoking the length of the neck and whispering to it, as if it was the love of his life.

That was until he watched with keen eyes as the last musician emerged.

A beautiful female with curly purple hair rioting outwards from the goggles she wore at her forehead.

Her outfit matched her hair, as she was dressed like a sultry saloon girl, with a long ruffle skirt pinned up short at the front.

Her corseted top left little to the imagination as the ruffles at the top allowed for a lot of cleavage to be left on show.

Which didn't seem to be a problem, seeing as half the pub looked to be in love with her... including the guitarist.

As for what instrument she played, she soon brought up her violin, one decorated with leather looking skin folded in such a way it looked like howling souls were trying to escape the hell of her music.

Now as for the unknown singer, like I said, he had already taken center stage.

Which meant all that was left, was for him to nod to the pretty violinist as a signal to start.

Something she grinned at, quickly winking in return and giving the guitarist cause to scowl.

But then the second she started playing the plucky, catchy tune, one by one, the rest of the musicians followed.

And as for the mystery singer, as soon as the beat really started to kick in, he finally revealed himself by tossing his cloak off to the side.

Then as he started belting out the words to some sea shanty song, I heard Amelia hiss,

“Oh, you have to be shitting me!”

This told me instantly that she recognized him. But then, she wasn't the only one, because Nero smacked a palm to her forehead and finally said his name...

“Gods be damned ballocks, Vern.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### A Sea Shanty Shifter

The second the red-headed male started singing some sea shanty song about the devil and drunks, Nero groaned.

The easy grin and playful manner told me the male was having the time of his life up there on the stage, and I couldn't help but once again think about Marcus.

Especially considering he most likely would have been up there too.

I had a feeling that these two would get along swimmingly.

The male's light red hair was longer on top with the sides shaved short, and every time he caught the eye of a girl in the audience, he ran his fingers through it while granting them a wink. A sight that made Nero sigh, as if totally immune to his charms.

As for the rest of him, he had a neatly trimmed beard, dimples, and hazel eyes that had flecks of green.

He had a slim, athletic build, rather than heavy muscles for brute strength.

And yet even when dancing and singing about demonic drunks and playing a flamboyant character, it was easy to see that he was not to be crossed.

The number of weapons strapped to his body said as much, but it was the black and golden bow peeking up from his back that told me he was most likely a true

marksman.

So no, I wasn't fooled by his easy, spirited demeanor but then again, I had never been fooled by Marcus either.

I was right not to be, as the male spun on a heel, giving the crowd a hint of his dangerous side when his thick leather jacket flared out.

Everything from daggers, throwing stars, and a small axe were seen attached to the multiple belts he had hanging from his waist. Belts that helped keep his breacan in place, which was the Gaelic word for tartan.

This was worn folded over pants that tapered down in to a pair of shit kicker boots, much like my own.

"This is great and all, but I have to say, I think I preferred the Posh-Vern spell," Amelia said.

"Oh, this isn't on me, that's all him," Nero replied with a scoff.

"Hmm, he's not half bad. He can definitely carry a tune, I will give him that. Did you know he could sing?" Amelia asked the witch, who just shrugged her shoulders.

"Clearly, there's a lot about Vern I didn't know...

er... not that I care," Nero added after Amelia gave her a sympathetic look and honestly, her fake nonchalant tone was fooling no one.

In fact, she reminded me a lot of Smidge in that regard.

As she too was more often than not trying to fool people into thinking that she didn't



care about Marcus when we all knew the truth.

The more I watched him, the more he reminded me of my best friend in some ways. Especially the way he was now draining his tankard dry while the instrumental part of the song played out. He swayed his body like he didn't have a care in the world.

But I knew better. Others watching him would no doubt think he was drunk, or at least one drink away from falling on his arse.

But they would be wrong.

Something that was proven when one of the demons at a nearby table started hurling abuse at him, shouting about how shit of a singer he was.

But then quicker than eyes could track, the shifter had plucked one of the blades from his belt and threw it at the rude bastard.

It was done with such skill that it ended hitting the bottom of the guy's tankard just as he was lifting it up to his lips to drink.

From my position, I could see the way his bulging eyes crossed as the heckler took in the sight of the blade at the bottom of his tankard.

Then his eyes slowly trailed over the rim to the singer who had just made it clear he wasn't about to put up with his shit.

A cocky wink was the singer's only reply, making the demon gulp down hard.

Naturally, this instantly made me like the guy.

Because it also proved that, despite how drunk he appeared, any assumptions made

with this guy could very well end up getting you killed.

For clearly, he was always at the ready for the fight.

And now every demon in the place knew it too.

Which meant that by the time the song ended, all this Vern needed to do was raise a single brow at the demon heckler, and he was up out of his seat clapping with the rest of them.

The heckler cheered the loudest in order to save his own leathery red skin no doubt.

“Ye Bastards and Lasses, ye hae bin a grand audience, bit th' ale be speaking tae me, sae if ye needs me, ah wull be at th' bar,” Vern said, making me laugh when Amelia screwed up her face in confusion.

“Gods, it was so much easier when he was Posh Vern,” she complained.

“I know, right?” Nero agreed.

This was the second time they mentioned a Posh Vern, making me frown in question, but my look must have said it all, as Lucius slapped a hand to my shoulder and advised,

“Don’t ask.”

We followed the McBain brother as he jumped from the stage and made his way towards the bar.

Slowing his steps long enough to yank his blade from the heckler demon’s tankard as he passed.

His jolly swagger caught the eyes of a group of female demons that looked eager for him to approach.

Meanwhile the band continued to play, keeping up with the pirate theme.

But this time the violinist sang, taking Vern's place.

The famed sea shanty, 'Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest,' soon started to fill the room.

What was surprising was that Vern seemed completely uncharmed by the females that surrounded him, making me question why. Because I had to say, at a glance it seemed out of character as he turned them down one by one.

Although it was true that I didn't know the shifter well enough to really question why. But I had been around long enough to recognize a man with a single woman on his mind. Something that all made sense as he glanced around the room before spotting us instantly.

His eyes scanned each of us all before quickly lingering on a single figure, causing his hazel gaze to glow golden as it landed on Nero.

The females around him were then left to watch as his expression transformed, now sporting the biggest grin as he walked towards us.

Oh yes, I knew that look alright. The shifter had it bad for the little witch.

"Nero! Ye Bonnie Lass, come 'ere 'n' gimme a hug!" he said, making her put her hands on her hips and give him a seething look in return. However, this didn't seem to deter him at all.

Instead, he scooped her up, wrapping his arms around her, lifting her from the floor, and leaving her feet dangling in the air.

“Put me down you... you...” she protested, making him chuckle as she was lost for words. But then he saw Amelia, and Nero’s struggles were answered as he placed her down before taking Amelia by the shoulders, saying,

“Amelia, tis bin tae lang!” Then he hugged her, making Lucius growl under his breath before stepping up behind his Chosen and placing his hands at her waist. This was so as he could pull her gently back a step and into his hold. Then he muttered under his breath,

“Not long enough, unfortunately.”

Vern just grinned like he found the King’s irk amusing, nodding to Lucius in greeting and chuckling, before saying behind his hand,

“Aye a crabbit bratach salach, is he?”

I couldn’t help but laugh when I saw Lucius frown and Amelia admitted,

“I have no idea what you just said, Vern.”

He winked at her and, of course, I knew he had just referred to the Vampire as being a grumpy dirty bastard. But then again, I had spent enough time around the Scottish to recognize the Scots Gaelic.

“A dinnae ken this yin,” he said, referring to me and the fact that he didn’t know who I was. So, I held out my hand for him to shake and told him,

“I’m...”

“Jared Cerberus.” Another heavily accented voice spoke for me, one that came from behind. So, I turned around to find another auburn-haired man, who I instantly took to be another McBain brother.

A McBain brother that Lucius clearly didn’t like all that much. Especially when I heard him growl his name...

“Trice McBain.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

A Shifter, a Vampire, and Goblin walk into a bar

T rice McBain.

At first glance, he was far more serious than that of his brother, Vern.

His dark brown eyes edged with a green ring, narrowed, at the same time his square jaw, shadowed with a few days' stubble, hardened.

His darker auburn hair was worn similar to mine, for it was long but currently pulled back from his face in a messy bun.

And this wasn't the only thing we had in common, as he too sported a scar on one side of his face.

But whereas mine was white and old, his was red and raw. As if it had been inflicted recently.

It started an inch from his hairline, cutting straight down through his left eye, finishing level with his nostrils.

I couldn't help but wonder how he had gotten it, because I had a feeling it wasn't as recent as it looked.

Its shape told me it was most likely from some Hellish means rather than that of a weapon.

A duel pronged line, for the top split into two.

A bident was a two-pronged implement similar to a pitchfork and was actually associated with the god Hades...

Like I said, my curiosity burned brighter.

As for the rest of the man, his long, dark grey cloak couldn't hide the muscular bulk of his physique.

Nor could he hide the sway of his sword as it tented the material at his side.

Strips of leather crossed over his black leather doublet, holding in place the small arsenal of throwing weapons across his chest.

My assessment of the man continued as I spotted the same tartan as his brother was wearing.

One swathed around his waist over black pants, telling me it was obviously from the McBain clan.

The once vibrant red, whites, and greens had clearly darkened over their time in Hell, but their pride in their name remained strong, that much was clear.

As for Vern, as soon as he heard his brother utter my name, he whistled through his teeth, as clearly my name had made the rounds to this side of Hell.

However, before I could comment, the newcomer's eyes went straight to Amelia's.

The scar on his face twitching as it lifted from his grin, his emotions betraying him... he cared for her.

“Amelia,” he said in a far softer tone, making Lucius tense behind his chosen. I could feel the fury coming off him in waves as his hands instantly tightened on Amelia’s waist once more.

However, she simply looked up at her husband before turning in his arms and whispering something directly in his ear.

It was obviously the comfort he needed as he nodded once, before letting her go.

Although, it looked as if he would readily prefer to chew on broken glass before doing so... interesting.

Any other time and I would have been intrigued to know what had gone on between these three, but as it stood, time was not on our side.

So, I stepped back to allow Amelia space as she approached the shifter.

Then she hugged him, speaking his name as she greeted him with nothing but friendliness and warmth.

“Trice.”

At the sound of his name, his stern features softened further, and he hugged her back before his eyes taunted the Vampire over her shoulder.

I had to give it to him, he had fucking balls, that was for sure.

In fact, I was sure Lucius was about three seconds away from tearing his jugular out with his teeth.

“Not that I’m not happy tae see ye, but I hae tae ask whit ye daein' 'ere, lass?” he



asked, talking slow enough so that she understood him.

“We need your help.”

He raised a brow in question.

“Ye in trouble?”

Amelia looked back at me before telling him, “My family is, yes.”

He looked to me then to Lucius. Someone who still looked like he wanted to tear the shifter’s head off and use it as a weapon to beat the rest of his body with.

“Then let’s go somewhere we kin talk... Mira, keys tae a room, please,” Trice shouted to the barmaid who stood behind the bar only twenty feet away.

She nodded just as her tentacles reacted, reaching out behind her and growing from beneath her hat.

They felt their way along the shelf with various bottles of liquor, until finding a black jar tucked behind them.

Once the jar was coiled within a tentacle’s grasp, it brought it to her, before tipping it over into her hand.

A key rolled from inside, straight into her palm before she then tossed it toward Trice, who caught it one handed.

He tipped his head in thanks before holding up his fingers, no doubt indicating to how many drinks of ale should be brought to us.

Or so I fucking hoped so, as this next conversation was most definitely going to need Hell's version of alcohol.

Something that was a fuck load stronger in this realm than any mortal could make.

“Go fin' oor brother,” Trice said to Vern, gesturing to the staircase that must have led to rooms for rent. His brother made a salute with two fingers jerked level from his forehead, before leaving us. Vern's lingering glance at Nero naturally spoke for itself.

“This wey,” Trice said to us, nodding toward a side room that must have been reserved for private discussions.

The curved wall was made from clouded glass bricks, with a carved frame that held a stable style door.

Once inside, we found a large round table with eight spindled chairs positioned around it.

Nets hung draped from the ceiling, with a chandelier made from a ship's wheel that hung down over the table by thick chains.

You could see where the candle wax had overflowed and dripped from the spokes to the table at eight of the different points.

We all took our seats, and soon the same barmaid walked in with a tray holding seven tankards of what I assumed was some kind of mead or ale. A drink Amelia wrinkled her nose at, making Lucius smirk down at her.

Shortly after this, Vern had returned with who I gathered was the last McBain brother.

And what a character this giant of a man was.

In fact, he was similar in size to that of Ragnar, but whereas that big bastard Viking could cut a person down with just a look, this guy was the opposite.

He looked as if he would be booming with laughter as he slaughtered you.

As if nothing could wipe the beaming grin off his face.

Unlike his brothers, his hair was flaming red and reminded me very much of Ella's, making it almost painful to look at.

It was shaved to his skull at the sides, with the top part braided and twisted down his back, its long length reaching his waist. But this matched the rest of him, whereas his brother's had adopted a more subtle look, he had said fuck it and gone full on warrior.

His naked torso looked like a weapon of its own... this guy had muscle on top of muscle. A single shoulder piece of hammered steel, leather, and horn, was held by a crisscross of leather straps over his impressive chest. Gods, but this guy could have bench-pressed my fucking brother!

Interlocking symbols were tattooed over one arm, covering every inch, as if telling a secret story.

Like his brethren, he too wore the same tartan around his waist. Although the belt that held it in place was more of a statement, decorated by his spoils of war.

Fangs, talons, and horns stitched to the leather and worn like a badge of honor.

His pants were made from some scaled creature this realm had to offer, tapered down into a huge pair of boots that were strapped to his calves.

But as terrifying and imposing as his body was, his face told the opposite story.

Light green eyes crinkled at the corners and nearly disappeared completely as he grinned, thanks to his rosy, big cheeks.

Those laughter lines spoke of a being who found the joy in life, no matter the circumstance.

What seemed like a permanent grin was framed by a long red beard, one trimmed shorter around his lips but kept longer at his chin, tapering down into a single plait.

A grin that I will admit was infectious and what most would find endearing.

Something Amelia certainly did, as her whole face lit up at just the sight of him.

And she wasn't the only one, as yet another red-headed warrior was happy to see her in return.

This told me that these three must have spent considerable time with her.

Especially when he enveloped her into a bear hug, nearly consuming her small frame entirely.

Amelia shouted his name, "Gryph!" Doing so with genuine joy in her voice.

"Aye, thare she is, oor bonny lassie!" he replied, his booming voice matching his stature.

But what was curious was Lucius's reaction to this, as he certainly didn't seem as tense because of it.

Not like he had been with the other two, although Trice was definitely the main focus of his growing irritation.

Again, I would have enquired as to why but right now, my priorities were firmly on the mission at hand.

After I was introduced to the behemoth, we took our seats.

Then once the door was closed, I wasted no time in explaining why we were all here.

First explaining what had brought us to this point.

Needless to say, this took some time, needing to continuously pause for long enough to answer their questions.

Up until what brought us to now, with Trice asking,

“Soo, ye wish fur oor help tae fight in this war I presume?”

“As helpful as that would be, we actually have a far more important job for you,” I said, nodding for Nero to continue.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

“Like he said, his Chosen One is very powerful, but right now she is being used as a weapon in this war. She is trapped under Garmr’s influence and the only way to break that and get her out is to put her to sleep, but to do that I need the flower, bleeding hearts,” Nero said, making me nod to her in respect and thanks for her understanding.

“And?” Trice asked, making her sigh before telling him,

“And this is impossible, not without giving my supplier something he wants in return.”

Trice turned to Amelia, addressing her this time.

“Your Vampire is th' richest bein' in th' realm, surely he is guid fur it,” Trice said before taking a drink.

Lucius growled, giving the Scot reason to smirk over the rim of his glass. But Amelia placed a hand on his arm in silent warning to keep his cool, before addressing Trice herself.

“He doesn’t want riches, but something far rarer.”

“And whit micht that be, lass?” Gryph asked after shooting his brother a disapproving look. Which was when Amelia looked at each of them before her gaze landed back on Trice, who was sat between his brothers. Then she told them bluntly,

“He wants a piece of you.”

Trice lowered his tankard slowly and spoke only when it was on the table.

“Come again?” he said in a stern tone.

Nero sighed again before telling them,

“It’s true, there aren’t many things on his list, but a single scale of a dragon is on there and seeing how hard it is to get into the Elemental realm, it’s what makes it so rare... because you three are the only Dragons here.”

Vern baulked, making his brother groan as if they knew what was coming. Even Amelia muttered next to her,

“Oh no, here we go again.”

“Och na, she's dane it noo!” Vern shouted, banging his tankard down and making Nero jump.

“Let it go, Vern,” Trice muttered, as if this wasn’t the first time.

One look at Amelia and I would venture a guess that she had once made this same mistake of riling up the shifter.

“Na ah wull nae. I’m going ta skelp yer wee behind...”

Amelia cut him off by telling Nero,

“Ah, I remember this one, he means to spank your ass if you call him a Dragon again.”

Nero’s eyes got wide before narrowing on the irate shifter.

“Why you son of a...!”

I quickly took back control of the situation before the witch could cast a spell on him and have him chirping like a canary.

“I think we should get back on track here,” I said, making Nero scowl at Vern.

He sneered back at her, muttering under his breath with a huff,

“Fcking Dragon... Cockatrice, Gryphon, and Wyvern... We ur nae dragons, Nero, ye ken this.”

She released a deep sigh and let go of her anger before telling them,

“No, but that is what makes it even better, as you are one of a kind and therefore, he won’t be able to resist,” Nero argued, making Trice grit his teeth. A look that didn’t bode well for us, and Amelia knew it as she interjected before I could.

“I know it’s a lot to ask here, but you don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“This HellBeast’s Chosen One, aye, ye said,” Trice replied, and it was enough for me to ignore the advice Amelia had given me before leaving the shop, telling me to let her handle it. Something that started with me banging my fist on the table.

“No, what’s at stake is Ragnarok!” I exclaimed in frustration.

“The end o’ days,” Gryph muttered as his eyes went wide.

“Bullshit!” Vern shouted in return, giving Lucius cause to add to this with as much determination as my own words.



“Cerberus speaks the truth. For not only do they have an army bigger than Hell has ever known, they also have the means of bringing about the end of days, and once the Underworld falls, so will the other realms... including this one.”

“You’re nae lying,” Trice stated, making Lucius nod before assuring in a tense tone,

“No, I am not.”

“So, you see, without you, we cannot prevent it from happening,” Amelia implored.

“And this woman o’ yers, she is th’ one that possesses enough power tae accomplish this?” Gryph asked me.

“She is but like Amelia said, she is being manipulated by Garmr. Which is why we must get her from his control so as he cannot continue to use her as a weapon,” I told him.

“And whit guarantee dae ye hae that it isn’t tae late?” Trice asked, making me grit my teeth once again.

“I have none, but that doesn’t mean that I am willing to just sit by and let it happen regardless. I will fight for her until my very last breath, as I would for my brother, something I am sure the three of you understand well enough.”

Their eyes widened, prompting me to explain how Garmr also had my brother, and how I was unwilling to believe him dead. Naturally, it didn’t take long after this that the biggest McBain turned to me and said,

“We wull hulp you,” he stated firmly, making Trice look at him.

Vern finished his ale before slamming his cup down and adding,

“Tis bit a piece o' us.”

“This realm haes taken from us again 'n' again 'n' ye still wantae dae this?” Trice asked his brothers, causing Vern to shrug his shoulders and Gryph to say,

“It haes, but we never lost oor integrity 'n' were nae about tae now, no matter what remains of oor souls.”

Trice sighed before turning to us and, thankfully, the argument I was ready with was not needed. My relief was visible and I felt my whole body relax back into my seat.

“We wull need ye lassie tae come wi' us tae bargain wi' this sorcerer,” Trice said, looking to Nero, making Vern tense next to him.

“And whit if it's dangerous?” he was quick to argue, making her straighten and snap,

“That's my decision to make.”

The stubborn cross of her arms did nothing to deter the shifter from biting back.

“The fck it is!” Vern argued.

Trice placed a hand at his brother's shoulder.

“There is na one better tae keep her safe, fur na one wid dare harm her whilst we ur thare. Nae if he wants whit we have tae bargain with,” Trice said, making Nero huff, no doubt pissed that they were talking about her like she wasn't at the table. As for me, I couldn't give a shit.

There was only one question on my mind...

“When can you leave?”

However, my question was interrupted as suddenly an intruder entered the room. A very small one and, yet again, Amelia knew exactly who it was as he staggered inside, making her shout,

“It’s you, the little green pervert!”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Hex For Sale

“ W

hat the Hell are you doing here?!” Amelia shouted in shock after tossing the insult at him.

“Oh, charming that, nice to see you too, sugar tits,” the goblin said in a Cockney accent, and suddenly all the men stood in the room, including me.

Yet it was Lucius who was by the table one second, then in front of the goblin the next, now holding him by his throat up against the wall.

His short little legs dangled in the air, kicking and twitching as he fought to breathe.

“Speak to my wife like that again and I will snap your neck, Hexion!”

“Wife...? You married him?” Trice asked Amelia, who was now bright red, hissing,

“Not the time, Trice.”

“Er congrats,” Nero muttered next to her, nudging her arm.

“Thanks, honey.”

Meanwhile, the goblin was still being choked to death, turning his green skin a lighter shade as his beady yellow eyes started to roll up in his head.

“Lucius, let him go,” Amelia said with a sigh, making him comply before the goblin could pass out. He fell to the ground with a thud, gasping for air and coughing through it.

“What are you doing here?” Amelia asked again.

“If... you... must know... I was... sent here,” he stammered, making me frown in question before turning to Amelia to ask,

“How do you know him?”

“Exactly what I want to know,” Lucius added, making her sigh.

“He is the one who removed the Hex... long story,” she said, adding this last bit for my benefit.

“Aye, 'n' fur a guid amount o' coin too,” Trice commented dryly, to which the goblin had gotten to his feet and was dusting down his little suit jacket, straightening his hat before shrugging his shoulders.

“A goblin’s gotta earn a living.”

“Aye, and na doubt that’s exactly whit he is daein' now,” Vern said, glaring at him.

“C'moan, oot wi' it, who sent you?” Trice asked, folding his arms and looking down at the goblin, his scarred brow raising.

“A strange fellow,” he replied, making Amelia snort before she muttered,

“Kettle... black.”

He just sneered at her, that was until Lucius snarled at him with his fangs out, making the goblin quickly flinch back.

“Eyes on me, cretin,” Lucius growled. A threat that made the goblin’s over pronounced bushy eyebrow hit the rim of his hat. His big nose wrinkled as well as his palm sized ears twitching.

“Describe this strange fellow,” I demanded, getting back on point.

“A lawman, spoke funny, and about as easy to understand as these three here.”

Nero chuckled, giving Vern cause to frown at her, his easy demeanor long gone since the decision had been made for her to go with them.

“This lawman, did he look like a cowboy?” I asked, having my suspicions, ones confirmed when he said,

“Yeah, and called me a Knothead, whatever the hell that meant... think his name was Wild Bob.”

Naturally, Amelia chuckled at this.

“Wild Bill,” I corrected, making him shoot a finger at me and say,

“Wild Bill, that was it. In my defense, Bills and Bobs all sound alike.”

Nero and Amelia looked at each other with skepticism.

“Do they though?” Amelia asked, making him wink.

“Sure do, Chickie... okay okay, no chickie either... sheez, this guy is even more

protective than your Scotty over here... what happened, the hero complex wore off when I took your Hex?" the goblin said, making Amelia slap a hand to her forehead as not only did he now have an angry Vampire to deal with, but an angry shifter too.

I decided to step in and block him before either man could rip his little green legs off like an insect.

"Wild Bill, what did he say?"

"He found me, heard some rumor that I sold a Hex to a shady character, some power hungry son of a God that needed to make everyone see him as the King of Fraud." At this my eyes grew wide, before Lucius snapped,

"Clay... fuck! And you didn't think to question why?!" Again, I kept myself calm, which wasn't as easy as it sounded, as clearly this Goblin had an affinity for pissing people off. But I knew there must have been a reason that Wild Bill had sent him to us, so kept my focus on that.

"Hey don't stab, maim, or shoot the working guy here. I was just trying to make a livin', times are hard, you know, and I got little goblins to feed," he said, holding up his arms in surrender.

"Gods, you're married?" Amelia asked, not even trying to hide her shock.

"Well no, just knocked up some demon over in Tzalmavet but still, she wasn't complainin', not when those little guys turned out like me," he said, doing a little dance like he was the sexiest goblin in all the realm.

"So Garmr, he paid you for this Hex?" I asked, once again trying to keep us on track.

"He sure did, and it would have been enough to retire on had I not lost it all on a

game of Aimitin.”

“Aimitin?” I asked, never hearing of this before.

“Oh, I know this one! Aim. It. In... they say it too fast,” Amelia said, adding this last part to Nero who just nodded. But it did make me wonder just how long she spent here in Hell.

“So Wild Bill tracked you down?”

“Yep, got a message to me telling me that there would be coin in it for me when I did. Although you weren’t at the witch’s shop like he said you would be, but some squeaky big ass fella told me you would be here.

And here I be, so... erm you know... who is gonna give up the goods?

” he said, answering me and holding out his hand, giving it a shake ready for someone to put something in it.

“Man, but get the balls on this guy,” Nero commented, making him wink at her, at the same time grabbing his little package, before saying,

“Don’t you know it, Chickie... Oh fuck, what?

You’re sleepin’ with both of them?” he complained when, once again, Lucius took a step closer like he was going to throttle him for good this time.

But then he wasn’t the only one as Vern also took a step toward him in anger.

Like I said, the goblin obviously had a death wish.



“First tell us what information you have.”

The goblin folded his arms and gave me a wry look in return before telling me exactly what he thought of my demand.

“What? You think I am stupid or something? I do that and you won’t pay me.”

I was now the one to lose my patience... picking him up by his jacket lapels before slamming him against the wall.

“No, you do that and I won’t kill you... Now what did he want you to tell me?” I seethed, letting my voice change as well as my eyes, which I knew were burning with Hellfire as my beast came forth. His features twitched once more before he finally said,

“I know a secret way inside the castle and can reverse the hex I put on this bad dude.”

I dropped him, making him land on his feet this time. Then I patted him on the head in a condescending way.

“There, that wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

He huffed once and started muttering, this time in a different language, no doubt cursing me to high Hell. Not that I cared, as we had what we wanted and that was all that mattered.

“Then lucky for you, goblin, you have some use to us after all and therefore, if this works out and you do as you say you can, then you will receive your payday,” I told him, and finally his eyes widened with glee before he rubbed his hands together and said,

“Great, when do we leave?”

I turned to the McBain brothers and the witch before asking,

“How long will it take you to get to this sorcerer?”

“It’s in the mountain range near the Valley of Torment. So, traveling by foot, a few days.”

To which Trice told her, “We wull nae be traveling by foot, lass.” Then he turned to me and said, “A few hours, fur ah ken th' mountain.”

I nodded and then asked,

“And once you have what you need, how long will it take you to make the spell?”

Nero shrugged before saying,

“Eight hours or so, no more than half a day for it to brew, I’m sure.”

I released a sigh, wishing it was sooner but with no choice but to wait.

“Then I suggest you get ready to leave as soon as possible,” I said.

“Come oan, lassie, ah wull escort ye back sae ye kin git whit ye need,” Vern said, no doubt eager to try and change her mind. Something I could already tell from my brief meeting with the witch, was not going to happen.

“What I need?” Nero repeated.

“Something warm tae wear, it wull be cauld flying,” Trice said.

“I can confirm this,” Amelia added. A comment that didn’t look like it went down well with Lucius, as clearly, he wasn’t being reminded of good times here.

“Then with little else to do on our part, may I suggest us getting a room and taking this opportunity to rest?” Lucius said, making the goblin snigger before nudging him and winking.

“Right, rest, sure, sure.”

Needless to say, Lucius didn’t appreciate the goblin’s wagging eyebrows, even if it made his Chosen One chuckle. As for me, rest was the furthest thing from my mind.

No, what was on my mind was Ella and asking myself...

Would I finally get her back this time?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Darkness on the Horizon

Ella

After what had happened in the prison cell, I felt more hopeful than ever before because, clearly, she had protected Orthrus and I was desperate to know why. But I was also terrified that I would do or say something that would push Anástasi the other way.

I also couldn't get the memory of Orthrus hanging there in that cell out of my head. His beaten body unable to heal had been a crushing sight, one that I knew would pain Jared also.

I couldn't imagine what Jared was going through, knowing how worried and devastated he must be, not just for me but for his brother too.

At least he knew that my life wasn't in any danger.

No, I was too important to Garmr, seeing as he needed me alive.

But as for his brother, Jared had no way of knowing for sure that he was still holding on.

Anástasi had been significantly quiet since the cell and like I said, I didn't want to push her in fear of her once again turning against me.

But it was also like she was thinking on it, as if playing all Orthrus and I had said

over and over again.

At least this was what I hoped for, and she wasn't just convincing herself that we were the bad guys.

Because despite being the same person, another thing I didn't have access to were her thoughts.

Just like Garmr wouldn't let her have access to mine or more like... my memories.

Since being back from the cell, I had time to reflect on my own strange circumstances, because I kept referring to her as a different person entirely.

Although, I knew deep down this wasn't the case.

The only thing I could think of it as, was like an old part of my brain had reawakened and taken over the person I had become.

Like she had been the dormant one for all these years, asleep in a hidden part of my brain. And now, we had switched places.

I had been sent to this void, along with my recent memories, thoughts, and decision-making abilities, all now locked away with no control.

It made me wonder what would happen when I came back to myself, if ever.

Would our memories merge? Would I lose my old self again, would Anástasi be lost forever or merely asleep once more?

I just didn't know.

But I knew one thing... I had to find my way back somehow. Back to Jared, back to my family, back to my life... back to myself. This cage was maddening, with nothing to do but watch through my own eyes at the mistakes she made on my unwilling behalf.

While I was silently contemplating my dire situation, she surprised me.

She wanted to speak to me.

“You have been very silent,” she said, purposely facing the mirror as if wanting to face me personally. But when I didn’t answer her, she huffed. “What is this? So you are not speaking to me now, you have given up your ruse of playing the victim?”

And of course, this was enough to rise my temper, making me react.

“Hardly,” I snapped, and the strangest thing happened, as the briefest flash of relief was what I saw reflecting back at me in my own eyes. Eyes that she had control of. I couldn’t help but cling on to that, spiking my hope just like in Orthrus’s prison cell.

“You still believe that Garmr is plotting to use me?” she questioned, and I had to refrain from a chuckle, instead watching my own lips move as though I was talking to myself.

“He doesn’t need to plot, he is already doing it. He has been from the very beginning.”

Her frown was almost laughable.

“He loves me,” she argued, making me break through enough to grit my teeth.

“Okay, so answer me this, did you volunteer to help build his army or did he ask you

to do that?”

She faltered slightly, as if knowing her own answer would damn him further. Her silence was telling enough that it prompted me to say,

“That’s what I thought.”

“You don’t understand, he needed me!”

I wanted to shout so badly at her, but I knew it would only push her to argue more. So, I decided to draw her out, doing so in a calm way.

“Why did he need you, tell me?” I asked, making her sigh. My shoulders slumped as the tension started to leave her.

“Persephone, our father’s wife, wanted Lerna and I dead. She was amassing an army and Garmr needed to do the same in order to protect us. But my powers weren’t strong enough, so he told me that he knew a way to make me stronger...” Before she could say it, I finished it for her.

“The book of souls.”

“Yes,” she said, and it was in that moment that I knew what had started this whole thing.

It had clearly all spiraled out of control after that point in the past. And it made me realize that this was what Garmr had wanted all along.

For me to take possession of the book of souls and not only regain my power, power that he could then use once again, but much more.

He wanted that version of me back. The part of me that had been so easy to manipulate in my grief and heartbreak when losing the love of my life.

My HellBeast.

That's why he needed to get me back into Hell.

That was what he had tried to do ever since that first attempt of the Hellhounds attacking me.

Throwing one thing after another at us. Until, in the end, it was my love for Jared and my own attempt at trying to save him that led to me to being here now. Led to this point.

Right back to the start.

"It's what he wanted all along," I said, making her frown, so I explained, "He won't let you access my memories, right? He is stopping you in some way?"

"It's not like that, not a physical thing or anything he has done to me. He just told me what would happen if I do."

"Why? What did he say would happen if you did?" I asked, a bad feeling washing over me.

"He told me that there is a chance I will be lost again, lost to you and all the memories I had before in my first life, they would disappear completely as you regained back control."

I groaned.



“Or he is just scared that you will realize the truth, that you will see the life I had before all this and how happy I was? That you will see what type of man Jared is and that he is not the enemy? You will see all the nightmares Garmr plagued me with since I was a child and how he stalked my mind. Because it was the only thing he had the power to do once he knew I had been reborn back into a mortal,” I told her and, for once, she didn’t instantly argue against me.

Although she wasn’t exactly all fired up to accept it either.

Baby steps, I kept telling myself, baby steps.

“We will have no way of knowing if that is true or not, as I am not willing to take that chance. I am sorry but I just can’t do it.”

I couldn’t say I was surprised. So, I decided to use a different tactic.

“So, you trust him... Garmr? You trust his intentions and the reasons he is telling you as to why he continues to make you rebuild this army...? And to exhaustion at that, I might add. You can honestly say you trust him completely?” I asked, and despite her answer, I couldn’t help notice her slight hesitation in doing so.

“Yes, I trust him.”

“You don’t believe he is keeping anything from you?”

“I don’t understand why you are asking me this, I have already told you, I trust him, so no, I don’t think there is anything he is keeping from me!” she snapped, telling me I needed to tread lightly.

“Okay, so let’s prove it.”

“How?” she asked, our voice laced with suspicion.

“Simple, let’s go for a walk.”

She jerked back in surprise, obviously not expecting my suggestion.

“A walk?”

“Yeah, why not? We aren’t a prisoner here, so surely we can go for a walk, right?” I asked, making her frown.

“I feel like this is a trick.”

I laughed, and it was a sound that made it through, something she didn’t seem surprised by anymore.

Something that told me, once again, how much stronger I was getting.

But I had to question, was it because she was letting her guard down with me?

Was she getting more comfortable with hearing my voice...

and to the point that she was even asking for it?

I didn’t yet have the answers, so I decided to lure her even further into a false sense of security by pointing out the obvious.

“What, you think I have somehow arranged for us to be kidnapped? How would I plan anything, I have no control, remember?” I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of our tone.

“Fine. A walk to where exactly?”

“I don’t know, around the castle, just anywhere out of this room that doesn’t include a cave filled with bones,” I said, making sure to point out the fact that this was all we ever seemed to do.

Garmr had been pushing her too hard lately and I could feel her resolve snapping, along with her need to make him happy.

It was as if she could see his growing greed for more.

More bones, more souls, more power to add to his army.

One that was so immense, I knew that if I didn’t do something to stop this, and soon, all would be lost. Because there was no way the rest of Hell could fight against this.

It was just too immeasurable. So, I had to find a way to help somehow, something I knew would never happen if all I ever saw was the inside of this room and those dreaded caves.

“Alright,” she agreed, and I forced myself not to make her sigh in relief, because I didn’t want to tip her off that I did actually have an ulterior motive.

In truth, I was hoping that I would see something that would help me when the time came. That, or I would catch Garmr doing or saying something incriminating. Something enough to have her questioning his own motives. Either way, I knew I had to try.

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And as for Anástasi, she also had something to prove.

It just happened to be something that she never could, because I knew the truth.

So, after grabbing a long black velvet cloak, she wrapped it around our shoulders, covering the moss-green dress.

A dress that I would have usually found beautiful, with its floaty crepe fabric hanging around my legs in layers.

The edges of lace making it flare out in places, whereas the bodice made of the same lace, fit tight to my torso.

This lace continued over my shoulders and along the edges of my cleavage, all of which was pulled tight, thanks to the lacing at the front.

A single brown belt at my waist meant that she could gather the front of her skirt and tuck it up, so it wasn't trailing along the floor.

Neither could it get caught up in the heels of the brown boots that laced up to just below the knee.

Cloak secured, we left the room and walked the dark, dank stone corridors in a different direction than we had been before.

It seemed I had planted the seed of exploring and now she was rolling with it.

Not that it was all that exciting. For what seemed like the longest time, there was nothing but doors that led to dusty bedchambers...

Rooms that looked as if they hadn't seen life in decades.

It made me wonder what this place used to be like before Garmr had taken control.

Had there been parties and gatherings? Other demonic royalty that had stayed here amongst a flurry of activity and life?

I didn't know, but I assumed those rooms once had more of a purpose than just a place to store furniture for gathering dust and cobwebs.

But then we reached one room that wasn't like the others.

Because unlike the rest, this one clearly held life.

The bed had been slept in and clothes could be seen peeking through the open door of a large wardrobe.

There was a plate left on a small table where someone had eaten a meal and left it in a hurry, because the food wasn't moldy or spoiled.

And the room was clean. All of which lead us to believe that this room was in use, but the question now was... by who?

"Let's go inside," I pushed, making her hesitate by the door.

"We shouldn't," she said quietly, as if someone would hear us and we would get into trouble.

“Why not? Are you not to one day be the queen of this castle? Isn’t that what Garmr already calls you, his queen?”

” I reminded her, and thankfully, it was enough to convince her to step inside.

Because she knew, if she didn’t, then once again she would only be adding fuel to my fire.

She would be proving me right. So, she stepped inside, turning to close it behind her so someone wouldn’t notice.

I could have taunted her about doing this, but I didn’t want to piss her off enough for her to back out.

“I have never been in this room before,” she admitted aloud.

“I wonder who it belongs to?” I said, leading her down a path I wanted her to walk, because of course, I had my suspicions already.

“Those are Garmr’s clothes,” she said after walking closer to the wardrobe.

“Why has he never brought you in here, if this is his room?” I questioned, and again, I felt like I was poking at her. Because here I was, just call me the doubt farmer, with my bag of seeds aplenty and at the ready to toss some at her any chance I got.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, and if I wasn’t mistaken, was that hurt I heard in her tone?

She walked over to the bed, which was practically a replica of our own, as was most of the room. The only difference was the theme was red instead of black. For some reason, with the splash of crimson against the black, it only ended up making the

room look more sinister.

However, in the eerie silence, the moment we heard a voice, it hit us like an alarm blaring. Anástasi stopped reaching out for the bedsheets before whispering,

“It’s Garmr.” And she wasn’t wrong because we heard him speaking to someone outside of the room.

“Tell me as soon as they are seen traveling down the mountain pass, until then, I am not to be disturbed.”

“Understood, my Lord Geryon.”

I could feel her frown at the title and I don’t know whether it was the idea of being caught in here or what she may discover.

But either way, she decided to hide, much to my own relief.

Which meant that this time when I spoke to her, I didn’t push for it to come out of our mouth, but did so directly in her mind like in the beginning.

‘That’s strange, why did he call him that?’

Of course she couldn’t answer me, not without being heard herself. But again, I didn’t want to miss the opportunity for another seed of doubt I planted to take root.

She slipped behind a privacy screen and crouched down next to a vanity unit, where we found a tiny crack just big enough to watch what happened next.

Something that quickly grew that seed of doubt into...

A freaking tree!



### The Puppet Master

We remained hidden as Garmr stepped inside and it was strange, like we held our breath at the same time.

But it soon became apparent that Garmr was far too preoccupied to notice that he wasn't as alone as he thought he was.

Hastily, he walked toward his mirror, as if it held so much more than that of his image.

As for the mirror, just like the rest of the room, it was an exact replica of our own. Although admittedly, not long ago ours had been shattered in pieces but that was before Anástasi had fixed it.

She had become frustrated, as clearly, she wasn't used to dealing with a mountain of curly hair, nor did she quite know what to do with it. But then I remembered the vision I'd had of her when back in the temple with Lerna.

Her hair had been straight as a pin, so it was no wonder she didn't know how to tame my mad hair. Honestly, it made me want to chuckle every time she huffed about it or stamped her foot in frustration. In the end, I took mercy on her and told her how to tie it up.

Which meant that the majority of it was currently pulled back from our face, with only the shorter curls that would escape. Curls she pushed back now so as not to hinder our view.

Garmr was about to use this mirror for something other than doing his own hair. And I was right, because the same green swirls of smoke that could flow from our own hands, started to seep from all around him.

Then once most of his body was consumed in this green mist, he lifted a hand toward the mirror. He waved his palm in front of it and started to mutter words neither of us could hear but whatever it was, it seemed to channel the mist.

The result of which meant that it was soon being gathered together, making it more concentrated.

Doing so until it became a swirl of green smoke, flowing with the direction of his hand.

It continued to grow in thickness, making it seem more tangible.

A palpable creature he could control, making it coil around the mirror in the direction he wanted it to go.

This ended with the continuous circling of summoning power, making it now look like a snake eating its own tail.

And we didn't have to question why for long, as suddenly, at the center, an image started to appear.

However, from this angle I couldn't quite make out who it was, but it was clear it was a man. Then Garmr spoke a word neither of us recognized, just before a second voice filled the room.

“Faeir, I am here.”

“Nier... right where you need to be. Now tell me of your progress,” the voice said, making me wonder what those foreign words meant.

“The rest of the army is on their way with the remains you sent. They should be arriving within the hour,” Garmr informed him, the eagerness in his tone easy to hear.

“Good, then our plan is nearing its fruition and with it, the end of our enemies.”

We saw Garmr bow his head, making me realize who this was... this was the real Puppet Master. The one who had been pulling the strings all along.

“When will you arrive?” Garmr asked, instantly giving me a bad feeling. Because it was one thing having Garmr to deal with, but an enemy of unknown power... was bad... very, very bad.

“When I can link to my kin, then I will be strong enough to make a portal, for this is one battle I do not wish to miss,” he replied.

“And one we will not have to retreat from this time,” Garmr added with an edge of bitterness.

“No, but I trust it was necessary like you believed it was, for you needed more of a reason to present to the girl to bring her to heel.”

I felt my counterpart practically tense every muscle we possessed as they began to speak about her.

“Anástasi has done well, for her powers grow daily,” Garmr praised, making Anástasi clench our teeth.

“You sound like a proud father,” the unknown being commented with a scoff.

“I am proud, for we could not have done this without her, you know that” Garmr argued, prompting an amused chuckle from the other side.

“Don’t worry, I will recognize her status and connection to you once our goals have been accomplished. Have patience, for you will soon be able to claim her fully like you have always wished... along with the feel of her cunt upon your shaft.”

Anástasi had to cover her mouth as she gasped. Whereas I just felt like shouting BING-FUCKING-O! Because there it was. What I had been waiting for. For Garmr to damn himself and, thankfully for me, he only continued to do so.

“This is not just about rutting her!” Garmr argued, making whoever it was laugh.

“No? Then I am curious, how does she feel about waiting and knowing the reasons why you can’t claim her yet? That it would strip you of your control?”

I felt tears fill her eyes as the vision of the man she loved turned blurry.

“I have my ways, so do not question my ability to control her, for she believes what I want her to. I need not remind you of our deal, for she will be my Queen, Faeir,” Garmr threatened, and for a moment Anástasi turned her head away and closed her eyes, causing more tears to fall.

“Yes, yes, you will have a taste of her and for real this time, for I do not care how much you plunder her cunt after I have all the realms under my control.”

“And they will be, except this one, for the Underworld will be mine!” Garmr vowed in a sinister tone.

“And you may have it just as we planned. For it is your right, your heritage deems it so, Nier. And what’s more, we will keep it, for even Lucifer himself could not stop

us, not when we have Fenrir leading the way.”

“He will only listen to you, remember that” Garmr said as if needing to remind him of this fact.

“And I will be there to control the beast, have no worry. You just get your little summoner to do her part and I will do the rest.”

Garmr nodded.

“We are near, Nier, and will soon be rewarded for eons of patience, for soon the Gods will fear us once more, when they kneel and bleed at our feet.”

A shudder ran through both of us at this, which meant that it was most definitely sinking in with Anástasi as to what this truly was. That I was right... we were nothing more than a weapon.

“Fear us, they will,” Garmr replied as way of goodbye, and with a slash of his hand, the green snake was broken before it evaporated completely.

As for Anástasi, she was visibly shaking, making me say,

“Come on, just keep it together for a little longer, be strong, honey.’ ” Because I couldn’t help but feel bad for her, feeling her devastation for myself. The way our fists clenched and every muscle tensed with her lip quivering. Because now she knew.

It had all been a lie.

A lie Garmr could no longer deny. And as for me, I had achieved my goal, but I couldn’t help but ask myself... at what cost?

But then something strange happened because instead of celebrating in what was soon to be his victory, Garmr sat on the bed and lowered his head into his hands, as if grief stricken.

It was such a strange reaction that I couldn't help but think it humanized him.

It was if he was at war with himself and it confused the hell out of me.

Especially when he pulled back and looked down at his hands, like he was looking at all the blood he was about to spill dripping from them.

But then the moment was shattered when there came a knock at the door, making him sigh before standing.

“What is it?!” he snapped, his frustration easy to hear in his sharp tone.

“My Lord, the convoy has been spotted, along with the army.”

Again, he sighed before making his way to the door. But when he paused long enough to look directly our way, my heart would have stopped had I been in control of it. He even made a step toward where we were hidden, but paused when the voice behind the door asked,

“My Lord?”

This was enough to jar him back into action, and he shook his head. No doubt believing whatever he felt or heard was nothing. He finally left the room, and I felt our body deflate back against the stone wall as all the air left us.

I started to get worried when Anástasi didn't move or speak, telling me that she was trying to process all that she had just witnessed. But I knew I had to try and get her to

act.

“We need to leave here.”

I felt her shaking her head, her emotions overwhelming her.

“Come on, honey, we need to get back to our room, at least before we are discovered missing,” I told her.

“It meant nothing... I meant nothing,” she replied in a heartbroken tone.

I couldn't help but feel bad for her, whereas before I might have reveled in this realization. But now, I couldn't help but share in her pain. So I made the decision to trust myself to do what was right.

“I think it's clear someone else is pulling the strings here, and as for Garmr, he is doing all of this with the promise he gets to keep you.”

“Why do you defend him, after all, isn't this what you wanted?” she asked, her voice near breaking as her tears fell.

“I am not defending him, his actions, nor his lies. But I think his motivation isn't as clear cut as using you to take over the realms. You're just his prize for doing so.”

“He is using me just like he always has,” she replied, making me sigh.

“And now you know the truth, so it's time to ask yourself, what are you going to do about it, Anástasi?”

Her head snapped up and I felt the rush of anger rise from her as she gained her feet.

“I will tell you what I am going to do... I am going to destroy all he made me build,” she said in a dark tone, making me quickly say,

“Whoa, okay let’s not get all kill crazy here. We need to think about this,” I told her as she started walking toward the mirror, and the sight of her determination reflected back. The hurt in our eyes morphed into hatred, soon making them glow a sinister green.

“There is nothing to think about. He has used me as a weapon, just like you said he did. He controlled every element of my life for his gain. All his lies of loving me, of doing this for me, to keep me safe, it was all just a way to manipulate me to win his war,” she said, facing herself as hot, fat tears ran down her cheeks.

“What are you going to do?” I asked in a fearful tone, hoping I hadn’t made a mistake here.

“I am going to end this... going to end this Puppet Master,” she said, flicking out her fingers and smashing the glass on the mirror, before turning away from the broken shards.

After this, we left and instead of walking back to our room, she started to make her way toward where the balcony was.

The one Garmr had forced me onto the day before I regained my powers.

The one that showcased his army of Hellhounds and demons alike.

An army that, by now, I knew had grown exceptionally.

“Okay, we need to take a minute here, because we don’t know what he is capable of, Anástasi,” I argued, trying to reason with her.



“He cannot beat me,” she stated in a hard tone.

“Maybe not, but we have never had to fight him, so you don’t know that for sure.”

“There is only one way to find out,” she snapped, making me start to panic.

“Please, Anástasi, let’s not be hasty, we need to plan what our next move is.”  
Because I was sure it wasn’t this.

What was she going to do here, snap his neck and toss him to his army below the battlements?

“My next move is to destroy what he loves the most,” she vowed, and I had to admit, her deadly tone was really starting to worry me.

“No, what we need to do is play this smart. Because if we show our hand too soon it could backfire.”

When she didn’t respond but just kept walking to where we knew he would be, I continued to plead with her.

“Listen to me, Anástasi, he forced me to take hold of that book, he had the power over me in that throne room, so what if he holds that same power over you?” I asked, trying to get her to see what I really didn’t want to say. But hoping she got there on her own.

Garmr had made one thing about their relationship very clear, and I knew it was the part she would struggle with the most, just as I had but for very different reasons.

“He doesn’t,” she argued, and I wanted to scream in frustration. Something I might have done if I didn’t think it would send her over the edge.

“But we don’t know that! What if he can force you to do whatever it is this bad guy needs you to do...? We will have given up our one and only chance at escaping,” I tried again, but it was no use.

“Escape, I have no wish to escape!” she argued, making me inwardly wince.

“But we have to! We have to get back to Jared and help them fight this war, they will lose if we don’t!” I told her, my own tone desperate and pleading.

“There will be no war, not when he has no army to fight, an army I will soon take from him,” she said with so much venom, I could feel the power pulsating beneath our skin. Which was when I knew I had no other choice left. I had one last card to play, and I knew it would be the most painful yet.

‘Please, oh god, please, Anástasi, I implore you, don’t do anything rash here, this could be our only chance... he can obviously control us, think about it, think about what he has made you believe has happened between you, when it hasn’t.’

At this she finally took pause, and a hand reached out to the wall to steady herself. Because it was clear that she had blocked this part of the conversation out until I had just reminded her.

“He... he controlled my mind... made me believe he had... that he had made love to me.”

I felt our eyes close as more tears fell. Because she wasn’t wrong... he had done that. There was no other way to spin it, not after the conversation we heard.

It was obvious now that he couldn’t have sex with her.

Not unless he wanted to lose his control over her.

But as their relationship progressed, how could he tell her that?

How could he tell her that he couldn't be intimate with her because it would take away the one thing he needed from her the most...

the guarantee of his ownership over her power.

So, he had obviously found another way... to make her believe that they had made love.

Despite how bad I felt for her, I couldn't say that I wasn't elated.

Because this was what I had struggled with the most. The idea that my body wasn't my own and it was being touched by the enemy.

As if I was being willingly raped, but with half of my mind giving him consent.

But now, to know that my body was still my own in this way, was like a gift and eased my own heartache.

It soothed my battered soul and centered it once more.

Yet I knew that ultimately...

It came at a cost...

Anástasi's heartbreak.

When Hope is Blinding

“ I

am so sorry,” I told her, making her scoff.

“No, you are not.”

“Okay, so you want the truth? Then no, I am not sorry to find out that he didn’t rape me,” I said, and she flinched, as if she only just thought about it that way. “But I am sorry this knowledge is hurting you and that is the truth,” I added as she sniffed back fresh tears.

“I believe you,” she told me softly, making me sigh.

“It’s why we can’t risk letting him know what we heard. We don’t know what he will do, but we do know what he can do ... because if he can make us believe whatever he wants, then just how far will he take that?” Finally, this was enough to get her to agree with me.

“You’re right, we can’t.”

My relief was one she felt as a shudder went through us both.

“What do you suggest we do?” she asked, after she had wiped her tears and no longer needed the wall to support her.

“We play along until we know it is safe to escape. We then get to the camp and tell them what we know is coming. Then we face Garmr on the battlefield and take from him all he holds dear... his power.”

She nodded but before we could say any more about it, a guard came from around the corner, clearly surprised to find us there. Anástasi stood straighter and, thankfully, was quick to act the part.

“My Lord is looking for you.”

“I was just in search of him,” she replied, impressing me with her impassive tone, especially considering what I knew she was going through internally.

“This way,” he said holding out his arm, prompting her to follow.

Of course, she knew where he would be, so she strode past the guard, determination in her steps.

As for me, I was on edge, hoping that she could hold it together long enough to act the part.

At least long enough for us to find a way to escape.

I honestly hadn't felt hope like this before.

It was as if I was so close to getting back to Jared, I could almost touch him.

Something that couldn't happen soon enough because the second the light was shining at the end of the tunnel, I could hear the thundering of his army. And I was right, this time it was at least three times bigger than the one before it. One that was about to get even bigger.

The second I stepped onto the balcony, there was Garmr, staring out toward the distance.

A place our own eyes turned to and like a scourge upon the Earth, a shadow had befallen the land.

Wave after wave of soldiers made their way through the valley...

they just kept coming. An endless army of bodies that would soon join the thousands all lined up below the battlements.

But that wasn't all.

"Ah, my dear, isn't it a glorious sight?" Garmr said, and I felt her tense behind him. So, I encouraged silently,

"You can do this, I am here with you, you're not alone in this... just relax or he will know something is wrong."

The moment I felt her relax, I knew it had worked, and she stepped up to him when he held out his hand to her.

As if on instinct, he pulled her to the front of him before wrapping his arms around her from behind.

I could feel our joint heartbeat pounding rapidly, making me realize that she had been sharing so much more with me these last few days.

She had been trusting me more and more and now since witnessing Garmr's betrayal, I knew all doubt about me had gone and vanished.

“More men? I didn’t think we would need any more than what we already have?” she said, her voice tense but in the height of his own glee, he didn’t pick up on it.

“Just a precaution, I assure you. For this will be a war we will win and when we do, this realm will finally know peace under our rule. It is nearly over, Anástasi, we are so close,” he told her, giving her a squeeze but, of course, we now knew what that really meant.

Again, I had to give it to her, I could feel the anger pulsating off her in waves, but she kept her cool and didn’t react.

“Ah, here it comes,” Garmr said when something new could be seen appearing over the horizon.

Something darker than all the rest. Something so big that it cast a shadow on all those around it.

Giant grey sails covered it, creating a mound so big that it took hundreds of bodies to pull it on the colossal platform.

Wheels bigger than buildings tore up the land as it was heaved along the road, the valley floor only just big enough for it to fit through. Whatever it was...

It was something monstrous.

“What is it?” Anástasi asked, her tone as fearful as my thoughts were. Because I had a feeling this was the last job Garmr had in store for Anástasi. The one that had the power to end it all.

“It is our secret weapon,” Garmr said, his voice in awe of the sight.

“I thought that was me,” Anástasi said bitterly, letting her feelings slip and making me flinch. At this he gripped her chin and forced her gaze to his.

“Are you alright, my dear? You seem... different.”

“I am just tired,” she replied with a sigh.

“I know, my love, you have been working very hard for our cause, but I promise you, it is nearly over now,” he told her.

“Just smile at him, don’t let him break you, Anástasi, beat him at his own game,” I encouraged. To which she took my advice because I felt her grin up at him, even going so far as to grant him a kiss on the cheek.

“I know, and I look forward to the day when this is all over,” she told him, but it was only I who felt the true weight of those words.

“Then may I suggest that you go lie down and rest, for I am afraid I will be in need of your gifts once more and this time, it will be a true test to your powers. I want you ready,” he said, making her sigh once more before she nodded, no doubt trying not to snap and lunge at him with her nails.

To scream and shout and accuse him of all his wrong doings.

To lash out at him before making him pay. But we both knew now was not the time.

We had a war to win, but that battle was not today. So, I felt her nod her head and remain unmoving as he kissed her, the tender gesture now sickening us both. But he must have sensed her reluctance because he pulled back and gave her a look of concern.



“Are you sure you are alright?”

“Like I said, I am just tired,” she replied in a passive tone, forcing him to nod and let it go. As for me, I was eager for her to leave while we still had him fooled into believing that nothing was amiss. Which was why the moment he released us, I felt as if she could finally breathe for us again.

“You did well,” I told her the second we were free of him and making our way down the tunnel.

However, instead of answering me, she started to run back to our room, her emotions taking hold. The bellowing of our skirt flowed behind us as she raced through the castle, desperate to get herself behind closed doors. Again, my heart broke for her because I remembered the feeling all too well.

After all, what had I done when hearing how the man I loved could never truly love me back?

I had danced until my body had given up.

Because despite how much I hated Garmr for what he had put me through, for all her faults, Anástasi had fallen in love with him.

Fallen in love with her captor. Call it Stockholm syndrome, call it desperation, call it rebound love, whatever label it held, its outcome was always going to be the same.

Devastation of the heart.

Betrayal.

Grief.

Anger.

She was now feeling them all and as she ran, I felt every single one of them right alongside her. Because she was now at her most vulnerable. Which meant that she was letting me in and soon I knew what would happen.

She would give me back control.

But taking it forcefully right now felt wrong. It felt like I would be just another person taking advantage. Another betrayal. Right now, she wouldn't see it that way... but one day she would.

She started sobbing the second she was inside our bedchamber, finally speaking to me again.

“Why don't you just take me!?”

“That's not how this works, Anástasi,” I told her sadly.

“This pain... this pain, I don't want it! Just take it... take it away, please,” she pleaded, making me sigh.

“Before today I would have, trust me, I am desperate to get back to who I was before, but our mind has been split in two... who knows, perhaps it always was. But I couldn't live with myself knowing I had just cast that piece of me aside.

You deserve to live just as I do. I want your memories just as much as I want you to have mine.

I want to be whole again. To be Ella as much as I used to be Anástasi, and I can't do that by just casting you out.

Locking you in some hidden box in my mind like before,” I told her, making her sob harder as she slid to the floor, holding herself tight in a protective ball.

“I want to be whole again too,” she said, and I would be lying if I didn’t say it was a relief.

“Then let’s do this together.”

“But how?” her desperate voice asked.

“I wish I knew, but we can’t give up hope. And we can’t let Garmr win,” I told her, making her nod, her resolve slowly returning.

“No, we can’t, as you are right, we must leave,” she said, getting to her feet, her determination giving her strength once more.

“We can leave through the caves... surely, if Jared got here that way, there must be a way out.’ ”

“But we will be seen,” she pointed out.

“Exactly. We will be seen but our presence there is so common that no one should suspect seeing us. Then when the opportunity presents itself, we make a run for it,” I told her.

“That actually might work,” she agreed, making me chuckle.

“I don’t know why you’re shocked, we do have the same mind, you know,” I teased, and it actually made her laugh. Something that felt like a small victory. One that didn’t last, however, when I reminded her, “But first we must free Orthrus.”

She started shaking her head.

“As much as I would like to, I am not sure how we could get away with it and escape ourselves.”

“Why not? We can’t just leave him here, we don’t know what Garmr would do to him if we don’t help him!” My cry of panic made her wince and hold her head, for once making me apologize, “Sorry, I don’t mean to shout but you have to understand, he’s like a brother to me, Anástasi.”

“I understand, but what if we could help him in another way?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if we could heal him enough that it gave him time for others to rescue him?” she asked.

“But Garmr could just outright kill him in his anger,” I was quick to argue, but then something came to me. An idea that might just work. “What if we pretend we have been kidnapped?”

I felt her frown before asking,

“How would that help?”

“Well, we could leave a note of ransom.”

At this she shook our head and said, “I am afraid I am still not following.”

“If the ransom is from Jared saying if Garmr wants you back, the exchange is for his brother, then he will have no choice but to keep him alive... right?” I asked, making

her grin.

“That could work, but Garmr knows my handwriting.”

“But he doesn’t know mine,” I told her, and in her eagerness, she raced over to a writing table. Then she lifted the top and blew off the fine layer of dust that had gathered over the things we would need. The sight of the quill and ink pot made me want to wince.

“Er, I hate to say this, but calligraphy has never really been my thing.”

“Don’t worry, I will help you, but you will have to take control of my hand like you have done before,” she offered, and this time we both gave in to the impulse to grin.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I said, and again that dangerous hope burned ever brighter.

I just hoped that in the end...

It didn’t blind me from the truth.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### A Soul too Far

A little time later, we had our letter all written out and placed where it should be found.

It was obvious that Garmr was busy with the new addition to his army, whatever it was, because, lucky for us, he hadn't come to our room...

no doubt believing Anástasi needed her rest, as clearly, he had something big planned.

So, we decided to take our chance and make our way down to the cells. It turned out, it was a good job that we did, because Orthrus was in an even worse way than before.

"Even more of his lies," Anástasi hissed because it was clear that he had been beaten even more since Garmr assured her that he wouldn't be touched.

"Oh God, Orthrus," I cried out at the sight.

His wrists looked torn to shreds where he had clearly fought against them during this last beating.

The flesh on them looked raw and bloody, just like the rest of him.

His face was near unrecognizable. There was barely an inch on his body that didn't have injury inflicted upon it.

My heart broke all over again at seeing him this way.

“We can’t leave him like this!” I implored.

“And we won’t,” she assured me, stepping inside and making me thankful they considered his escape impossible enough that no guard was stationed at his cell. As for the rest of the prison, it was empty, so Garmr must have thought there was little point in wasting the man power down here.

“Please tell me he is still alive,” I said, as he hung lifeless and unmoving. A sight that would no doubt haunt me for the rest of my days. He looked... oh Gods...

He looked dead.

But then Anástasi told me,

“I still detect life but he doesn’t have long. We must act quickly.”

“Yes, please do whatever you can, please just save him,” I pleaded, glad that we had made it just in time to save him.

“First, I need to change the spell on the shackles, hopefully they won’t notice. I just hope he is willing to act along.”

“He will, just hurry.”

She nodded and lifted her hands up over the shackles.

A green glow emitted from her palms seconds before the symbols started to burn brighter.

Then I watched as they began to rearrange, first merging together before splitting and creating new markings.

And whatever she did must have worked because suddenly, Orthrus took a deep breath in, scaring me at the sound before relief once more flowed through me.

“Oh, thank god!” I shouted, making Anástasi smile before cooing in a soothing voice,

“Easy now, HellBeast, take steady breaths.”

“Coo...kie?” Orthrus said in a broken voice, making my heart ache at the sound.

It was as if he had been made to swallow acid. Something inside me snapped and I stepped up closer, our movements for once my own. Then I cupped his face and told him,

“It’s me,” and it was, because my own voice broke through, as if Anástasi was letting me take the reins.

“I can... feel myself healing,” he told me, as if shocked. Which told me that whatever she had done, finally allowed his power to heal to break through.

“Yes, you can heal now but only internally, we still need them to think you are weak and beaten,” I told him, hating how that sounded. Finally, he opened his eyes, the swelling in both of them receding enough so he was able to do so.

“You have a plan?” he asked and I smiled, despite how sad it truly was, because I just wished that plan included getting him out of here right now.

“When do I not, big guy?” I said, making him grin, despite how painful it looked, cracking his skin further.



I explained the plan, and he agreed that it was the only way, encouraging me to escape as soon as I was able. The question of taking him with me didn't even leave his lips, as I knew it wouldn't.

No, his only concern was my safety, telling me about the tunnel in the cave where the bones were.

He told me the way to go and that it would lead to a temple where they had broken into.

But I wouldn't leave until he assured me that if it all went wrong and they tried to kill him, that he would fight back.

That he would do everything in his power to survive and escape them.

This moment ended between us with me placing my forehead to his and whispering with tears streaming down my cheeks,

“Survive, my brother.”

To which he closed his eyes and whispered in return,

“Promise me you will tell my brother, I love him.”

I gasped, knowing what he meant.

“You will be able to tell him yourself soon,” I said resolutely, but still he continued.

“Promise me, Ella.”

I swallowed hard and told him, “I promise.” My voice nearly breaking as I cried.

“Love you, my sister,” he said softly, and again he was breaking my heart.

“I love you too,” I said, and then he pulled back enough to jerk a chin to the door and say,

“Now go, while you can.”

I nodded, sniffing back my tears before walking to the cell door, hoping and praying to every god out there that I was making the right choice.

Orthrus thought I was and so did Anástasi.

But then if I was, why did it feel as if I was tearing my own heart out?

How could I ever face Jared again, knowing I might have caused his brother’s death?

This time, it was Anástasi’s turn to console me as I released the control I had on our actions.

“I am sorry that we can’t do more for him, but he was right, if we took him with us, we would have less chance at escaping,” she said, wiping her own eyes as I continued to make us cry.

“I know, it’s why it’s so hard because he’s ...he’s my family.”

“Trust me, I understand... all too well, and now I know that it was all through my own foolish actions,” she admitted, referring of course to Lerna.

We left the prison and instead of going back to our room, we made our way toward the caves in hopes Garmr wouldn’t be there.

Of course, if Anástasi was seen, it wouldn't look out of place, but that didn't mean that the tension wasn't there.

The feeling that we were sneaking around and trying to escape added that level of fear that we would get caught.

We just needed to get far enough that it was safe to make a run for it. The moment we were through the tunnel that opened up to the cavernous space of the hallowed mountain, the gasp came from both of us.

Because now instead of mountains of bones, there was the giant remains of a single being in their place.

Of course, Anástasi had resurrected all the Hellhounds that Garmr had been storing here, so we had expected it to be empty.

What we hadn't expected was the giant remains of a creature.

A giant and monstrous wolf... or more like, the remains of one.

It was clearly dead, although this looked like it could have happened recently, because it wasn't skeletal and was far more than just decaying flesh and bones.

Its midnight black fur was thickest around its head, with his black lips pulled back as if he had died growling. Its snout wrinkled in anger, with jaws big enough to swallow a bus and with its teeth at least twice my size.

If I thought Jared in his HellBeast form had been big, then this creature was something else!

His paws could have crushed buildings and its tail could have taken out city blocks.

That was if it had life, for it was clear something had happened to kill this beast. That was unless it had just been put under some kind of spell?

But its chest wasn't rising and falling, meaning it wasn't drawing in breath, so I didn't know.

Although I did suspect it had something to do with all the chains that was wrapped around its body.

Each of them elaborately made and etched with what looked like Norse symbols, as I recognized what runes looked like.

"Gods, what is this?" Anástasi uttered, but then the second we heard a voice behind us, we gasped for a new reason.

"This is the mighty Fenrir," Garmr said, placing his hands on our shoulders, making us shudder at his touch.

"I hope you are feeling better, my dear," he said, leaning down to place a kiss at our cheek, and I felt Anástasi tense. Because it was clear we had missed our opportunity to escape, meaning we would have to find a different way. But then she started shaking her head as if she knew what this meant.

"I can't... I can't do this, Garmr," she stammered, and it was enough that I caught up with what he meant by us getting our rest.

"I believe in you," he told her reassuringly, but she continued to shake her head, pulling from his hold and turning to face him.

"It's too big, I can't do it!" she argued, making him frown down at her before folding his arms.

“Yes you can.”

“But why?! You don’t need this beast to win this war! How much power to do you need...? How much do you need to take from me!” she shouted, letting her emotions take hold, and I was unable to stop it.

His features twisted and for a fraction of a second, guilt and pain was all I saw. But then just like someone had snapped their fingers, it was gone and steely resolve took its place.

“Are you denying me?” he asked in a dangerous tone.

“Am I not allowed to do so?” she argued back, and any other time I would have applauded her. Garmr sighed as if this was not what he wanted, and this was all very taxing on him.

“You must understand, that once you do this, then our victory will be absolute. I am not only doing this for myself but for us, Anástasi,” he told her, and I couldn’t help but scoff silently, something she agreed with because her tone was scathing.

“And I am asking you not to.”

He jerked back a bit, like he had been struck by her hand.

“You wish for me to lose the battle and put you at risk?”

“No, I am telling you, do not ask this of me!” she snapped, throwing out her hand toward the colossal dead beast he wanted her to resurrect.

But this was when he changed on a dime, because he stepped closer, gripped her chin, and forced her to look up at him. Then he growled down at her,

“Then I will not ask.”

She relaxed, but I knew better than to trust his words, because his dark tone spoke of something other than relenting. It spoke of a sinister promise.

“Thank you, Garmr,” Anástasi replied, but this made him narrow his gaze before he suddenly spun her to face the beast. The chained monster that lay at the bottom of the mountain floor below where we stood.

She gasped when he quickly collared her throat.

His lips lowering to our ear, and just as he let his power of control start to flow through her, he told us,

“I will not ask but I will take... for you are mine to possess, as is your power!”

His demonic voice would have had the power to freeze the blood in our veins.

But as it stood, the power he held over us was all that was needed because we became paralyzed in his hold.

I even felt her open her mouth to scream and just before the sound could fill the cavernous space, echoing like a haunting crescendo to our own dark opera, he forced her to do his bidding.

Which meant the sound was only like a trumpet of triumph as her scream rang out at the same time our hand started to rise up.

The summoning magic within us building up ready to be let out, no matter how much we tried to hold on to it.

A rising heat burning through us until it had nowhere else to go but be released from fear it would make us explode.

Which meant, in the end, we had no choice. I had been right all along. His love had been nothing but a ruse. A form of control to make his life easier. But now that option was taken from him, he had no choice but to force Anástasi to do his bidding.

Because he may have had someone else pulling his strings but for us...

He had always been...

The true puppet master.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

The Hope that Cracks

It was a strange feeling...

To have your body give up on you but your mind still be conscious...

or at least a part of it. As for Anástasi, she had passed out the moment the dreaded deed was done.

Garmr had forced her to use her powers like I had always feared he would.

He had used her like the weapon I always accused her of being.

Her body and mind nothing but a vessel to channel the power he himself hadn't been born to wield.

But Anástasi had.

The true daughter of Hades.

She possessed the power to not only summon souls to her command, but now, she could bring life back to the dead. Which was the real reason Garmr had needed her. To bring back this monster and with it, the destruction of the world.

I wondered why it had taken him so long. Why hadn't he made her do this all that time ago? Had she not been strong enough then?



I had no answers, I just knew that the second the colossal beast took its first breath, our body gave up.

Which meant that before I had chance to witness the horrors that came next, our eyes had closed and we were being lifted into Garmr's arms. I knew that because I could still feel, hear, and smell everything.

Like how he hushed tender words down at us, empty words that meant nothing. Words of praise that sickened me.

I could feel his arms tighten around us, with the admiration he bestowed upon us. And I could smell the sheets as he lay us down on the bed, after carrying us back to our room.

And throughout it all, I was powerless to do anything.

All I could hope for was that he didn't see the letter we wrote. Hopefully, when Anástasi finally woke, we would still have a chance at escaping. Although the second I heard the locks turn, I felt this hope shatter, cracking like a glass orb filled with my dreams.

But before he left, I felt him brushing back my curls, tucking them behind my ear like he actually cared. Then he asked,

“Why did you have to make me do that?”

Of course, he received no reply but, boy, if I could have said what was on my mind, then I would have lashed out in the worst way.

“Let's hope when you wake, you are back to the girl I know,” he said, but then the most startling thing of all was when I felt him lean over me so he could whisper in

my ear.

“I know you are in there, Ella.” I would have gasped had I the ability to do so.

“I know you’re in there, playing your little mind games with my queen, but it won’t work.

For you wish to start a war with me? Then so be it, but you will lose, for I have something you do not... ultimate control.”

I felt the slightest grit of my teeth. But then he saved the worst till last, whispering,

“I can make her love me and love me she will.” Then he kissed my cheek and just before he left, I heard his voice by the door remind me of my dire hell, “And as for you... you will be my prisoner, forced to watch for all eternity.”

After this the door closed and internally, I was left with nothing else to do but scream in silent horror at the forced life he painted.

A future I would pick death over rather than watching this monster violate me this way.

But a new nightmare plagued me now, making me question which Anástasi I would face when waking?

The friend or the foe?

It was maddening. A torture like I had never known.

A cruel waiting game that I was forced to endure in the darkness.

Because unlike Anástasi, I never slept. This part of my mind I was locked to never turned off.

It was just a punishing, endless existence I could never escape.

The only time I ever remembered finding the comfort of sleep was during the battle when I had been knocked out.

Waking to find Garmr sitting next to me.

Before that, I had taken to plaguing Anástasi's dreams as my hatred for her had burned within me.

I had blamed her for all of this but now... now I understood her better.

Understood his control.

So, I had stopped, because inflicting nightmares on her only ever backfired anyway.

It pushed her more toward him as she gained comfort in his arms when she woke up screaming his name.

But now, so much had changed between us, that I could only hope that all my hard work wasn't for nothing.

That she would wake and remember all she had witnessed.

That I was right, she was nothing more than a weapon to him.

In the end, I didn't know how much time had passed but the moment I heard the door opening, I inwardly braced myself for Garmr's return. And return he did, this time

taking control over her enough that it made Anástasi wake when he commanded it.

“Open your eyes, my beauty.”

The sight of him would have made me sick to my stomach had I had control of it.

A pair of deep-set red eyes narrowed as if they too were waiting to see what version of us he would find.

Those marred red lines down his face branched out like lightning, angry and glowing.

His stark white hair now pulled back into a leather tie at the base of his neck, giving his features a more profound harshness to them.

But nothing was worse than when she took in the sight of him and spoke his name like he was her entire world.

“Garmr? Is everything alright?” she asked sweetly, and my hope once again shattered. I wanted to scream, but in the end, I just cried,

“Anástasi, no!”

Something that forced her to hold a hand to her head and moan.

“She still speaks to you?” he asked with simulated concern, because of course he knew that I did.

“She is getting louder, yes. Will we ever be rid of her, my love?” Anástasi asked, making me want to lash out and give her the migraine from hell! I felt so betrayed, so hurt, and so lost.

But deep down I knew it wasn't her fault.

Not like before, when I blamed her for all of this.

As for now, well I knew the truth. He had controlled her emotions, her feelings, manipulated far more than just her power.

He had made her believe she cared about him.

Which meant that she hadn't just fallen for her captor after all.

He had forced her to love him.

Because he had fallen in love with her first.

It was so obvious now. She was his consolation prize, the queen he got to keep, despite it not being real.

Which made me wonder, just how many times had she discovered something about him she didn't like.

How many times had she tried to run away once his control wore off?

How many times had he reclaimed her and forced her to love him once again?

It was a heinous crime against her, and one I wouldn't rest until I saw him punished for it.

"We will find a way, I promise. Once this war is won, we will do whatever is needed to rid you of your mortal life."

She hugged him and snuggled into his neck, kissing him and making him groan.

But when he put his hands on her shoulders to stop her, she pulled back and I felt her pout at the rejection.

Whereas I was thankful for it. And of course, I now knew the reason why he did this.

He would have to control her mind once more and I had no doubt it would be too soon for her to cope with.

“As tempting as it would be to ravish you, my sweet, right now you need rest, for Fenrir’s return to this life took too much out of you,” he told her, making her eyes widen.

“Is that what happened? I don’t remember... did it work? Did I make you proud, my love?” she asked, making him grin back at her. Then he smoothed her hair back from her face with his strange ink-stained fingers, before cupping her cheeks.

“Yes, my sweetest one, you made me so very proud, you always do.”

I inwardly scoffed at that, but strangely she didn’t react to it. But as Garmr looked at her, he stroked her cheek affectionately.

“Gods, Anástasi, you are so beautiful, you make my heart ache for you,” he told her and right then, had I had control of my body, I would have stuck my tongue out and gagged. But instead, my head tipped into his hand, before she told him,

“As I ache for you.”

He kissed her and she melted into him, making me recoil internally, thankful at least that she closed her eyes so I didn’t have to witness it. Because feeling it was bad

enough!

“I will let you rest, my dear,” he said once they had finished, bestowing a kiss at her forehead before he rose and told her,

“I will have some food brought to you.”

“I am not hungry,” she protested.

“You need to keep up your strength, sweetness.”

“Perhaps in a little while, right now I still feel tired,” she told him, covering herself up and snuggling down into the bed.

“Very well, I will leave you to your sleep.”

He left the room, this time not locking it like before. And the second it was closed, suddenly the covers whipped back and she was up and out of bed.

“Thank the gods, I was worried he would find our letter and ruin our plan!” she said, shocking me enough that I couldn’t actually form words. But then she went and said my name, something she rarely ever did. “Ella? Are you still there?”

I was flabbergasted. Too afraid to speak to find it was all a cruel dream. Too afraid that it was a trap, although I was not sure what could be accomplished by it.

“I am sorry I had to kiss him, but I needed it to be believable,” she told me, and it was at this point that I finally started trusting it was real.

“Anástasi? Is that... that really you?” I asked, making her laugh.

“Heavens, was I really that good an actress, that I fooled even you?” she asked, making me laugh too, but it came out as a sob, one that was strong enough to break through, no doubt making us look like a crazy person.

“Yes... oh god, Anástasi, I was so scared that I had lost you again. That he had tried to control you, that he had made you forget it all.”



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“Yes, and he would have, as I felt him trying to do just that, making me realize that he must have done this before.” Her voice became hard and angry as this realization hit her.

“How come it didn’t happen this time?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but the only difference now is that I have you, my mortal side.

Perhaps you saved me from it, saved me from the villain, as I realize now that was all he ever was...

Gods, Ella, he controlled everything!” she cried out, before covering her mouth just in case he heard her anguish and anger combined.

“Well, we can hate him together, but before we start making Voodoo dolls and poking sharp pointy shit into them, let’s get back to the plan of escaping,” I said, and I felt her screw up her nose, before admitting,

“I have no idea half of what you just said, and I’m especially not fond of the part where we defecate on something but yes, we need to escape, although that will be vastly harder to do now, as the caves are no longer an option.”

“Any ideas?” I asked, and she sighed in response.

“No, but there must be various way out of the castle.”

“Yes, but how many are guarded?” I pointed out, making her deflate back onto the

bed.

“Most likely all of them. I am going to be honest here, I don’t know how long I can keep up the pretense around him. Not now I know the truth... that he forced me to feel these things toward him. To know that it was never real.” She shook our head as if haunted by the revelation.

“I understand.”

But then she wiped at her tears and this time the reason she was crying wasn’t because of Garmr at all.

“I think he stole my memories,” she said softly.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I didn’t remember him, Ella,” she admitted sadly, and when her breath caught, I didn’t know if it was because of her or me.

“You don’t remember, Jared?” I asked, my voice near breaking for her.

“Cerberus,” she said, making me answer with a small,

“Oh.”

“I know that I used to have so many memories of him. But when I try and reach for them, it’s like they are no longer there. More like he is just a vacant memory of a beast I knew once existed. That he used to mean something to me, but when I try and push for what it was, I feel emptiness.”

Oh, Gods but I wanted to cry for her, because honestly, I knew how it felt to have

your memories messed with.

“And ever since I mentioned him, you have been searching for it... for those memories?” I guessed, making her nod our head.

“Yes. I looked for them, as I once loved him, that much I do know. But it was like the grief I once knew I felt had been replaced by bitterness and hatred, yet I don’t know why or when I started to feel this way.”

“And now you think Garmr planted those feelings in you?” Again, this wasn’t a hard guess.

“What else could it be? He must have, and now I know he has that power over me, then I can’t think of anything else but what he has taken from me... because memories shape a person, and he has taken them. I know that he has changed me.”

“He tried to change you, but he hasn’t succeeded,” I argued, making her scoff.

“Hasn’t he? Look at all I have done,” she said, no doubt referring to the violence inflicted on our father’s wife and stepsister. Also fighting Jared and basically trying to kill him... twice.

So yeah, I was starting to understand why she was struggling with this.

“Okay, so yes, you went a bit kill happy there for a bit but you’re looking at this all wrong,” I told her.

“How so?”

“He has taken your memories, changed you, made you do bad things, shaped you into who he wanted you to be, but in the end, he still couldn’t keep the goodness that’s

inside of you from coming out and finding your way back regardless,” I said, trying to get her to still see the good in her, adding, “Because if there had been nothing left of your true self, then you would have continued to shut me out forever. You wouldn’t have questioned things the way you did.

You wouldn’t have gone into that bedchamber and discovered what you did. ”

“I think you were my anchor to who I used to be. I needed you to break the spell,” she said, and perhaps she was right, or perhaps she had broken free of his control many times before without my help.

We would never know, which was what I told her before I then added gently, “I’m sorry this happened to you. ”

“Happened to us,” she reminded me.

“Yes, I am sorry this happened to us but no more. Never again will he have that power over us, not as long as we stick together in this,” I told her, making her laugh the once.

“It’s not like I can get rid of a piece of myself, no matter what Garmr said.”

“Unfortunately, I think he will try and find a way, especially if he ever discovers that I am the reason you can’t be controlled anymore.”

“He better never find out then,” she said, but before we could speak more on it, we heard footsteps behind the door. Which was when she reacted by lying down quickly and faking sleep. Doing so just in case he had ignored what she said about not being hungry and returned.

We both seemed to hold our breath as the door opened slowly, almost cautiously.

Which I thought was odd, making me wonder if it was someone else and not Garmr after all.

“She’s asleep, what do we do now?”

The second we heard this voice, our eyes flashed open and saw what I would have once believed as a dream. But then Anástasi shouted her name.

“Lerna!”

The next thing I knew we were hugging her, holding her tight as tears filled our eyes. However, Lerna wasn’t sobbing like Anástasi was, which made her pull back and hold her sister by the shoulders.

“Sister, is it really you?”

Lerna’s beautiful face nodded.

“It is me,” she said, but there was something else in her gaze that made me instantly wary and before I could question it further, she said, “I am so sorry, Anástasi.” I felt our frown.

“What do you mean, you are here, what could you ever be sorry... wait... you!” Anástasi narrowed our eyes on another in the room, and it took me a moment to realize who it was.

“Koro!” Anástasi hissed in anger, because of course she thought he was still the enemy.

She wouldn’t know any different or know Koro as anything but Garmr’s right hand man.

The one who kidnapped her sister all those years ago and became her personal jailor.

And whereas before, Garmr would have made her believe he was one of the good guys, like himself, but now she knew the truth.

Which meant that she would only associate Koro as being in league with the man we were trying to get away from.

However, before I could say anything to stop her from reacting, her powers started to rise from our hands ready to attack. Something that ended up with our sister and I shouting at the same time,

“No!”

“No, Anástasi, stop!”

Whereas I was helpless to do anything, Lerna wasn't. Because it seemed like they had come here with a plan in mind.

Lerna reached into her bag and pulled out a glowing glass bottle. One swirling with shimmering blue liquid like it held the evening sky inside it.

“I am sorry for this, sister,” Lerna said, and before either of us could react, she threw the bottle down next to us.

Quickly stepping away and covering her mouth and nose with her cloak, as Koro did the same.

As for Anástasi, she wasn't quick enough, and the scent of something sickly sweet filled our senses.

Before I knew it, our eyes were closing.

Which meant that for the second time since being locked in my own mind, I found peace...

In the darkness of hope.

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Loath to Wait

Jared

This was, undoubtably, the hardest part of the plan.

The waiting.

Waiting for the shifters to return, waiting for the spell to be made, waiting while we made our plan, waiting while the goblin made his map, and most of all...

Waiting for Lerna and Koro to return back with my girl.

That was the hardest wait of all.

But that was all I was allowed to do. Because every single aspect of this plan had been gone through with a fine-tooth comb. It had been said over and over again, until there was no mistaking what had to happen.

As for how this plan started, the shifters had little trouble getting to the mountain, although Nero had no choice but to exhaust herself in getting through the sorcerer's wards long enough to land.

As for the sorcerer himself, it was obvious the brothers didn't like him.

But Vern had liked the way he had looked at Nero even less.



Apparently, she had impressed the sorcerer with the way she had been able to get past his wards. He said if she ever wanted to learn from him, that she was always welcome to stay. It was after this offer that Vern pulled his bow out and held a flaming arrow an inch from the sorcerer's face.

Luckily, Nero already had the foresight to retrieve one of their scales, at the ready to do the deal.

And like she had suspected, it was one he was all too ready to make, and the sorcerer told her that she could help herself to anything in his garden.

So, she had gathered up what she needed and they had left without further incident.

Needless to say, by the end, all three brothers had been eager to leave the place and the creepy sorcerer to his mountain.

After that and upon their return, Nero wasted no time in getting to work on the spell, and I was left waiting yet again.

At least with this first hurdle out of the way it was on to the next...

and that was getting Lerna and Koro inside.

Which was where the Goblin came in. He had told me that in order for the hex to work, the person, which in this case, was King Geryon, needed to be there when this particular hex was cast.

Of course, no one knew by this time that the King had been switched and Clay, the actual king, was living life in the mortal realm.

But it didn't matter, as all Garmr needed was what this imposter already had.

People to believe he was the King. Now when, exactly, this happened, no one knew, but it was believed it was before he stole Anástasi from me the first time...

And his new control over anyone with summoning powers would have led him to her.

The hex was all he needed, for it would then make everyone who had ever heard of the King think it was Garmr. But here was the kicker, and it was a big one that no one saw coming, or had fully put together yet. Knowledge that Geryon and Garmr were actually related.

Because once Garmr's true heritage had come to light, it was then tied to Clay or should I say Geryon, who he was born as. Because he was the son of Callirrhoe, one of the daughters of Garmr's mother, the Titaness, Tethys. Which meant that Garmr was actually Geryon's uncle.

Hence why he had been chosen, as Garmr wanted to seek revenge on the Greek side of his family for casting him out. For not recognizing him as being one of their own. And whereas his nephew had received a castle and his own realm to rule over, Garmr had received nothing.

Something the goblin actually pieced together after what Garmr had told him about his heritage.

For some reason, Garmr, at the time, had felt the need to justify why he was doing this.

Which the goblin admitted, that as long as he had a trunk load of coin like he had been promised, he didn't care.

Didn't care if his mother was a hairy toed harpy and his father a legless Gorgon leech.

He would have done the job regardless. And it was a job he did.

These were the goblin's words when explaining this to me over a tankard of ale. Because quite literally, there was fuck all else to do while waiting for the spell to be made, so with Lucius and Amelia getting 'rest', I was left with the goblin for company.

He then went on to tell me that in order for the original switch hex to work, that both men needed to be in the same room, and he needed the King's blood. Something that Garmr said wouldn't be a problem, seeing as he fully intended to slit Geyron's throat in his sleep.

This was of course after first checking whether or not the king needed to be alive first, which, lucky for Garmr, he didn't.

But it was also obvious that Garmr had never encountered his nephew before as he believed he had switched with that of his kin.

Not that it mattered, as Clay's replacement had enough power over his summoners that it transferred over to Garmr as well.

After that, the goblin admitted that his only aim was to get the job done, get paid, and get the fuck out of there with his head still attached.

Seeing as the chest full of gold had once belonged to the king, Garmr admitted that he didn't care what he took.

No, all he wanted was control over the realm and his army.

And since then, his army and power had grown significantly.

But the part of the story I had been most interested in and had been eager to get to, was how this tied into the castle of Thanatos or, more specifically, how the goblin knew the way inside.

Because we were not talking of the Realm of Fraud here, but that of the Underworld.

Which was why Clay couldn't help us, as he had no prior knowledge of this castle.

In fact, the first time we had managed it, it had been from a map provided by a merchant.

Then the goblin, who still refused to give me his name, as apparently that was his policy when doing business with people, went on to tell me more. He said the only reason Garmr's plan worked was because King Geryon had been invited to stay at the castle for the celebration of Genesia.

This was a festival of the dead, so to speak, where the Athenians would decorate graves, leave offerings and sacrifices in honor of their deceased ancestors. And seeing as Thanatos was the God of peaceful and non-violent deaths, it was in memory of these deaths in which he too celebrated.

This meant that Geryon would not be as protected as he might have been in his own realm. And it was in this particular castle where Garmr knew of a secret way inside.

It made sense now as to why he had taken over Thanatos's castle, choosing it as his stronghold.

Because not only was it the best place for him to house an army in the Underworld due to its position being so close to the border of Helheim, but it was also his prior knowledge of the place that drew him back there.

And as for the way inside...

The goblin told me that there was an abandoned building just outside of the stronghold that held the entrance to a secret tunnel.

It was made as a precautionary measure as a way to smuggle supplies into the castle in case it was ever under siege or surrounded by the enemy.

Not many knew of its existence, nor was it obvious as its entrance had been boarded up to look like part of the wall.

Garmr told the goblin that he discovered it when using the old, unused building as a place to hide as he scoped out the castle for ways inside. As dumb luck would have it, since the building was damaged, a piece of the wall crumbled away and exposed the hidden door.

Now I had little doubt that Garmr had not had this entrance sealed up completely.

He was coward enough that he would have kept it as a means to escape himself, if ever the need arose.

Which meant this was the last puzzle piece to slot into place in getting Lerna and Koro inside.

After that, it was up to them to get her out by using the sleeping spell Nero had cast.

Which meant I was currently at the camp, waiting impatiently for them to get back from their mission.

Of course, thoughts of my brother plagued me, as I had been so tempted to have a second team go in and try and rescue him.

I had even tried to argue this point with the others in the war room when we had been planning this.

But before I could argue my point after the other kings had told me that it was too risky, it was only when Marcus intervened that I shut up.

All it took was for him to place a hand at my shoulder and shake his head slightly to tell me everything I needed to know.

To tell me that Fate would not be in our favor should I push this.

I had shrugged his hand off my shoulder and stormed out of the room in my anger and frustration.

Because, yes, of course I wanted my chosen one back, but not having my brother by my side was like losing a fucking limb!

The pain of knowing what he was most likely being put through was like swallowing hot coals.

Every single fiber of my being knew that he was still alive, he just had to be!

To be forced to do nothing to save him went against the grain.

Which brought me to now, after hours of pacing inside my tent like I was a wild animal that woke up to find themselves in a barbed cage.

“We will get him back,” Marcus said, because of course my fucker of a best friend couldn’t leave me alone to wallow in my own self-pity for too long. Just like my brother wouldn’t have, I thought bitterly.

“You don’t know that!” I snapped.

“I do know that the chances of success at getting Ella back are even less should you have tried to reclaim them both.”

I didn’t respond, but clearly the asshole had a hard time taking the hint.

“I also know that Ella is the key here to winning this war and should she remain in that castle any longer, then that one in a million chance at winning this, knocks back down to zero.”

I finally stopped pacing and let my tensed shoulder drop.

“I know all this, Marcus.”

“Good, then perhaps you should focus on that part and let go of your guilt.”

“Easy for you to fucking say, you weren’t the reason he got his arse taken prisoner in the first place,” I barked back.

“No, he was the reason,” Marcus replied, making me growl and grit my teeth.

“How can you say that?!”

“Because he had a choice and he made it, you didn’t force him to save your arse.”

Again, my body was tensed so hard I thought bones would shatter under the muscle.

“Yes, and now I can’t save his, so how the fuck do you expect me to not feel guilty about that?!”

“Orth would be the first one to tell you not to risk it and you know it, J, he would say, save the girl, save the world, make the sacrifice, as he would do the same.”

I turned my head away in anger but it wasn't directed at Marcus. But instead, at the fucking hand Fate had dealt me! It felt like I was picking one over the other, and despite knowing which I would choose, it was the pain of having the choice to begin with.

Because Marcus was right about what Orthrus would be telling me right now, that I had made the right decision, despite what it meant for his future.

And speaking of future, just before I could argue it further, my own future was being carried back into my life. Koro and Lerna entered my tent with literally my heart in their hands.

As quickly as what was physically possible, I rushed over to them and took Ella into my arms. And for what felt like the longest time, my soul once more felt...

Whole again.



### The Power of Memories

Ella

The moment my state of mind became conscious again was also the same time Anástasi also woke. However, I instantly recognized that something was wrong when she started to panic.

“Hey, it’s okay, Lerna saved us,” I told her, but instead of answering me she was up out of the bed of furs, thrashing against them in her erratic movements. But then, I realized that I recognized where we were, having been in this tent with Jared before, but she didn’t.

“Anástasi, you need to calm down, it will all be okay,” I tried again, but once more there was no reply from her. In fact, there was no acknowledging me at all. Which meant that soon, she wasn’t the only one panicking. It had me questioning what had they used to cause this reaction within her?

A worry that only increased the moment I felt our powers building up inside of us, as if she were drawing from it, at the ready to unleash it at the sign of trouble.

And speaking of trouble, the second Jared stepped inside the tent, my breath would have caught in my throat had I the ability to gasp.

Gods, just the sight of him had me wishing, more than anything, that I could just go running into his arms.

He stopped short at the sight of us because, clearly, he hadn't expected us to be awake so soon. His eyes displayed an array of emotions, first being relief, and secondary to this was worry, which soon morphed into apprehension.

He raised his hands as if we held a gun on him, although with the green mist now swirling around us, I would say he had a better chance at surviving a gun.

"Anástasi! Listen to me, it's Jared, it's your HellBeast! He won't hurt us!" I pleaded, trying to shout loud enough to break through, but it was almost as if I was back to the very first day of being trapped like this. The time where I felt the most helpless.

It was only with time that I was able to build up the strength to push through in the first place. But not anymore. That spell, whatever it had been, had triggered something and all my hard work had been for nothing. Because they hadn't rescued us like they thought.

No, they had just welcomed the enemy into their camp.

"Easy now, sweetheart, we are not going to hurt you," he said, backing up as Anástasi started to walk toward him.

"You kidnapped me!" she snarled angrily, acting just as she did that day when finding Jared in her bedroom. Just like when they had fought on the battlefield. I could feel that same hatred pouring off her, as if a switch had been flipped.

"No! Anástasi, don't do this! Fight against it! Listen to me!" But again, my pleading went by unheard and I started to panic. But no more so than when she started to follow him out of the tent as he retreated.

"I am not the enemy here, Anástasi," Jared told her, keeping his tone calm and his stance as unthreatening as possible. His arms were held out slightly to his sides, with

his palms facing us.

“You took me from him!” she shouted, her voice back to being the one I barely recognized.

As for the scene that we were creating, it was soon drawing in a crowd as if they knew this was coming.

And it was now through her eyes of hatred that I could see figures approaching.

But her gaze remained rooted to Jared, not allowing me to get a good look at them all.

She lunged for him and caught him before he was quick enough to evade us. Which meant his throat was soon in our grasp, and she let her power coil down our arm, wrapping around his throat like a noose. But this was when I went crazy, screaming this time,

“NO, LET HIM GO!” My furious bellow was enough to get her to drop him before she could choke the life from him. My protest strong enough that she staggered back, holding her head in her hands. This was when Lerna shouted for her,

“Anástasi!” Then suddenly she was throwing her arms around us, holding us tight, pleading, “Don’t fight him, he is not the enemy, my sister.”

But this was when she broke free of Lerna’s arms, turning furious eyes to her and pushing her back a step.

“You did this to me! You took me from him again!”

Lerna started crying, pleading with her, “No, please, Anástasi, you have to break free of his control, Garmr is making you think these things, but they aren’t true!”

Anástasi once again let the power build within her and, this time, I could feel it about to become explosive. Which was when she started to take in the people around her.

My aunt Keira, my uncle Dom, my cousin Amelia, her husband Lucius, Pip, Adam, Marcus, Orson, Asher, Tyr, and others I didn't recognize had all gathered to watch this play out.

My family looked pained to see me this way.

But no more so than Lerna, who was sobbing as Koro took her in his arms from behind.

It was utterly heartbreaking but what was worse, was that I was left screaming from seeing them all.

“GET BACK! RUN!”

Anástasi screamed as my desperation rang out in her mind, and she gripped the sides of her head, roaring,

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

Then we transformed, just like we had that day when Lerna opened a portal into the temple. My emerald-green battle gear molded to my body like second skin, leaving no one in doubt of my being the Summoner Queen I had been proclaimed to be.

And like that day, I was at the ready to kill, only this time, it wasn't me they faced, it was the girl who didn't recognize them. Didn't recognize her old life. In her mind, she was simply surrounded by the enemy that had torn her from the man she didn't know she had been forced to love.

By the time she rose back up, after being slumped over when fighting against me in her mind, she was ready for the fight ahead. But Jared didn't look as concerned as he should do. No, instead, he bravely started walking toward us, and my uncle did the same.

“Don't come any closer! I will kill you all, don't think I won't!

” Anástasi threatened, but then something strange happened as my uncle pulled something from behind his back.

She must have thought it a weapon, as the green serpents of power shot out toward him.

But the second he held up the object, they paused before they could touch him, evaporating instantly.

“Ella, my dear niece, do you remember when I gave this to you?” my uncle Dom asked softly, and I felt our eyes narrow, focusing on what was in his hands.

“Snow globe,” I uttered, and amazingly, she did the same.

“Snow globe.” Her voice sounded pained now, as if she wished it had been her own memory.

“Yes, I gave it to you, do you remember what I told you?” he asked, his voice so tender and comforting, it made me cry, tears that were actually breaking free and falling down our cheeks.

“You told me it would help protect me from the nightmares,” I spoke and again, Anástasi did the same.

“Nightmares, she used to have nightmares...” Then she glanced up from the globe into my uncle’s eyes, telling him, “You told her it would protect her from them.”

My uncle granted her a small grin, before nodding his head. Then my aunt stepped closer and told us,

“You loved wolves, collected them. They were all over your bedroom. You used to pretend to be one when you were little. Then you would make people chase you on all fours, your wild red curls bouncing everywhere,” Keira said, tears streaming down her face.

“I... remember,” I stammered, the emotions making it hard to communicate. But Anástasi didn’t speak this time, she simply nodded.

And then it was my cousin’s turn... she stepped up next to her mom, took her hand, and told us,

“I remember the sleepovers, the trips to the mall, we would talk about boys and eat ice cream at the park. We both have funny laughs, and once we would start, we just couldn’t stop.

You would laugh at the sound of mine and I would laugh at the sound of yours.

I remember, one time, we smushed our ice creams to our lips and gave ourselves ice cream mustaches...

and we kept them there, you know, just to see who would say something first, your mom or mine.

But yours kept making you itch, so you would wrinkle your nose, you looked like a red rabbit. God, we laughed so much that day.”

Her words made me scoff my own tearful laugh.

“Yeah, we did, and then we stayed up late watching scary movies and you laughed at me when I hid under the blankets, even though I am older than you. Of course, now I know why.” I laughed through my tears once more, tears Anástasi was allowing through.

And even though Fae couldn’t hear me, I felt her comfort like seeing a lighthouse in the storm.

“This... this isn’t my life,” Anástasi said, backing away instead of reaching for the snow globe like they had no doubt hoped for.

Because I knew what this was. Their plan to bring us back. A branch from our mother’s tree hadn’t been enough to do it, so they were all hoping for that snow globe to work, but Anástasi wouldn’t take it and, once again, I felt my hope slipping away.

Our fearful gaze went to Jared, and I couldn’t help but wish he could hear me, hear me when I told him,

“I love you, Jared, and I’m so sorry this isn’t working... you tried... all of you but it just isn’t enough.”

“He is the enemy,” Anástasi told me, as if answering me, but before I could argue, Jared simply nodded to someone behind me. Which was exactly the same moment she was lifting up our hands as if ready to unleash Hell on everyone I loved.

But before she could, suddenly someone wrapped their arms around me from behind, and the second I heard his voice in my ear, everything changed.

Everything.

“My Wild Child.”



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

That voice! The same one I had heard thousands of times.

The one that taught me so much. Taught me how to change a tire, how to do an oil change, how to rebuild an engine.

He was the same one who snuck candy into our room that night of the sleepover.

The one who held me when I woke from a nightmare.

Who picked me up as a kid after falling off my bike, the same one who taught me how to ride it.

Who told me how proud he was of me when I didn't need the extra training wheels.

Hundreds of memories all hit me at once, flooding my mind with my childhood, from my earliest memory to my most recent.

And not just of my dad, my mom too. Her warmth, her love, her caring nature.

The times spent as a family, memories right up until the night of my engagement. They had looked so happy.

Every single moment they had been there for me, protecting me, raising me, teaching me between what was right and wrong.

They had been there for me at my best of times and at my worst of times.

From encouraging me to dance, to sitting in the front row and watching me fall.

Holding me through the devastation I felt when I realized I wouldn't be able to live out my dreams of becoming a dancer.

Learning of my disease and the change it would mean to my life.

The limitations it would set, the pain I would have to endure.

They were there for all of it. All the pain, laughter, questions, heartache, sorrow, and happiness.

My whole life they were there telling me to fight for what I believed in.

To never give up. To never stop being who I was.

To always find my way home and, right now, my father's voice was the key to doing just that.

"My daughter, let her go," he said, and this was all it took for me to finally make it back. It happened the same way as before, when Garmr first stole away that part of me, only this time in reverse. My mouth opened as a sob tore through me, finally a single word making it through.

"Dad?"

After that I gasped, my legs dropping beneath me as my whole body became supported by his strong arms. And my father's voice broke, relief making him cry out.

"Oh, my daughter! Ella, my sweet girl!" He took me in his arms, both of us falling to

our knees as we embraced.

My tears soaking his neck as I sobbed, like I was a child missing my family after so long, after believing that I would never see them again.

I could hear both my aunt and cousin crying behind us, too, as they felt our joy as their own.

I felt my head cradled to him by his large hand. Hands I had always marveled at as a kid, believing they could accomplish anything. Make anything. Fix anything. And I was right. Even here in this Hellish place. Which was when it dawned on me, making me pull back and ask through my tears,

“But how?”

“It’s a long story, kid... but I had help,” he said, looking behind me, grinning, and as I did the same my eyes landed on only one other person. And my father knew it because he let me go and whispered,

“Go to him.”

Not that he needed to because I was quickly scrambling back to my feet, running toward the man I loved. Jared’s face said it all, because the brief glimpse of it was enough to have fresh new tears spilling down my face... relief and pure joy.

That was also what his own tears told me.

And then I was in his arms!

Finally... I was back where I belonged.

He caught me and, this time, I poured my heart into our embrace.

I didn't ask myself where Anástasi had gone.

I didn't ask him what had happened since being taken.

I didn't even ask him if he was alright.

I just clung on to him like I was terrified someone else would come along and rip us apart at any moment.

His arms held me tight, telling me he was feeling the same thing.

"Ella." The way he said my name was like drinking some healing elixir. My name coming from his lips felt like a dream. One I had been waiting to happen for so long. But I needed more. So, I pulled back and looked at him, before framing his face with my trembling hands, telling him,

"I have missed you so much! I tried so hard, so hard to get through to her!"

"I know, baby, I know," Jared cooed, tears falling from his eyes before he put his forehead to mine and whispered one more time, "I know."

But with this came the sudden realization of something I had been keeping locked away.

Like a memory I had kept back just in case it could ever be used against me.

Something I hadn't told Anástasi, not even when I trusted her.

Just in case Garmr had been able to control her again and somehow use it against me.

Or worse, wanted to hurt our baby.

The baby I had hidden from the enemy.

I was pregnant with Jared's baby. A baby that, up until now, I hadn't wanted to think about for fear of anyone finding out.

A baby that I didn't know how...

To tell Jared we were having.

Hold Me Tight

We were finally together.

My soul whole once more.

My heart complete.

And I was not the only one who felt this way. Because Jared wasted no time in framing my face with his hands before tipping my head back and kissing me. I felt myself melt into him, it was like coming home and back to the heart of myself.

The passionate reunion had me quickly breathless in his hold. And it wasn't just down to the heat of our hunger or desire, but it was knowing that we had finally found each other again.

Our lips moved in flawless sync, like some age-old dance we had been born to know the moves to.

That perfect fit, as if no other kiss in the world had the same power over us.

The way we tasted each other and deepened the kiss, to the point that all else around us simply faded away.

The whole world could have been burning and we wouldn't have known it.

The moment I tightened my hold on him, I felt myself being gripped by the waist and

he lifted me up to the right height.

My legs instantly wrapped around him. This was his cue to start walking with me toward his tent, and I vaguely heard the others around us comment with chuckles.

But I just didn't have it in me to care because I just needed to feel him once more.

I needed his touch, his caress, his tender words of love to erase all the lies and fake memories Garmr had planted.

I needed all of him.

The entrance flap to the tent slapped back in his haste to get me alone, the sound barely penetrating my mind.

I wished it was a fortress around us rather than thin strips of fabric, because I wanted to keep everyone and everything out.

Our responsibilities, the impending battle, the dire end of the world, along with our fate to stop it.

I just wanted to lock it all out and throw away the key.

"Too... many... clothes," I told him between kisses, making him groan in my mouth before telling me,

"I couldn't agree more!" he said, prompting me to place my feet on the tent floor as he lowered me down.

Immediately, we began trying to tear the material off one another, with the kind of desperation in our actions that spoke of this building need that never went away. Of

course, he was far more successful at it than I was, thanks to having claws he could call at will.

“Well, that’s unfair,” I told him in a teasing tone, making him grin and holy shit how I had missed it. Missed that devastatingly handsome smile that just seemed to transform his face into something beautiful. That tugged at my soul every time I saw it.

Then he reached up and pulled off his shirt and by the gods, I couldn’t help but utter my thoughts.

“Gods, you’re breathtaking.”

He actually seemed to blush a little. But then I was in his arms again, this time I felt him holding me still as he gently dragged a claw down my back.

Doing so just enough to tear into whatever outfit my summoning powers had created for me.

This was so he could then peel it fully from my body, as if it was emerging from an evil cocoon.

Until soon, all I needed to do was kick off my boots and drag the pants down my legs before I was completely naked before him.

His eyes hungrily drank in the sight of me, and I let my fingertips trail down his muscular chest and abs before tugging at the waistband of his pants. Then I gripped them tight and yanked him closer, growling at him,

“Take these off, HellBeast.”



His eyes started to glow molten silver as his desire for me burned brighter. He leaned closer to me, yanked at the fastening, and growled in return,

“As my HellBeast Queen commands.”

I grinned and said, “Yeah, she fucking does.”

Then I started to lower to my knees, taking with me his pants and making him groan at the sight of me on the floor before him. Of course, he wasn't wearing underwear, so this freed his cock and put it level with my eager and awaiting mouth.

I took no time at all before I was taking it in hand and guiding it to my lips to kiss.

At the first feel of my touch at the tip, he closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

Groaning again as I rubbed the beads of his precum across my mouth.

Then I looked up, purposely letting him watch as I made a show of licking his seed from my lips.

Again, the sight made his eyes glow brighter, before his hand tangled in my hair, holding me captive in his grip.

With me locked to his grasp, he kicked his boots and pants free of his ankles.

After which he leaned down close enough to my face so that he could growl over my lips,

“Give me this mouth, it is mine!” Then he kissed me, a deep and possessive show of him tasting himself from my lips. One that didn't last long because he pulled me back and warned, “Now give me what I crave, woman, for I have waited far too long for

this pleasure, one only you can give me.”

When he guided me back to his hard cock, I shocked him by instantly taking him deep and gagging myself on him.

His growl was a raw and guttural sound that only spurred me on more.

I quickened my action, alternating between taking him deep, keeping the tight suction around his girth, and swirling my tongue up and down his silky skin.

Each inch I tasted, sucked, and felt against my tongue only added to my own pleasure.

“Fuck!” he growled again before then hissing, “Gods, woman!”

My satisfied grin was one he felt for himself, but then I moaned around him, and it was the vibrations of my desire he felt too.

“Heaven... fucking Heaven in this Hell,” he said as I licked up from his balls all the way to the tip of his dripping cock. This before flicking my tongue on the head and then taking as much of him down my throat as I could.

“Alright, sweetheart, that’s enough or I will... fuck, Ella!” he managed to say, trying to pull me gently away from him, but I was having none of it!

I took him down again and again, no longer teasing him with alternating. No, I was just going for gold at this point and making it impossible for him to deny me.

“Ella, I am ...Gods... I am...” At this point I paused long enough to look up at him and after licking up the length again, I told him,

“Please... please give it to me... let me taste you, swallow you down... please, my king.”

His will to do anything but that, snapped completely. His hand entwining itself in my hair before turning to a fist at the back of my head. The bite of pain only added to my hunger to have him and soaked my dripping core.

“Then it is all yours, my queen... only yours ... so open those pretty lips for me, so as I may see you take it, so I can bathe this talented tongue of yours with my cum.”

These were the right words to say... I pumped my hand up and down his length, one soaked as a result of my gagging around him. My palm sliding easily along satin skin as I used my other hand on his balls. His face gritted with pleasure and it was fucking perfect!

Then once I had him exactly where I wanted him, I purposely held my mouth open wide, ready for him to watch like he wanted.

My tongue out just as I knew he would like it to be, and holy fuck, it was hot!

I pumped on his shaft, faster and faster, while keeping my eyes on him, watching the pleasure take hold.

Watching as it gripped him and kept him prisoner with the promise of euphoria.

“Fuck yes, that’s it... that’s it, baby, fuck...”

FUCK!” He suddenly erupted, streams lashing across my tongue, my lips, and my cheek, as long jets of cum hit me.

My triumph was both the taste and sound of him as he roared to the ceiling, overcome

in his fulfilment.

And it left little to the imagination as to what we were doing in here.

I just hoped like hell my other family members had the good sense to get my father far enough away from this tent. Or he would be scarred for life!

I was about to close my mouth and swallow when Jared stopped me.

“No, I want to see it... be a good girl and show me.”

Another thrill shot through me and straight to my core, making me shudder.

Because I wanted to be his good girl... always .

So, of course I did as I was told, showing him.

The groan that followed was worth it, as well as the dazed, almost drugged look in his eyes as he was near overcome with the pleasure I provided him.

“Good, now swallow for me,” he commanded, and with each new order came another wave of lust. After this he reached down and picked me up gently, with his hands tucked under my arms. Then once I was standing in front of him once more, he used his thumb to wipe my lips and my cheek.

Dragging the cum he found there back into my mouth, and each swipe he made, I sucked or licked at the pad of his thumb.

His eyes trailed every motion and once I was clean, he told me,

“Gods but you are so fucking perfect... Can’t wait to make you my wife.” This part

was whispered down at me, after holding his forehead to mine once again.

“Fuck, but I need you... need to be inside you.”

Another ripple shuddered through me. Which was why I replied,

“Then take me... I am yours.”

He didn't need any encouragement to have me, but if he did, then this was enough for him to suddenly lift me.

I emitted a surprised sound, one that only got louder as it turned into a gasp.

This after my legs wrapped around him, and he lowered me down onto his still hard cock.

I let my head fall back as I gripped his neck to anchor myself to him when he started to move me up and down his length.

The feel of him filling me so completely that he stole the words right out of my mouth, when telling me,

“I am home once more.”

“Yes!” I cried as he continued to bounce me up and down on his cock, each drag hitting nerves I didn't think I had. So many sensations consuming me as my orgasm built at incredible speeds. Until all too soon or not soon enough, I was crying out my first release.

“Yes, yes, yes, Gods, fuck YES!”

He growled in reply, before he was walking me to the furs. However, when he lifted me from him completely, I couldn't help but mewl in complaint.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I will be there again soon." Then he lay me down but when he rolled me to my side, I couldn't help but ask in panic,

"Where are you going?"

He chuckled before telling me,

"I like you needy for my cock."

Then he climbed in behind me and put one arm under my neck, using the other to open my legs.

"Don't worry, I am right here, right where I was born to be... where I always will be," he told me, before thrusting up back inside me, fucking me from behind.

"Oh gods!" I shouted, making him growl right in my ear,

"The gods can't have you... you are all mine, Ella!"

He started to move, this time using his other hand to collar my throat, holding me prisoner to his powerful thrusts. This position made me feel so owned, so consumed, so overpowered, that it only heightened my dark need for him to possess me completely.

Putting two fingers in my mouth, he pumped them in and out of my lips in sync with his cock plundering my pussy.

Which was why it didn't take long before I was crying out another release.

His free hand alternated between gripping the inside of my thigh to hold me spread open and squeezing my breast. This before plucking at the nipple and twisting it.

Then his fingers stopped fucking my mouth, so he could hold the top of my hair.

His forearm against my head as he yanked my head to the side silently told me what was coming.

“Yes... yes... please, Jared, take my blood. Take all of me!” I pleaded freely and with wild abandonment.

“Gladly, my queen,” he growled, before I felt his painful bite as his fangs pierced my tender flesh.

It quickly morphed into the delicious pleasure I knew it would.

This combined with the squeezing of my breast, and the hammering of his hips, I was again screaming out my pleasure as it stole my breath.

The orgasm hit me so quickly it made me dizzy.

But then he wanted more, so he pulled his fangs from my neck long enough to tear into his own flesh at his forearm.

Of course, I didn’t need to ask why, and I reached up, holding his arm to my mouth before latching on.

His satisfied groan shuddered through me and I felt his growl vibrate from his chest at my back.

“Yes, that’s it, feed from me, claim me,” he praised, and my reply was to suck him

down harder.

Another growl of pleasure and he did the same, resuming feeding from me while fucking me in earnest. Pistoning his hips up faster and faster, making me hold on to his forearm even tighter, digging my nails in, keeping his blood to my mouth.

Needless to say, it didn't take long for us to find our final release at the same time.

However, my own cries were lost to the sound of Jared, who bellowed out his release.

“ELLA! FUCK, YES... YES, MY QUEEN!” he roared so loud it even shook the tent, making the fabric walls vibrate. As if he wanted the gods themselves to hear as he reclaimed me as his.

He panted behind me like some wild beast coming down from his high, and he wasn't the only one.

I too had to catch my breath, and I barely registered as he sealed the break in my skin before healing his own.

Then while still keeping himself seated inside me, he gathered me in his arms once more and held me from behind.

“Gods, I missed you, words cannot express how much,” he told me, making me sigh back into him.

“You're not the only one. I'm at a loss for the same words because I missed you just as much.”

His reply to this was to squeeze me tighter.



“I know we have much to discuss, but I would like to hold you for just a little longer before we are forced to face our reality,” he admitted, and the request made my heart melt, making me nod.

Because he was right.

Our reality was one none of us wanted to face right now.

Not when we both knew what...

Uncertain fate faced us.

Not An Option

Jared

I didn't know how long it had been since I had fully slept, but I knew I must have hit my limit as I didn't even remember falling asleep. Although the relief I felt at finally having Ella back in my arms was what I knew had truly done it.

If I was honest, I couldn't ever remember sleeping as well as I did when Ella was in my bed.

Before I met her, I would often toss and turn, restless in my sleep, but after...

I had never slept so soundly. I had never felt so content.

It was no doubt why I made the excuses to keep her in it, even before we were together.

When she had a broken arm and lost her voice, I still insisted on her sharing my bed, whereas I had never done so with anyone else other than Lerna.

But now I knew the truth and as a result, I was actually happy to know we had never been intimate, and that it had all been a rouse.

Because it just meant all that more to me with Ella.

The only woman I had ever truly loved.

A woman I now found missing from my bed...

As soon as I woke and didn't feel her next to me, of course, my first reaction was blind panic. I tore off the furs and ran straight out the tent. I didn't give a fuck that I was stark naked, I just ran and roared her name.

“ELLA!”

Of course, this caused a quick reaction within the camp as everyone that had been in the war room came running out, thankfully including Ella.

Her eyes widened in shock at the sight of me as I stormed unashamedly toward her, ignoring the actions my naked body created.

Like the way Amelia gasped before her eyes were covered by Lucius.

As for Keira, she was turned forcibly into Draven's chest, and Lerna stumbled over her words.

“Oh my... oh dear...” Before her husband actually picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and disappeared back in the room. Something that looked like a very good idea right now, which was precisely what I did the second I was close enough to my girl.

“Jared, what are you... whoa!” Her question died in her throat as she yelled in shock. Then, without a word, I stormed back toward our tent, my anger building with each step.

Although, I was no longer panicked, and the feel of her delectable body squirming over my shoulder certainly helped.

As well as the sight of her fuckable arse so close to my face.

A sight I enjoyed many times since the first time I got to witness her arse up close in my club all those years ago.

And then again in Germany, which had been a benefit of her sassy behavior when pushing me in my own club.

And well, since that day, let's just say that I saw the appeal to tossing your woman over your shoulder at any given opportunity. Now being no different.

However, I wasn't just pissed to find her missing, but it was more the reason why that had my temper flaring.

Because after making love to her many times throughout the night, we had laid blissfully exhausted and sated in each other's arms. Which finally allowed us the chance to talk as we each told the other all that had happened that led up to this point.

For my part, I told her what was needed for our plan to work, and on her side, she told me what I already suspected. That she had been a prisoner in her own mind. It was hard to hear all she had been through, but the irony was that using Nero's spell could have ruined everything.

Because we hadn't needed it. Ella had already managed to break through to her old self and convince her of the truth.

The hardest part of this conversation was, unsurprisingly, about her dad.

Of course, I would have liked to have left that up to him to explain.

Considering he was the one lying all these years about who he really was.

But seeing as I wasn't ready to let her go yet, I chose the selfish path and told her the truth.

To say she was shocked was an understatement, and for the most part, I ended up regretting my decision, only fearing it would backfire.

But then as I continued to tell her the reason why he had kept it secret, she had finally started to calm down.

Now as for the part I played in it... well, this was when Ella got upset.

Because I had to admit when I discovered the truth about her father.

Although I was quick to point out that I never planned for her to jump through a fucking portal when attacked by Hellhounds, so she eventually gave me a pass on that.

As for discovering her mum being sick, this was when she started to cry, and it pained me to be the one to have to tell her.

But as painful as it was for her, I went on to explain how her dad was healing her, and this most certainly helped.

Especially when telling her that now she would never know the heartache of losing her parents to old age, as like the rest of us, they were immortal.

Her sweetest words followed as she told me how she felt like I had just given her the greatest gift, and I wasn't the only one.

Ella was quick to bestow one of her own, with confirmation that my brother was still alive. Which was what led on to her 'plan'. And this was where our problems had

started. What she wanted to do was something I just couldn't allow to happen.

She wanted me to let her go back there.

Needless to say, things got loud, and not in a good way.

Not like before when we were tearing each other's clothes off and fucking for hours on end.

Oh, but how I wish that we had been, as it was a fuck load more fun, that was for sure.

Because no matter how many reasons she gave me, how much dire end of the world shit she presented, there was absolutely no fucking way I was letting her go again!

No fucking way I was allowing her to do something so foolish. To go back to that fucker.

No. Fucking. Way.

Which was what I told her.

And her response... She had lured me into a false sense of security, waited until I fell asleep, and left, no doubt to go over her plan with everyone else. So yeah, I was pissed.

"Jared, put me down! This is ridiculous!" she argued, and just because I was furious, I dumped her on the bed, making her wild hair fly all around her face.

I also forced myself to ignore how fucking adorable this made her look.

Then because I didn't particularly want to have this argument butt naked, I grabbed my pants and yanked them on before facing her.

"They needed to know everything that had happened," was the first argument that left her lips.

"And your ridiculous plan, did they need to know that as well?" I snapped, making her sigh.

"Look, I know you're worried."

"Worried? Ella, I am fucking terrified here!" I shouted, making her flinch, and I instantly felt like a bastard.

The sight was enough to get me to calm it down a notch. I knew she didn't need the stress after everything she had been through, and I hated that she still felt the weight of this war on her shoulders.

"And you don't think I am?" she asked, and I sighed before joining her on the bed.

"We will find a way."

Placing her hand on my thigh, she told me,

"There is no other way, Jared."

I growled in frustration, raking both my hands through my loose hair and tying it back before I ripped it from my scalp in anger.

"Answer me this, what would be the point to have rescued you, just to send you straight back there?!" I snapped, but damn her fucking logic as she told me,

“So that I could tell you the plan, because I can’t do this alone.”

I got to my feet again, before I started prowling the tent, pacing like my HellBeast was about to crawl out of my fucking skin.

“The answer is no,” I stated firmly, making her scoff, now standing herself and folding her arms across her chest. One that, unlike mine that was still bare, was covered in the dress she had obviously learned how to summon for herself.

The same green one she had been wearing yesterday that brought out the color in her eyes and the red in her hair.

Hair that she had left loose, wild, and free...

as it should have been. In fact, the whole outfit made her look like some ethereal forest goddess, and I tried not to stare at the fuckable way her dress pushed her breasts together.

Gods, she was beautiful and, once again, she was making me fucking hard for her.

But now was hardly the time to start thinking with my dick, despite what I would rather be doing to her... which was much more than having this fucking conversation.

“It’s cute that you think you have the power to make that decision,” she shot back in a dry tone, and damn it if her sass didn’t also make me hard.

Fuck sake, but why couldn’t we be arguing back home at Devil’s and not on the cusp of some fucking end of the world war?! Not dealing with yet another megalomaniac asshole who wanted to rule the fuck all left after he had burnt it to the ground.

“I do have that power,” I stated, making her point out,



“And the other Kings, do you not think they also have that right?” she threw at me but I, in turn, threw one right back at her.

“And your father? Do you think he doesn’t have a say in this?” Her face twisted in anger at what I knew was a low blow.

“Don’t you dare bring him into this!”

“But he is in this, don’t you see? We turned him into a fucking Vampire just to get his arse to Hell and all for what?

For you to become Garmr’s fucking puppet again!

?” I shouted, and this was the exact point I wanted to punch myself, as I knew I had gone too far.

Something her expression told me as I watched it crumble before hardening in anger.

“I can’t believe you would throw that in my face!” she shouted, making her way out of the tent.

I winced before reaching out and stopping her.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” I admitted, making her at least lose some of the tension in her shoulders. “But, Ella, don’t you see, that is exactly what could happen again if I let you go and do this.”

Her reaction softened, and instead of pulling away, she surprised me by throwing her arms around me.

“But I know it won’t.”

“Ella,” I said her name on a sigh before she pulled back enough to add,

“You have to trust me here.”

“I do trust you,” I said, despite not being sure that I did.

Not in the way she was referring to. Because how could she know what was truly coming?

The lengths that Garmr would go to? What if she did manage to fight off his control, what would he do to her when he realized that she was no longer useful to him?

I knew exactly what he would do...

He would use her against me, and he would fucking win! Because if he ever had a blade to her neck then I would give him the fucking world if it meant saving her life.

“See, you say that, but your eyes tell me something else,” she said after pulling back further to look at me, and damn her for knowing me too well.

“He will use you against me,” I admitted, making her shake her head and tell him,

“Not if my plan works... a plan, I might add, you pretty much shut down before even listening to properly. A plan I was just in the middle of telling the others when you and your big swinging cock showed up,” she said, making me smirk at her choice of words.

“You trying to butter me up with compliments, Red?”

She scoffed and said, “Oh please, like you don’t know it’s big.”

I yanked her closer and growled.

“Fits in you just fine, baby... my tight little pussy,” I said, cupping between her legs.

She moaned and gave me some of her weight and fuck me, but I loved how ready she always was for me. Or maybe not, as she took a step back and shook herself, trying to clear her mind before accusing,

“I know what you’re doing.”

“Trying to fuck my woman and make her scream for me, fuck yeah, I am.”

She chuckled before telling me,

“Yes, well as nice as that would be, we do have more important things to do. Like, you know, all this end of the world shit,” she said, mimicking my words. However, there was only one word I focused in on. A word that made me grab hold of her once more.

I pulled her close and growled down at her,

“Nice?”

Her lips twitched as she fought a grin, instead mocking me by shrugging her shoulders.

“It was delightful?” she teased again, making me growl louder as we continued our banter. So, I ran my nose up the length of her neck and asked her,

“Delightful, did you say?”

I felt her shudder at the feel of my lips against her sensitive skin.

“Hmm, perhaps I could add more words, charming, agreeable... ooh, enchanting...” she said.

I pulled back and raised a brow at her, enjoying the way she tried not to grin. Fuck, I loved her playful side.

“Charming, agreeable... enchanting?” I mocked.

She was unable to hold back the smirk this time, scoffing a laugh as she said,

“Take your pick.”

I framed her face and pulled her so close I growled my next words over her lips.

“Trying fucking addictive!” Then I kissed her, and like our first kiss yesterday, my whole body came alive. It was as if she was the cure to a fractured soul. Everything within me just felt right and whole again.

It was of little wonder my issue with letting her go again. I didn’t want to risk losing her... and for good this time...

I didn’t want to risk losing my heart.

But then when she pulled back and placed her forehead to mine, she also placed a hand to my cheek, covering my scar in a tender, sweet gesture. Then she said in a soft voice,

“Please, baby, just listen to my plan... for me?”

The request made me grit my teeth as I clenched my jaw. Something she felt beneath her palm. Because she knew I could rarely deny her anything, which was why I finally conceded.

“Alright, I will listen but understand now that I make no promises to like it.”

Knowing that this was as good as she was going to get from me right now, she nodded. Then she took my hand and led me from the tent, walking us back toward the war room.

I would have asked why, but the moment I saw the faces of the other women, I knew I had just walked into a trap. Because here she would have backup on her side, meaning...

I was so screwed.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Exchange of Hearts

Ella

“ H

oly shit, that’s a big army,” Amelia said next to me, after grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze in comfort.

As for my other hand, this hadn’t left Jared’s since we started making our way back toward Garmr. We were still out of sight from where we were to make the exchange, but high enough we could see the army that looked like some dark entity that was taking over and consuming the land.

I was surprised that I had actually managed to get Jared to this point.

Although, he was still yet to actually let me go.

But after the meeting in the war room days earlier, then what choice did he have?

Not only was his brother’s life on the line, but so was the fate of the world, and all the realms combined.

Which was like I had said to him, when yet again, this morning, he was trying to talk me out of it...

“And where would we live in our happy ever after?” Because everything would be

gone or under Garmr's and his master's rule.

A question that finally tipped the scales in my favor.

As for the meeting, the room had been full, and that was only with the key players there.

A lot of them I recognized, and quite a few I still didn't.

My father and I had spoken that morning when Jared was still asleep, no doubt exhausted after worrying about me and his brother for so long.

But I knew, after everything Jared had told me the previous night, that I needed to speak with him, especially hearing how my mother had cancer.

That knowledge had broken my heart, but to also know she hadn't wanted to tell me for fear of me worrying about her, that had been my limit and made me cry even harder.

Like I said, it had been a lot, but in the end, the thing that made it all better was not only the knowledge that my dad could save my mom's life.

No, it was also the knowledge that I wouldn't have to watch as they grew old or got sick.

Because this was, undoubtably, the hardest part of learning I was now immortal.

All the loved ones I would be forced to say goodbye to.

Of course, my dad was sorry for all he kept from me, but after talking to me about the reasons why, I definitely understood it better.

But more than that, it was knowing the sacrifice he had made for me in coming here.

How they'd had no choice but to turn in him to a Vampire, tying him to Lucius for eternity. And his response had been a simple,

“There isn't anything I wouldn't do for my daughter.”

Of course, this became another thing to make me cry, and I threw myself into my father's arms.

I dreaded to think what could have happened had he not been there to bring me back to myself. Which also had me questioning, what happened to Anástasi?

Where was she now?

Was that part of me once again locked away, along with memories of my past life? Memories I knew Garmr had spent a great deal of time stealing from us. I didn't have the answer.

But I did have a plan to end this.

Which was why when I walked into the war room a few days ago, I knew I would have to convince everyone that there was the only one way to win this war.

But I would need to convince Jared most of all.

As for my father, I had told him before the meeting what I planned to do, telling him it was my destiny.

That I was the only one who could end this and that he would have to trust me.



They all would.

I knew he hadn't liked it but what choice was there?

It was this or let the whole world burn...

the world in which my mom lived in. His pained expression when I pointed this out was one I didn't relish in.

But, in the end, his acceptance came in the form of him hooking me behind the neck, pulling me closer, and kissing me on the forehead. Then with choked words, he told me,

"Proud of you... I am so fucking proud of you, Ella."

Before he could break down in front of me, he walked away just as I saw the first tear fall. From that, I knew he wouldn't be in the meeting with us.

He already knew what was coming.

I was quickly introduced to everyone I didn't know, making me wonder if I would remember all their names. I most certainly would their faces, because they made for the most interesting people and, understandably, unforgettable.

Like the McBain brothers, who literally looked like they had just walked off the cover of some period romance novel, one set in Scotland featuring highland warriors.

Each one was handsome in their different ways.

The biggest one, however, would have been scary as hell due to his size and the sight of that massive hammer resting on the floor beside him.

But I swear the second he smiled, it was like being scared of Santa Claus!

He looked so fucking jolly, anyone would have thought this was a party we were arranging, not war.

Although, considering how he was dressed, I would venture a guess and say war made him happier than cake and presents.

As for Nero, I could tell she and my cousin were good friends, which by extension made me instantly like her.

Plus, she was beautiful in an unconventional way, and I could tell after about all of thirty seconds, that one of the Scottish brothers had it bad for her.

She was clearly playing hard to get, something he didn't seem to mind at all.

Now as for the scariest new edition, his name was Carn'reau, and he looked like someone who could slit your throat in your sleep without you hearing a single footstep.

He looked like some dark, dangerous elf that would have made Legolas from Lord of the Rings piss his pants.

Lucius introduced him as commander of his armies, one that had arrived and was at the ready to fight.

Garmr wasn't the only one whose army had grown, because our camp was now ten times as big as it was when I had seen it last. Demons, creatures, and supernatural beings from the far reaches of Hell were here, ready to save the realms from destruction and chaos.

An army that would have had a chance at winning now that I was no longer being used as a tool...

as a way to bring back his souls once they had died on the battlefield.

However, I had to break the dire news about Garmr's secret weapon.

"Before my rescue, Garmr was able to control me long enough to have me bring something back to life, something far bigger than I have ever seen before," I told them, and they didn't seem surprised by this. But I soon understood why, when Jared told me,

"Our spies saw an army traveling toward the castle, they were heaving something on a platform."

I looked around the room, one that held nothing but people, and a large table in the center with what looked like a map of the Underworld upon it.

Names written there that I now recognized myself after being to some of those places.

But my eyes lingered on the castle I had just been recused from, and my mind went back to the danger that lay hidden in the mountain on the map.

"Its name was Fenrir," I told them, and at the mention of this, there were a series of gasps, curses, and shocked faces all around, telling me that most knew of this beast.

"That would be the chaos we spoke of, as it looks like they have found a way to bring Helheim to the Underworld," my uncle stated in furious tone.

"Fuck, that will mean the end of us," Koro hissed.

“And the start of Ragnarok,” a muscular blonde man said, one who wore a hooded jacket and had strange tattoos on his hands. A man introduced as Sigurd.

“Er, for those of us that skipped Norse Mythology, who exactly is Fenrir?” my aunt Keira said. My uncle’s lips twitched, and Amelia smirked. But then to make her feel better, I also commented,

“Yeah, I skipped that class too.” Something that prompted my aunt to wink at me. But before anyone could speak up again, Jared said,

“Perhaps it is best we focus on the battle plan and then we can...”

Tyr frowned and decided to interrupt, starting with,

“She needs to know the truth, HellBeast.”

Of course, the second Jared growled and took a step closer to where Tyr on the opposite side of the table, I placed a hand at his stomach. The feel of his abs clenching told me how much he disliked the God. But despite how little he liked him for his interference, Tyr was right, I needed to know.

“Fenrir is also known as Vanargand, meaning...”

“Monster of the River Van,” the big guy, Sigurd, finished for him, seeing as they were obviously of the same Norse descent. Tyr nodded to him.

“Sounds cheery,” Pip commented, before slapping a hand to her mouth when her husband shook his head down at her.

“Oops, sorry, forgot this was a non-speaking role.”

Aunt Keira chuckled before Tyr continued,

“As you no doubt already know, Fenrir is a giant, monstrous wolf, he is also the son of Loki and the giantess Angrboea.”

“Er, and just to clarify here, Loki isn’t like the loveable rouge character from the Avengers movies... right?” my aunt asked again.

“Oh yes, I also want to know this,” Pip said, making Sophia groan next to her husband, as the two of them had only arrived that day, after gathering Zagan’s own legions.

“He is no loveable rouge. But that of an angry God,” Tyr told them and once again, before Pip could comment, Adam shook his head at her.

“Right Loki, bad guy, gotcha... I’m sorry, please continue,” my aunt said, making Tyr nod in thanks. As for Sigurd, he just looked amused.

“Perhaps we should go with the quick and easy version,” Amelia suggested, and before Tyr could speak again, Marcus interjected,

“Big bad wolf was tied up by the gods but is destined to break free, eat Odin, and start Ragnarok... that about right?” he asked, making Sigurd shrug and agree.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Whereas Tyr released a frustrated sigh.

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“I was the one trusted to capture him and administer the chains that bind him,” he told us, making only half of us look shocked... and most likely all the ones who skipped Norse class with me and my aunt.

“Yes, and so I hear that doing so cost you your hand when he bit it off,” Sigurd said, grinning at the man like he was a legend, and I guess, to the big Viking, he was.

“Oh, just like you, Luc, look at that, you guys have something in common... hey, did yours just grow back like his did? Wait, did you have to look like Michael Jackson too? Oh, my giddy aunty days, that was some funny shit... do you remember that? I would make these sound effects when he walked by or if he asked something serious, I would answer, ‘sure did, hee-hee,’ or my personal favorite, I would say ‘shamone,’ at the end... honestly, I thought he was going to strangle me,” Pip said, and half of the room looked at her like she was utterly bonkers.

“I am pretty sure he wants to now,” my aunt commented under her breath, whereas Amelia couldn’t stop giggling. Well, that was until Lucius growled down at her and whispered something in her ear that made her blush. It also had her swallowing hard and shutting up pretty quickly.

“I understood very little of that, little Imp, but what I did, makes me think that you are delightfully funny,” Tyr chuckled.

Pip blushed at the compliment and Adam scowled. Something Tyr didn’t take seriously until Sigurd leaned closer and, no doubt, whispered in his ear exactly who Adam was... he must have missed it the first time. I didn’t know Gods could turn so pale.

“I mean no disrespect to you, Abaddon. And to answer your question, yes, my hand grew back, little Imp,” Tyr replied, inclining his head.

“So, the chains I saw, he can’t break free of them?” I asked, getting us back on track and off the idea of Lucius dressed like the famed singer.

“Only his father can break the chains and since he was weakened after his own imprisonment, he needs the souls of others to gain back his strength. Something he has not had access to in the cave where he was exiled. For this is where the myths get it wrong, as it is said that he will only be freed once Ragnarok has begun, but in truth, it is always he who has been destined to start it,” Tyr told me, because clearly, he had something to do with this and seeing as he was also a God, then it wasn’t surprising.

But with this new information it triggered something...

“Wait... what is the word for son and father in your language?” I asked.

“Faeir, is father and Sonr or Nier is son,” Sigurd told me.

“Then it was him,” I muttered.

“Ella?” my uncle asked, making me turn to him and say,

“When I was trying to convince my other self to believe me about Garmr’s true intentions, we snuck into Garmr’s bedroom and hid in hopes of hearing something that would incriminate him.”

“That was clever of you,” my uncle praised.

“Thankfully for me, it paid off, because once there he came in and started speaking with someone who he called Faeir. It had to have been Loki.”

“And what did he say?” Lucius asked.

“That he was nearly strong enough to make a portal and would... oh gods, that he would arrive soon,” I said this last part slowly, looking to everyone who held the same look as I did... unease.

“If we allow this to happen, all will be lost, whether we win the battle or not, it will not matter,” Tyr said, clearly having dealt with Fenrir before... and losing a hand over it.

“Then we cannot allow Loki to gain back the rest of his power,” my uncle said firmly.

“And how are we to prevent that?” Sophia asked, and it was at this point that I said,

“I can.”

Everyone who had been discussing amongst themselves all stopped to look at me. I also felt Jared tense next to me, saying my name in warning.

“Ella.”

“What do you mean, my niece?” Uncle Dom asked.

“Look, I brought Fenrir back, but we all agree that no Fenrir, then no Ragnarok... right?”

“Yes,” Lucius replied first.

“And we all know that a summoner who can give life can also take it away... yes?” Again it wasn’t really a question but more of a statement.



“Ooh, me likey this plan... oh, I mean we don’t likey?” Pip said, adding this part with a wince when Jared growled her way.

“No, we don’t,” he stated firmly. Which was when I stepped back and looked at him.

“I have to do this, I am the whole reason this is happening, Jared.”

“No, we will find another way,” he argued.

“Let her speak, HellBeast, at the very least let us hear what her plan is,” Tyr said in my defense, making Jared grit his teeth before lashing a hand toward Tyr and threatening,

“You stay out of this, it is between me and my woman!”

“But it’s not,” I said, making him frown down at me.

I reached up and cupped his cheek, trying to calm him down while I implored,

“It’s about all of us. It’s about every single person here.

Everyone we care about. My family...” I said, looking in their direction, then looking to Marcus and Jared’s council.

“...your family, your brother, who I know how to save. It’s about my sister and finally giving her a chance at living a life filled with happiness.

But it’s about our life too, Jared. Don’t you see...

? It’s about the life I so desperately want with you but can never have unless we stop this. ”

And it was in this moment that his resolve finally broke, and he pulled me closer, whispering down at me,

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“And you won’t because we will be doing this together... I promise you,” I said, closing my eyes as tears gathered.

I heard his defeated sigh before he finally said,

“Alright, sweetheart, tell us of your plan.”

With those words, I swear there seemed to be a collective sigh of relief leave each person in the room. Which was when I turned to face them all once more and said,

“It’s easy...”

“...We fake a ransom.”

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And The Oscar Goes To

Goodbyes.

I hated Goodbyes.

But when that goodbye was aimed at the man you loved, who looked like he was breaking inside, that goodbye meant something else.

That was the type of goodbye you could barely breathe through.

The one where tears clung to your lashes, even long after they had been shed.

The type that tore at your soul and fractured your heart.

It was the type of goodbye that spoke of so much without the need for words. The one that said,

If I don't make it, I will die loving you.

That was what this goodbye was.

As for the rest of my family, I had told them all how much I loved them, clinging to my father the most. This time, he couldn't hold back his tears. And my last words to him, were a spoken promise between us.

"Tell mom I love her."

“You can tell her yourself when we get home,” he replied, just as I had done with Jared’s brother. But we both knew what that truly meant... Hope that there would still be a home.

We all hoped for it, but there was no guarantee I was making it out of this alive.

It was why I hadn’t told any of them about the baby.

Because I didn’t want them to have yet another life to mourn.

In the days leading up to this point, I even made Lerna promise not to ever tell anyone.

She was the only one that knew, and I wanted to keep it like that.

If I couldn’t tell my family under happy circumstances, then I didn’t want them to ever know. Of course, she tried to talk me out of it but I wouldn’t hear of it, making her promise me regardless.

As for our plan, everyone knew the importance of this last battle.

All the Kings and leaders were at the ready to lead their armies into what they were calling the War of Souls.

For these generals had made their own battle plan, spending long hours in the war room until everyone knew where their forces were supposed to be.

My uncle was naturally the one in charge of this plan, which was simple enough...

Fight until victory or die trying.

I remembered hearing this being said at the last meeting. My uncle hammering his fist to the table over the image of the castle. And with this, my aunt's voice entered the room behind him.

“And try we will, but as a family.”

All heads turned to the door, only to find that the men in the room weren't the only ones dressed in battle gear.

“We discussed this!” my uncle said, but my aunt just scoffed.

“You didn't really think we would listen, did you?” she said, patting him on the cheek in a patronizing way.

“Yeah, sorry, Pops, this isn't just your fight,” my cousin added, winking at me as she joined them at the same time as Pip and Sophia, who were also dressed ready for battle.

“Amelia, we also talked about this,” Lucius snapped, to which she simply winked at him and said,

“Yeah, but when do I ever really listen?”

After which the arguments started, only ending when a rider from Garmr's forces arrived with a letter.

So, I took the precautions Jared advised, and raised my hooded cloak up over my head so the guard wouldn't be able to convey anything to Garmr about seeing me.

The demon, who had pale, grey puckered skin, beady black eyes, and a face that looked like it had been chewed on by a dog for a week, pulled back on the reins of the

beast he travelled on.

“I seek the HellBeast King.”

Jared, who had his arms folded, nodded silently.

Then the demon pulled a letter from his satchel and held it out to him.

Jared snatched it from the rider sitting on the back of a snarling beast, one that looked like a Hellhound and a horse had one ugly ass baby.

But the second it snapped its jaws at Jared, his own beast responded, roaring at the creature and letting pieces of his HellBeast emerge.

This made it whimper in submission before the rider took control of it again as it tried to flee.

“My Lord expects a reply by nightfall.”

“And he will fucking get one, now go, before I send it back with your severed head!” Jared threatened.

The rider left and Jared tore open the black, wax seal, unrolling the scroll of parchment. He started scanning it and I watched as his jaw clenched.

“What is it, what does it say?” I asked, but he handed it to me and replied bitterly,

“You have your wish.”

As he walked away angrily, I knew why. Because his last hope had been in Garmr not replying. Of not finding the letter we left behind, or not being willing to make the

exchange.

But that last hope had fled because Garmr had found the letter and was willing to hand over his brother for Anástasi. Which brought us to now, and our painful goodbye.

“You have everything you need?” Jared asked me, checking my hidden bag, one tucked under my long, dark green cloak.

I took his hands in mine because we both know he had checked it three times already. And it was all because my survival depended on what was in the bag.

But first came making the exchange.

For that, I had needed chains and a witch.

Chains that Nero was at the ready with as she stood back, giving us our last goodbye. We had travelled in a covered wagon because Jared hadn't wanted to take any chances with me being seen by Garmr's spies.

Besides, I was playing the part of the prisoner, so with that logic they would need a way to transport me to the castle.

Garmr had to be convinced that Anástasi was too uncontrollable to keep in their camp any longer.

That they had tried and failed to bring Ella back and as a result, she had threatened to kill everyone unless they gave her back.

Not willing to risk it, they had bargained to give back to her precious Garmr, but only in exchange for Orthrus.

And as for Garmr, he had taken the bait up until now.

But I knew I was going to have to put on one hell of a show for it to work completely.

I was going to have to act like his murderous Anástasi.

Yet as for right now, I had a few more minutes of being Ella, and I was going to use every second of them with my HellBeast.

“You know, I think we need to throw a party once this is all over... when’s your birthday again?” I asked, making him sigh and tell me,

“I know what you’re doing, Red.”

“Being optimistic and looking to the future, you bet I am, Beastman,” I replied, making him place his hands at my waist and pull me closer.

“Fuck, but I missed you calling me Beastman,” he told me tenderly, wrapping his arms around me, prompting me to do the same.

“Well... Macho Man Supreme Bone Crusher was taken,” I said, referring to what I nicknamed his brother once, making him scoff. But when silence ensued, I looked up at him and told him, “I will bring him back to you.”

He nodded.

“As I will come for you,” he vowed, which meant it was my turn to nod, before I hugged him tighter, holding my cheek to his chest so I could tell him,

“I love you, Jared Weller. My HellBeast King.”



I felt the rabid beating of his heart as well as heard it when he swallowed hard. Pulling back enough to look at me, he cupped my cheeks and told me,

“I love you, Ella, my HellBeast Queen.” Then he kissed me and this time, it was to the taste of our joint tears.

“Promise me, Ella, promise me you will do everything in your power to survive this... fucking promise me... please,” he said, and my heart broke at the desperation in his voice. So, I held my forehead to his and told him,

“I promise.”

“It’s time, J,” Marcus said, and I turned to walk down the steps of the wheeled platform the caged wagon was built on. Before I made it there, I felt my hand taken and Jared pulled me back.

“Don’t do this... please, Ella, I beg of you.”

I closed my eyes and let my forehead hit his chest.

“Jared.”

“I have a bad feeling... I just can’t shake it. I...” he tried to say more but I was quick to stop him, hating the panic I saw building in his eyes.

“Hey,” I said, cupping his cheek. “Listen to me, what happened to every Chosen One?”

“Fate,” he replied, making me nod.

“Yes, Fate. Their destiny happened, and each and every time it brought them back to

their King. Back to the keeper of their heart. We have to believe in that, Jared. We have to hold on to that,” I told him, but his pained voice asked,

“Hold on to what, Ella?”

“That soon it will be our turn... our turn for our own happy ever after,” I told him, whispering over his lips before kissing him one last time. Then I forced myself to pull back and say, “Showtime, handsome.”

With a wink, I walked toward Marcus, who waited with Nero. And this time, Jared was forced to let me go. Then I held out my hands to Nero and asked,

“So, will these really work?”

“Yes, as soon as Garmr breaks them, Dariush will have a location, he knows the plan.”

I nodded and held out my hands for her to cuff my wrists. The elaborate metal etched with glowing symbols was supposed to fool Garmr into believing this withheld my power. At least enough to stop me from going batshit and killing everyone.

“Give them a try,” she asked, and I yanked on them, making them flash and glow angrily.

“Neat,” I said, making her grin, the white tattoos on her chin becoming more pronounced.

“And it’s all for show, right?” Jared asked.

“I promise you, she doesn’t feel a thing, but she will have to act like she feels everything.”

“Damn it, but why didn’t I do drama instead of dancing?” I joked.

“Well, not sure your portrayal of Hamlet on stage would have had quite the same effect as your Little Red Riding Hood dance, but the skull in your hand would have got him going,” Marcus joked, slapping Jared on the back and making him sneer in return.

I laughed before pulling him in for a hug, and when Jared was busy asking Nero questions about the chains, I whispered in Marcus’s ear,

“Take care of him.” I pulled back, his look saying so much, and not a shred of it was funny. Then he released a pained sigh and nodded, agreeing,

“I will.”

“You will what?” Jared asked.

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“I will never hear the end of it if you don’t both get your ass’s out there and act like you hate each other!” he replied, prompting us to do just that.

But as I popped my head out from behind the back of the wagon, I couldn’t help but gasp at the sight of Garmr’s army spread out as far as the eye could see. Of course, he wasn’t the only one, and I glanced back at ours and took in the impressive sight of our own forces.

Standing there, in the middle of both sides, was a lone figure, waiting.

“Orthrus,” Jared gasped out his name. “Get everyone ready,” Jared then said, his voice hard, knowing that once I stepped out there, then, there was no going back. Quite literally, all Hell would break loose.

“You’re up, Nero girl,” Marcus told us, making her nod, saying,

“You just tell those ginger bastards to be at the ready.”

Marcus granted her a salute with the tip of his staff. But I glanced back and nodded to him, silently telling him to remember what I said. Then he turned, ready to walk away, but something stopped him in his tracks and his shoulders tensed. Then he said,

“Fuck it!” He then slammed his staff in the ground, so it stayed there, and he turned suddenly. Striding back to me, he pulled me in for a hug and whispered,

“Listen to the voices, Cookie, follow them, no matter what, promise me, Ella.”

I was so shocked I didn't know what to say, so I nodded as he held me back, his hands at my shoulders, looking in my eyes until he was satisfied. And with that he left.

"What did he say to you?" Jared asked, and because I didn't want to chance anything going wrong, I told him,

"He told me to be careful," I said, watching him as he ran toward the others, who were all waiting for the signal.

My family.

"It's time, Chica," Nero told me, and I nodded before stepping out from the proverbial stage curtains.

And there was Garmr, appearing from a portal he created behind his own prisoner.

So, with him watching, it was time for everyone's game face.

Which meant that when I walked past Jared, he made a show of looking disgusted with me.

He turned his head away, before following behind where Nero walked, gripping my arm like my warden.

"Get moving!" Nero shouted, giving my shackled arm a shove.

"Nice," I muttered, making her speak while barely moving her lips.

"Thanks, think I missed my calling?"

“Totally,” I agreed.

Her lips twitched but other than that, she didn’t give anything away. Especially the closer to the enemy we got, but then as soon as we were within hearing distance, Jared shouted,

“That’s far enough!”

“I have to say, I am surprised, HellBeast,” Garmr said in that overly confident tone, and when I struggled to get free, Nero held up her hand, making the shackles crackle with fake power. And as for me, it was my cue for my Oscar winning performance to start.

I screamed in pain and dropped to my knees, doing so hard enough that it would actually hurt and therefore look more convincing. And whereas Jared remained passive and unaffected, keeping his arms crossed, Garmr did not.

“Anástasi!” he called out to me. But when I got up and lunged for Nero, with my hands about to try and strangle her in my fury, I stopped inches away.

I shook the shackles, making them spark like crazy.

I tried to look like I was struggling against her non-existent hold, whereas she simply ended up looking like a bad ass.

She held up her hand, like she was in control of my restraints.

“I... WILL... KILL... YOU!” I screamed at her, but because I had my back to Garmr when I did so, I added a wink to it.

When she gave me a nod, I dropped to the floor again, faking agony as I writhed on

the floor, my dress getting caught up around me.

“Alright stop... STOP IT!” Garmr shouted like he couldn’t stand it anymore.

“You know what I want, Garmr. Hand over my brother and you get your summoner back... and your fucking war!” Jared snapped, sneering back at me.

There was such venom in his burning eyes that had I thought it was real, I would have flinched back in fear.

As it stood, I just wished I was free to boop him on the nose in some comical cute gesture.

“Get up, traitor!” Nero snapped, grabbing me under the arm and yanking me up to my feet. At this, I asked her through my teeth,

“Is he looking?”

“Yeah.”

So, I gave her slight nod, and like we planned, she looked the other way back at our army, giving me the chance to steal her blade and hide it down by my skirt.

Jared also knew to be looking away from us at this point, so it looked like I had just pickpocketed her weapon.

One I would need if I was to get Garmr to believe this ruse completely.

Because he would accept nothing but blood being split.

I turned to start walking, giving Jared the cue to issue his demands.

“You know how this works, asshole, my brother walks this way, and your bitch does the same!”

“And you would so easily give up on who you believe is your woman?!” Garmr tested, but as I passed him, Jared snarled at me and said,

“She isn’t my Ella anymore! You made fucking sure of that!

My Ella is dead because of you and you will fucking pay for every life she took from me!

” Then he nodded to Nero, who pushed me along, while Jared remained where he was.

And I could see how difficult it was for him to do so.

He even took a step forward but forced himself not to take another.

My heart was in my throat the whole time, silently begging for him not to break.

Not to ruin the plan and snatch me away like I knew he wanted to.

So, the more distance that stretched out between us, the harder it became to breathe.

I so badly wanted to look back, just as much as he wanted to no doubt run for me.

But then as Orthrus got closer, I could see that he was wearing the same fake shackles that Anástasi had changed.

Meaning his wounds on the outside were superficial, keeping them there like we had planned...



so that he appeared weak, when internally he would have healed himself.

Garmr nodded to his own guard, a large demon with a horned helmet that hid most of his features, exposing only his lower jaw that looked like rotting flesh, exposed bone, and pointed teeth. What did he have, a zombie army or something?!

Orthrus staggered forward on his own, before straightening enough to walk without being aided, and Nero did the same. Which meant we both walked toward each other. My face was passive as Orthrus frowned when he saw me. Because of course this hadn't been a part of the plan I had told him about.

I never told him the exchange would be me.

In fact, when he started shaking his head, saying,

“No... no, not you.” I thought the plan would go to hell... literally.

But then he looked to his brother and whatever he heard in his mind or saw on his face, made him continue to walk toward me.

The second he was close enough, I grabbed the dagger I had hiding and told him,

“I'm sorry... but it had to be me.”

Then I stabbed him.

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War of Souls

“ N

O!” Jared roared as Orthrus fell to the ground clutching his stomach with his bleeding hands.

Hands I had no choice but to slice in order to make this look real.

Because of course, I hadn’t actually stabbed him.

I only had to make it look like I had, something Jared knew would happen so as to get someone on the inside. Someone Garmr would foolishly trust.

Me.

Which had been my plan all along, one Jared knew. So, to play his part, Jared ran to his brother as I went off running toward the enemy, Garmr. And as soon as I was close enough, Garmr did what I had expected him to do.

He bellowed out his command to kill them all.

But seeing as we planned for this exact thing to happen, Nero had her spell cast at the ready.

She threw up her hands and created a blue barrier above them.

The size of the blue ring was no bigger than that of a large umbrella that only just covered all three of them.

Jared reached his brothers side just as a rain of arrows filled the sky, heading their way.

As for me, I had to hold back everything in me not to react in horror as I looked behind me and saw the three of them in danger.

I just hoped that Nero's barrier was strong enough!

And thank the gods it was, but when the second wave hit, raining down on them, I could see her barrier was starting to fail, making her shout,

“IT WON'T HOLD!”

Oh god, what had I done! Had I made a mistake?

Had I put them all in too much jeopardy of getting injured?

! I was so close to using my powers to protect them, saying to hell with the plan, when suddenly I saw a great shadow flying ahead.

And no sooner could it have arrived because this was the cavalry we had planned for!

A third wave of arrows began coming down at them an almighty roar tore through the air.

Then just before the arrows could destroy the rest of Nero's cover, fire shot across the sky in a long, burning stream.

The arrows all caught fire, scorched to a crisp, and all that was left was ash raining down on them.

I couldn't help but look up, watching as the McBain brothers swooped across the sky toward Garmr's army, bellowing out even more fire, this time aimed below.

The combined shifter was a sight to behold, a three headed dragon with three sets of wings, tails, and feet, each different from the other. It was an incredible sight, and even more incredible was the devastation it made on Garmr's front line.

"NO!" Garmr roared in anger at being denied his kill before his gaze quickly returned to me.

Which meant, next, came the hardest part, and not just for me, but for Jared also.

Because the second I was close enough, I threw myself into Garmr's awaiting arms, tossing my shackled hands up over his head and around his neck.

Everything in me tried not to recoil back from his embrace, instead forcing my body to relax into it.

"My love!" Garmr said as I cried into him, trying to seem overcome with emotion and relief that we were back together again. As for what was happening behind me, I could hear both sides of the army now charging toward each other.

"Are you hurt?" he asked me, pulling back as much as the chains would allow.

"No, unlike that HellBeast!" I sneered, before adding, "I told you he was mine to punish."

Garmr grinned down at me, telling me that I had been right, my plan so far was

enough to fool him.

“That you did, my love,” he cooed, but then the dragon started to swoop low and blow fire our way. “Quickly, I need to get you out of harm’s way and far from the battle.”

I nodded before he pulled me into the portal. And with each step, he was lured into doing just as we had planned. Because I knew with the added threat headed our way from the sight of the McBain brothers, he would quickly want to leave.

We had planned for them to do this. To put on a show of danger heading our way, and it just added yet another reason for Garmr not to doubt me. And it had worked, because in his panic, he pulled me through the portal that transported us back onto the balcony high on the castle’s battlements.

From way up here, we could see the whole battle at a close enough distance, but without being in danger of it touching us.

“We will not join the fight?” I asked, knowing what Anástasi would have said. In fact, after so long being forced to do nothing but listen to her, it wasn’t surprising just how easy it was to play the part.

“No, not yet, for we have something far more important to do,” he told me before I looked below, keeping my eye on the fight and watching as my uncle led his many legions into battle.

As did the others, and a line of well armored demons all raised their weapons high, about to hit out at what was left of Garmr’s front line.

The scorch marks left in the Earth were still flaming, thanks to the devastation left in the wake of the McBain brothers.

Unfortunately, I also knew that they couldn't keep this form for long, even less so when producing fire.

Which was why hitting that first line of defense had been so important, because what was left of Garmr's first legion was easily defeated.

But this was when I started to notice something odd, quickly looking back at Garmr behind me to ask,

"Where are all the Hellhound souls I brought back? Should they not be fighting?" I asked, instantly having a bad feeling about this.

"No, they are not intended for here," he told me, making me frown back at him.

"But you told me..."

He stepped up to me and took hold of my chin.

"Do you trust me, my queen?"

I was forced to nod, before agreeing.

"Yes, of course, but..."

"Then it is time to bring forth your souls, for they will be needed in this next part of the fight," he said, taking my hands in his and looking down at my shackles. I felt myself tense because I knew this was the moment we had been waiting for. He frowned down at them and asked,

"These held back your power?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak in fear of what I might give away.

“She must have been a very powerful witch to cast these,” he said and when he added no more, I knew he was expecting me to say something to this. So, with no choice but to continue to play the part, I told him only half truths.

“My sister, she was there.”

“What?” he asked, shocked.

“Lerna, she was the one who took me from you. I awoke and she smashed something, I breathed it in and it made me sleep. After this I woke up and found myself in the camp and I...”

“You what? Tell me?” he asked eagerly, so I looked up at him in what I prayed was a hopeful expression, one he would take as me seeking his approval.

“I wanted to make you proud.”

His eyes widened before he pulled me close enough to kiss my forehead and again, I had to hold so still, forcing myself not to pull away.

“Did you kill many of them?” he asked, his tone vengeful and full of dark promise.

“Yes, my temper... I just... I just hated that they had taken me from you,” I said, and I knew this was the right thing to say because he grinned.

“Good, you did well, my love. And these?” he asked, nodding to my hands.

“They must have had another spell, as I woke once more, only to find myself bound and unable to attack any more of his men,” I said, now feeling the strange sense of

satisfaction... one firmly labeled... revenge.

As this was exactly what Garmr had done to me.

Tried to make me believe his lies, over and over again.

And now... I was finally doing the same back to him.

But unlike what he had done to Anástasi, the difference was that he wanted to believe every word.

He hadn't been forced like she had been.

I hadn't used any powers or stripped him of thoughts of his feelings.

He simply heard what I told him and believed what he wanted to and that... that made all the difference.

That made him the vulnerable one.

A captive to my lies.

So, I smiled, held out my hands to him, and asked,

“Let me help you win this war. Take these away and watch as I do what I was born to do... let me be your Summoning Queen,” I added for good measure, and his face showed nothing but love and admiration.

“You don't know what this means to me, Anástasi.”

I bowed my head back to the shackles, trying not to be affected by the sound of so



many deaths below.

Because I wanted this war to be over. I wanted to save as many of our side as I could.

And the longer he waited, the more soldiers would die.

The more chance that someone I loved could get hurt... or worse.

Thankfully, he took my hands in his once more and when his eyes started to glow crimson, it was all but a few seconds before the restraints snapped.

And with it, what would soon mark the end.

But first, I would put on a show, transforming my dress back into my own battle gear.

One that not long ago, Jared had stripped off me, before claiming me as his once more.

Every inch of me was now protected, from my knee length boots, my skintight pants, and my long tunic. But unlike before, I had added to it, with plated armor over my shoulders as a form-fitted breastplate that showcased the symbol for the house of Hades.

My true heritage.

Then I let the power flow through me, relishing in it once more after being parted from it for so long. Because Anástasi had been the one in control before. But now...

Now it was my turn to play the part of the true queen.

He just didn't know that I wasn't his yet.

I was Jared's.

And I always would be.

I turned to face the thousands of soldiers below, feeling Garmr stepping up behind me, whispering to me,

“Take out the front line. The kings, their queens... they are all there. The ones who want you dead. Hit them with the power only you possess, my love.”

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

I closed my eyes and let the power rise up within me.

My book appearing at my side, and with a mere flick of my hand, it was so easy to flip open the pages and release them all as one.

The pages turned quicker than the eye could see, and one after another, every green soul in my collection all flew down below, creating a line of unbeatable entities for Jared's army to fight first.

“Do it! Make them pay, Anástasi!” Garmr growled behind me with glee. The anticipation of the kill made his voice more dark and sinister than usual.

“Oh, I will make them pay!” I said, my voice now that of someone else.

And I sucked in a quick breath when I felt her there.

The other side of me. Anástasi had forced those words out, her voice demonic and angry.

The power shot from me, and with it a command I was almost fearful of, for they all went charging toward the wrong side.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Garmr said behind me, but then just when I thought I had made a terrible mistake convincing Jared to trust me, something happened. Anástasi turned slowly towards Garmr and for the first time in her controlled life, she said,

“No!” and suddenly, I didn't need to look to know that the souls suddenly stopped

charging toward my uncle's men's. Stopping just before they reached our army.

Each of them evaporated into a green mist that floated right over them. This before each of them reformed back into my souls, only now they were facing Garmr's forces. Which meant that they went charging into battle once more, only this time, they were fighting on our side.

Garmr's eyes went wide as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Red eyes that had haunted my dreams turned from the battlefield, before narrowing on us. He staggered back a little, before anger overtook his features.

"No, no, no... It... it was all a lie... a ruse... you... you aren't my Anástasi!" he accused, and the second I saw what I had been waiting to appear behind him, I told him,

"No, but I am his Ella!"

Then I nodded to the sight of Jared as he grabbed Garmr by the armored jacket he wore and punched him square in the face. Blood erupted around his nose, breaking instantly.

"Now, Ella!"

I didn't need to be told twice... I reached into my bag and grabbed the orb Nero had given me. The one that would incapacitate Garmr for a short time. Because there was still one more thing that we needed to do to win this battle. And for that, we would need a little green goblin.

So, I smashed the orb, knowing it was only intended for him. And thanks to the blood of a Viking volunteer, Nero engineered it so that it would only affect the one with Norse blood running through their veins.

Garmr cried out before he started to choke, thrashing in Jared's hold. Because unfortunately, Jared couldn't just kill him and snap his neck, as much as I knew he wanted to. This being his very first question asked to the Goblin when we had planned for this.

However, the goblin explained that the hex would remain on his dead body with no way of ever getting it off if he we killed him, because you could cast a hex, but you couldn't remove it from a dead corpse.

Which meant the army would only end up fighting in their King's honor.

So, Jared had no choice but to grab him in a choke hold until the spell began to work.

As for the goblin, he stepped through the portal Dariush had created, with Clay right after him.

Clay was the rightful king to the largest portion of the army below.

One that was slowly being beaten and would soon know defeat.

At least that was the plan if we could only get this fucking hex off him.

Speaking of which, Garmr finally went still, forced to watch the end of his reign and unable to do anything about it.

With Garmr paralyzed from the spell, the goblin wasted no time in covering Garmr's head with his hands.

As for Jared, he came straight to me, taking me in his arms and holding me close.

As if the last hour of his life had been the longest yet.

“Are you alright, did he touch you, harm you in anyway?” he asked, his concern for me easy to see. I shook my head and told him,

“No, it all went to plan.”

Jared pulled me closer, holding my head to his chest as I watched the goblin take down the villain once and for all.

And as for Garmr, he was forced to watch me in the arms of the man I truly loved.

The one who hadn't forced me to feel this way.

Hadn't planted lies in my mind or stolen my memories.

It was a love that was real. A love that was pure.

A love not asked for but one freely given.

And now he was made to witness exactly what that looked like.

And with it came the display of that love in the form of a kiss.

A kiss I gave back with just as much passion.

As if erasing the one Jared had been forced to watch Garmr give me that day in the bedchamber as he had been bleeding on the floor. It was as if history was being rewritten after coming full circle to this point.

A cruelty Garmr deserved.

“The hex, where is it?” Clay asked, prompting us to pull back from each other.

The raw pain in Garmr's eyes was the first real emotion I had truly seen in him.

"Hidden away, but over the years, it has bled outwards," the goblin replied, before closing his eyes in concentration.

"It's clinging on," he said in a strained voice, as if removing something that had lasted this long was a challenge he had been expecting. But then Garmr's eyes started to change, turning stark white with small black dots appearing at the centers.

If he had been in control of his body in that moment, he would no doubt have been screaming in agony.

The red scars that marred his face started receding, little by little, back into his hairline.

As if the essence was being drawn back out of him.

His hex, once hidden beneath his hair, had started to show as the years went by, with the evidence of it trickling down his face.

"Can you do it?" Clay asked, after looking to the battlefield as if pained at the sight of his men fighting for the wrong side.

"Yes... just... a little... more... AH HA GOT YOU!" he shouted suddenly and with it, Garmr's eyes closed, making me wonder if it had actually killed him.

Then an invisible current flowed through us, like wind that instead of going around you, actually travelled through you and everything in its path.

We all looked down toward the battlefield and amongst the fighting, we could see large groups of demons all stop, as one by one as it hit them.

Like they were suddenly waking up from a dream before all heads turned as one toward the battlements.

Toward the sight of their true King.

But this reaction didn't just affect them, because suddenly, all of Garmr's past control over me simply disappeared.

As if there had still been an invisible net clung to my skin that, for the first time in forever, had been lifted.

A cord that connected us had snapped and I cried out before falling, with Jared catching me just before I hit the ground.

"Ella!" he shouted my name in panic, and it felt as if I didn't know what to do with my body now that it was free. It was a feeling I hadn't known before, as if a piece of Garmr had always been there.

"Are you alright, what's wrong?" Jared's panicked voice brought me back, making me breathe in and out, at the same time glancing at Clay. I wanted to make sure he was focused on his side of things and when it was clear that he was busy taking back control over his army, I sighed in relief.

"The connection has been severed completely," the goblin offered helpfully, but Jared was barely listening.

His sole focus on me as he cradled my body to him, after first lowering me to the floor.

I gripped onto the black material that molded to his body, curling my fingers around the neckline of his clothes.



“Ella baby, tell me you’re alright.”

“I’m alright... I’m okay,” I told him, making him sigh in relief. Especially when I started to sit up, the feeling now passing me by as my body was getting used to this new freedom. To no longer feel tethered to another, despite never realizing that I had been before.

Jared helped me stand, and it was just in time to watch as Clay’s army started to fight against those they had once been fighting alongside. Something that caused mass chaos between the ranks.

Meanwhile, the rest of our forces were closing in, pushing the enemy back, after thousands of them fell.

We had been right, with Clay’s army and that of my summoned souls, we had started to overpower them.

The ones that were at the back of the battle had even started to flee. However, they didn’t get far, because suddenly a new army appeared just through the valley pass.

“Oh no, are those Garmr’s reinforcements?” I asked, fearful that the battle wasn’t as good as won like I thought.

Jared grinned and said,

“Koro came through on his word.”

His grin told me that they were on our side before the clash of weapons did. Now, Garmr’s army were being forced to fight from all sides, and soon it became clear that we were dominating the battle.

As for the goblin, I glanced back to see that he now had a strange glowing symbol in the middle of his forehead, telling me that this must have been the way he had removed the hex.

By absorbing it into himself somehow. But that's also when I noticed something else, because whereas we had all been busy watching the armies below, we had missed something important, making me ask,

“Where is Garmr?”

Jared's head snapped up and turned to the floor where he should have still been lying... only to find an empty spot. I looked to Jared and with pure panic in my voice, I said only one name...

“Fenrir.”

### Date Night

“C

ome on, I know the way!” I shouted, but before I could get through the door on the balcony, Jared held me back.

“You need to stay here, get back through the portal when Dariush opens it and get back to the camp. Wait for me there and I...”

Hearing this I yanked my hand from his grasp and said,

“No! This is bullshit, we go together, we stay together, and we finish this!” I shouted.

His silver eyes grew wide for a moment before narrowing.

“Ella.”

“No, Jared. This started with us and this will end with us... together. Now we are wasting time, let’s go,” I said firmly, this time holding my hand out to him, waiting for him to trust me.

And I swear it felt like a small eternity waiting for him to put his hand in mine.

But after a small sigh, he did, and the second I curled my fingers around his, I grinned in victory.

And speaking of victory, our last sight of the outside world was as...

We won the battle.

And now, it was time we won the war.

So, with this firmly in our minds and rooted in our destiny, we went off running down the tunnel.

“It’s this way!” I said, looking back at him as we raced through the tunnel toward the caves.

A place it felt like I had been so many times, I could have practically made my way there blindfolded.

Just how many endless hours had Garmr forced Anástasi to spend bringing back soul after soul, doing so until she would pass out from exhaustion?

Well, this time, I went there with a higher purpose.

But as soon as we entered through the entrance into the cave, I gasped.

I had expected to find the Hellhound army...

only to find it empty. And I quickly remembered why.

Because all those creatures I thought I had brought back for battle, were for something else.

I had believed Garmr needed them for his army, to increase his numbers.

But I had been wrong.

“Look!” I said, pointing to the ominous green glow we could see coming from one of the caverns below.

Where we were standing was much higher up from the mountain floor, on a walkway carved straight out of the rock.

A path that snaked down and was the very same one Anástasi and I had tried to use to escape.

Well, there was no escaping today. Not until we finished this.

“Last time I was here, so was Fenrir... I wonder where he has gone?” I asked, getting a really, really bad feeling.

“The last time I was here it was filled with bones,” Jared told me as we ran down to the bottom. Once there, it was easy to cross over to the other side of the mountain and see its hidden caves, thanks to it being empty.

“Yeah, and I think I know where they all went,” I told him, nodding to the only cave entrance that was glowing with the summoned life inside. But as we slowed down, before walking through, Jared took my hand once more and asked,

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Want to? No, I want to be at home watching movies in your kick ass bed, with your drop-down screen, while putting myself into a junk food coma. But hey, it’s a Tuesday, so I guess I am opting to saving the world by fighting a God and his deranged son instead.

Next time, date night is my choice,” I replied with a wink, making him scoff a laugh.

Then before he could ask me again, I told him, “But you know what they say, you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain... so let’s go be heroes, handsome. ”

After seeing Jared’s grin in return, I turned to face the bus-sized hole in the mountain before venturing inside.

The green glow from the other side offered enough light so we weren’t blindly making our way through.

Although, honestly, I couldn’t imagine Jared blindly fumbling his way through anything. Did he ever even stub his toe?

It was a strange question to ask myself, and one I might have asked Jared if we weren’t about to fight Garmr’s bad daddy.

And I wasn’t wrong, because the moment we finally emerged through the other side, what met us was a huge, cavernous open space that looked as if another section of the mountain had been hallowed out.

But then one glance at the jagged rock walls, and I could see that it must have happened naturally, otherwise wouldn’t the walls be smooth and show signs of being chipped away at?

Of course, what did I know about making underground mountain evil lairs, not a lot... but I did know about souls. Which meant I recognized pretty quickly what had been happening here.

In front of us, there was a large round platform, jutting out over a canyon... A dark

and endless chasm below, that was acting as some kind of place of sacrifice.

Two strange moons of light cut across the chasm, looming in the background. The gorge made me wonder how deep the tear in the mountain went, or was it now being filled up with the bones and remains of sacrificial Hellhounds?

Because there, on the platform, I could not only see Garmr, but that of a glowing green portal.

One that was framed by a round frame made up from curved blocks of grey stone, each one etched in runes and Norse symbols.

And before it, one by one, each summoned Hellhound was lined up ready to have the life sucked out of them.

It was a death walk for each of them, and a green mist thickened around them the closer they got.

Their souls rose from them in streams before being sucked into the portal, luring them closer along the path toward the round platform hanging over the edge of the cliff.

By the time they reached the portal, there was nothing left but the bones they started with.

Each of these were then cast over the edge like waste that needed disposing of.

Their remains splitting in half at the portal before bones flew off either side of the swirling vortex and fell to the chasm below.

And unfortunately for us, there wasn't that many left.

Which meant only one thing.

The portal was nearly complete and, with it, brought a God.

“He must have been doing this for days,” I told Jared, who also took in the scene with gritted teeth.

“They were never intended to fight,” I added, making him shake his head before turning to face me.

Gripping the tops of my arms just under my armor, he told me,

“It’s not too late to turn back.”

“You don’t strike me as a quitter,” I said dryly, making him shake his head again.

“I don’t mean for me.”

“Then it looks like that date is just going to have to wait for both of us, Beastman... now, time to get your badass beast on. You take douchebag Garmr, and I will take the angry God,” I replied, meaning he had no choice but to accept that I was going nowhere.

“That seems a bit one-sided,” he commented, making me walk backward, holding my arms out in a cocky way before telling him,

“Daughter of a God, remember?” Then I winked at him before taking off running. I heard him chuckle behind me before doing the same.

“You call me a house pet and I will be pissed, Red,” he said, catching up with me and making me throw my head back to laugh.



“Remind me to pet you later,” I said, smirking at him, loving the way he shook his head as if he didn’t know what to do with me.

Our small pleasure didn’t last long because the second the last Hellhound’s soul was sucked up into the portal, the moment of truth arrived.

All jokes stopped as the famed God Loki appeared.

And this time, it was a Summoner Queen up against...

A Norse God.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

Love is Sacrifice

“F

aeir... at last, you're free!” Garmr said in sight of the masterful figure appearing through the swirling green vortex. It was as if the figure was stepping though from another dimension. And he was not anything like I imagined.

The tall figure had a handsome face that had literal flaming hair.

Fiery strands moved around him like he was under water, and his eyes also burned with fire.

His lips were black and cracked, with branches of what looked like poison veining out under his skin.

As if he had been made to swallow venom.

His naked torso was slender, his muscles covered with tears in his flesh where that same fire was seen moving beneath it.

As if his insides were made from lava. His lower half was covered with lengths of folded black and green material edged in gold.

Pieces of it torn and frayed behind him as it dragged on the floor.

His pants were worn underneath the skirt and looked to be made from patches of

black leather all sewn together.

As for his feet, these were bare and covered in black liquid that stained the skin.

His face, although handsome, was set in a permanent scowl, thanks to his deep-set eyes and low slash of thin brows.

His features were angular, with a slim nose, cut jawline and pointed chin, one he dipped as he regarded his son kneeling on the floor before him.

Then he offered Garmr the back of his hand to kiss before telling him,

“Rise, my Nier, for your kin awaits.” His voice rang out, deep and resounding, making me shiver at the masterful tone.

Turning his head, he looked into the darkness past the portal. Then with a wave of his hand rising up, it made those two moons of light suddenly begin to move. A snarling sound filled the cavernous space as the shadows of beyond started to rise with his hand.

“Fenrir, my son, I am here to free you of your chains at last!” Loki said, lifting his hands up even higher, as Garmr got to his feet before coming to his father’s side.

Both of them watched the darkness move as the giant wolf came closer to the edge.

That was until Loki pushed his power forward, creating a large burst of energy to light up the rest of the cave, showing us the beast who practically filled the other side of the chasm.

Both of them were left looking up as Fenrir started to rise to his feet, the chains pulling tight around him, still keeping him restrained. As for Jared and me, we had

reached the long path leading to where they stood.

“Any ideas on how you want to do this?” Jared asked me, and I shrugged my shoulders before I said,

“I was just going to start by doing this and pissing him off.” Then I threw my hands forward and started to draw back the soul I had been forced to give life to.

Soon making the beast howl so loud that it cracked the cave walls.

Small rocks and dust rained down from above, making me hope that the cave survived this and didn’t just bury us all under a mountain of rock.

Of course, what I knew would happen, happened, because my burst of power alerted them both to our presence. Loki snarled angrily at me, while Garmr shouted for me to stop.

“Anástasi, no!”

“Wow, he really doesn’t get the hint does he...? I best go give him a stronger one,” Jared said, now transforming himself... and Gods what a sight.

His body morphed into something so much larger, and his arms became engulfed in flames.

His hands transformed into that of his beast, with thick claws replacing the short nails.

The T-shirt he wore burnt away, leaving his torso bare, with just his trousers remaining.

A pair he had told me were made from a fire-resistant material made from the skin of a fire salamander.

And good job too, or he would have been fighting in the nude because his body ignited before cooling into the same scaled fur that covered his HellBeast.

But this wasn't the only change... a pair of huge horns grew from his head, and black jagged bone tore through the flesh at his shoulders. Oh, and he was also at least two feet higher than before. It was the first time I had seen him like this, and he caught me with my mouth hanging open in shock.

And his response... he actually fucking winked at me! This new beast of a man, with his burning eyes of hot coals, flirted with me! I had to shake myself as he started running toward Garmr, because the fool had started to run toward me.

However, Loki wasn't about to let me get away with what I was doing for long.

Although, with each draw of Fenrir's soul I took back, the stronger I felt.

Which meant that when Loki got close enough to attack, I was able to fend it off by creating a barrier between us.

One that made him lash out against the green forcefield I created.

With my other hand, I continued to draw the soul back from Fenrir, but doing so while my power was split in two wasn't easy.

"You really think you can beat me?" Loki said, staring back at me through the veil of power, making his flaming hair now green as well as his eyes.

"Well, I do like to win," I told him, trying to keep the strain out of my voice.

He tipped his head at me before grinning. Which I had to admit, was an unnerving sight.

“I can see why my son likes you, perhaps I will keep you and play with you myself when this is done,” he offered.

“Thanks, but you’re not really my type. It’s your hair, too girly.”

His grin grew and before I knew it, he suddenly disappeared in a ball of flames.

“Huh?” I asked myself, still trying to concentrate on the task at hand, one that had been so difficult it had caused Anástasi to pass out.

Jared had reached Garmr and was fighting him, his anger and fury lashing out at him over and over again, to the point that all Garmr could do was try to defend himself.

As for me, I felt something wrap around my leg and I screamed, dropping my shield and my ability to continue to draw in Fenrir’s soul.

I looked down and saw the end of an orange snake wrap around me.

I then looked up and saw Loki was now there right behind me, his lower half transformed into the body of a snake!

What the actual fuck?!

“AH!” I screamed, trying to kick it off, but crying out when it got painfully tight. It started to wrap more around my body, moving upward and cocooning me in his hold. The higher up my body it coiled; his half snake body brought the top of him closer to me.

“Still think you can win against me, little queen?” he mocked, his finger skimming down the side of my face. And it was at this that I found my rage.

My power burned inside me, seeping outward and rushing to my hands. My eyes must have shown the first sign of it, because his own widened in wonder. The heat in them grew brighter, until concern made them narrow down at me. My veins were also lighting up, at the ready for an attack.

“That’s Summoner Queen to you, God of nothing!”

Then I let it all explode, screaming out as I did, and the effect was as if he’d had his fist wrapped around a grenade.

Meaning he had no choice but to release me as he, once more, disappeared into a ball of fire.

As for my summoning powers, they shielded me from the heat of his escape.

But I wasted no time turning and running closer to the beast I was trying to take life from.

Jared and Garmr’s fight continued, with neither of them turning into their full beast forms. As I was about to start drawing in life from Fenrir again, I heard Loki from a distance.

“Get ready to lose, Queen!” he threatened, and just as I turned my head, I saw what was coming. A flaming arrow shot from the weapon now emerged in his hands.

In that moment, time seemed to move differently.

Seconds slowly ticked by, as if prompting me to try and reach out and grab it, in

hopes of stopping it completely.

But even as I tried to bring my hands up to create a barrier, I knew it wouldn't be quick enough.

The arrow was heading straight for my heart, and I knew it would not miss.

I turned my face away from my impending death, choosing in my last moments to look at Jared one last time.

His face morphed into one of horror when he saw what was headed my way, his mouth moving as he screamed for me, shouting my name. But there was also another voice, one shouting a different name. He was also running toward me.

By the time the arrow made it to its final destination, I didn't feel the pain of it like I should have. This was because at the very last second, a body had thrown itself in front of me, taking the hit in my place.

A single second later, time resumed its normal speed, and I looked down utterly shocked to see that Garmr had saved me! His body was on the floor, with the arrow extinguished, but it had left a charred black mark in Garmr's chest where it was embedded.

"Anástasi, my queen... I am... sorry... for making you... love me," he stammered, reaching out to my hand and because of his sacrifice given, I took it.

The gift I received for giving a dying man some peace, was one that had the power to save us all.

Yet with one look at his eyes, I knew there was only one life he wanted to save, and it was mine.



Which meant he was willing to turn his back on his father in order to save the world from him burning it down with me in it.

I knew this when he looked to the portal gate, and after pulling me closer, he whispered,

“Destroy it and sever the link... it is... the only way to... survive.”

I watched as the life left him, staggering back the second Loki realized what he had done as he roared out in anguish.

I felt myself being pulled back further away as Loki suddenly transported in front of his now dead son, the one he had killed.

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He took him in his arms and threw his head back, bellowing to the top of the mountain. My mind played back what Garmr had told me with his last breath. To sever the link.

“Ella, you need to continue to take back Fenrir’s soul, I will keep him busy.”

I grabbed Jared, holding him back, amazed to find his skin didn’t scorch me like it looked like it would.

“But he’s a God, Jared!” I argued, but then he smirked at me and said,

“Yeah, but even Gods can bleed... and if they bleed, then they can die.”

Stepping back, he dropped to the floor before changing into his HellBeast. Every inch of him was born to rule the gates of the Underworld, being exactly as I remembered. He was huge, and a force to be reckoned with.

At the same time, Loki sensed danger, so he let go of his son and stood to face the snarling beast. The shapeshifting God suddenly burst into a red flame before emerging through the smoke as a... snarling beast.

One to match that of Jared’s.

I watched as they started to circle each other, before suddenly, Loki lunged at him. Being far more skilled fighting in this form, Jared dodged each attack, something that only frustrated the God. Especially when Jared lashed out with his claws and tore into the underbelly of Loki’s beast.

Which was when Loki changed tactics, seeing as this form wasn't working for him. He quickly changed from one creature to another, from small to large, from winged, to four legged, he lashed out at Jared from all around, making it near impossible for him to fight him.

As for me, I continued to draw back Fenrir's soul once more, causing another roar of anger to shake the mountain. A sound Loki couldn't miss as his head shot to his remaining son, the monstrous wolf.

This was enough of a distraction that it allowed Jared to bite into the giant stag Loki portrayed, but as he roared in pain, he used his giant antlers to toss Jared's HellBeast body off him, throwing him so far, that he hit the mountain wall.

"NO!" I screamed, but when I looked, ready to hit him with my power, Loki was gone. I whipped around, trying to find him, not wanting to let him get the better of me again. But that was easier said than done, seeing as the God could shapeshift into any living creature. Say...

A Hellhound.

The second I heard it snarling behind me, I turned just as it was lunging for me, making me send a blast of power toward it. It hit him, but it wasn't enough to stop him completely, only slowing him down so I could run.

And run I did.

But then the next time I turned, I found nothing chasing me and stupidly ran straight into the enemy.

Loki who was now back to his most terrifying form yet, that of a vengeful, furious God.

This time he gripped my throat and started to choke me.

He lifted me straight up off my feet, so I was left with nothing to do but to try and pry his fingers off me, clawing at his hand, but it was no use.

I couldn't breathe and black spots appeared in my vision... I knew that I didn't have long. I looked to see Jared still on the ground, but then my watery gaze shifted to the lifeless figure of Loki's kin, and I knew what I had to do.

I had to use his body somehow... so my hand left the one choking me and reached out toward Garmr. I then used my Summoning power to resurrect him, adding him as one of my collection. Which meant I could control him... and the very first thing I did with that control was to attack his father.

The raging soul of a Hellhound suddenly charged at Loki, taking him off his feet and giving him no choice but to release me.

I landed hard, choking through my breaths, each one burning my lungs.

But the pain was good because it meant I was still alive.

So, I forced myself back to my feet and when I saw Loki fighting with the soul of his dead son, I raced over to Jared.

Someone who had turned back to his demonic form, no longer his HellBeast.

"Jared, come on! Wake up!" I shouted, making him groan before lifting his head up and saying,

"I feel like I was just thrown into a mountain."

“Yeah, it pretty much looked like that too,” I agreed, making him scoff.

“Who is he fighting?” he asked, making me nod toward the body of Garmr, one slumped and lifeless without his soul.

“His son,” I told him, but when Loki realized how hard it was to kill a soul, he changed tactics.

He was fighting him, but at the same time, forcing Garmr’s soul closer to the portal. As soon as it was close enough, Loki kicked out and his son’s soul was sucked right in. Just like all the sacrificed Hellhounds it had taken him to get here.

Which was when Garmr’s last words came back to me, making me look to the portal.

“Ella, what is it?”

“I think I know how to stop him,” I told Jared in shock.

“Well, you better think quick, babe, ‘cause we got trouble.” And he wasn’t wrong, because Loki was now storming his way over to us, looking mighty pissed.

“We have to destroy the portal, Garmr told me to sever the link, I thought he was talking about Fenrir, but now I think he means the link to his own realm.”

Jared nodded, asking me,

“Do you know how?”

“I think so, it’s powered by the souls I brought back, so if I can pull them back through and into me, then it should start to collapse.”

Jared hooked me at the back of my neck and told me,

“If anyone can stop this, it’s you, Ella. I believe in you.”

I closed my eyes and nodded, thankful for his support and his belief in me. It was all I needed.

“And you, what will you do?”

“What I seem to do best... piss off the Gods,” he said, rising, and this time he didn’t change into his HellBeast, but remained as a man.

I didn’t want to waste a minute, so I ran toward the portal.

Then when I was close enough, I concentrated all my power at pulling at it, just like I had been doing with Fenrir.

This one was thankfully easier, and one by one, they came back at me.

Each soul I retook possession of, only seemed to make me stronger.

And with it, the less power the portal had, making it start to break away at the edges.

The darkness behind it peeked through as the giant wolf, Fenrir, roared to try and warn his father. More of the mountain shook and I shot a worried glance above, hoping this place would survive long enough to get this done.

But in doing so, I saw that Jared was being beaten by the God, and I was torn between what needed to be done and saving the man I loved. He was lashing out with his claws, but in doing so Jared didn’t see the blade Loki was creating in the hand by his side.

“Oh who am I kidding, no contest!” I said, throwing out a free hand toward Loki, this time lassoing him with a snake of my own.

A green serpent of power wrapped around his arm, stopping him just in time from delivering a killing blow to Jared’s heart.

The flaming dagger formed in his hand aimed to kill.

Well, not on my watch!

I snapped my wrist down, causing the weapon to fall from his hand, before the power started to coil tighter around the God’s wrist, forcing him away from Jared.

As for my other hand, this was held out to the crumbling portal as more souls came flooding back to me, one after the other, like a constant stream of power.

It fueled the serpents as more and more of them lashed out, taking hold of the God.

However, he wasn’t done fighting yet, and he suddenly slipped out of my hold before re-emerging next to me.

“ELLA, LOOK OUT!” Jared’s warning came a moment too late, and I screamed in agony as Loki morphed into a snake that had coiled around my arm. But before I could react anymore, it bit into my hand, biting my little finger clean off.

I staggered back, and the pain of losing a finger became secondary to the poison that started to flood through my bloodstream.

This time when I fell...

I didn’t ever expect to...

Get back up again.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### A Hero's Choice

“E

LLA!” I heard my name being roared, as the venom working its way around my body was not enough to cut out the sound of desperation from the man I loved.

I forced my eyes to stay open, as my body fought even harder to hold on.

The sight of Jared as he battled the God, and despite the odds stacking against him, his rage and anguish at losing me, gave him the strength he needed.

He was winning.

The god couldn't keep up with the speed of Jared's demonic form, as it slashed out in a blur of motion.

The God kept trying to protect himself as blood seeped out of each slice to his flesh.

The liquid fire dripping down his body, making him roar out in pain.

But Jared was a machine who wouldn't let up.

He was slowly killing him and when he tried to morph into another form, Jared got there first. An orange bird tried to escape, but Jared reached up, jumping just high enough that he ended up slicing through the wing of the eagle Loki became to escape.

As a result of this he ended up falling from the sky, and being unable to fly with only one wing, he went crashing into the side of the mountain. Jared wasted no time in getting to me. He came skidding to my side, now lifting me up in his arms.

“Hold on baby, I’ve got you, I’m gonna get you out of here.” But I started shaking my head, telling him,

“No... I... I have to finish this.” I told him.

“Ella please, we have to leave! The cave is not going to last much longer!”

“Not until its done... I have to send him back... it’s the only way to end this.” I told him, now reaching up with my uninjured hand, cupping his face and pleading with him.

“It’s the only way.” He looked back at the heap that was Loki, who was now missing an entire arm. With gritted teeth Jared nodded before carrying me over to the portal, one that was only half there.

“Do it Ella, destroy it once and for all, and I will protect you.” He told me after placing me down.

My weakened state told me there was only one way I was going to do this.

I needed the book of souls. So, hoping that they weren’t still needed on the battlefield, I summoned the book and with it, my collection of souls.

They had all returned to the book, making it glow brighter with the power that fueled it.

Then with my bloody hand in its pages, I reached out with my right hand towards the

portal.

I then closed my eyes and let myself be consumed with power.

Now becoming a conduit, drawing in the souls back into the book.

I knew I wasn't strong enough to do this by myself, so I made myself a weapon from its making.

"It's working! Ella, keep going, there is not much left!

" Jared encouraged and I could feel it for myself.

Each Hellhound soul flowing through me and out again.

But what I didn't want to tell him was that with each one that passed through me, it took with it a piece of me also.

A piece of my power that the book was now keeping for itself.

Which meant I knew that by the very last soul, I would be left mortal once again.

The Summoner Queen no more. Because this was the test I had to pass, one set by the fates.

The one the book of souls had also given me.

The test of what I was willing to sacrifice like no other Summoner had before.

To give up the need for supremacy, the addiction for more power that the book offered you.

This was my sacrifice.

Because I knew with it, it would only mean one thing with Loki's venom in me.

I would die.

And more heartbreaking, so would my child.

Both of us giving our life so as everyone else may live. My future nieces and nephews, my aunt and uncle, my cousins, my mom and dad. Every friend I ever made, Orthrus who was a brother to me, Lerna my sister, and Marcus who was a best friend.

But most of all,

The man I loved.

So, with tears in my eyes, I thrust out my hand one last time and just as Loki had gotten to his feet.

I could hear him roaring, at the same time Fenrir shook the mountain in anger.

But it was too late, as I finally dragged in the very last soul from the portal.

The one that meant that Loki had no power left in this realm, the connection severed for him being allowed here.

Which meant I looked back just in time to see him cry out as he fell to his knees. The ground then started to open up beneath him. Hands bursting free from the earth of his realm at the ready to drag him back to the prison from which he came.

Each one clawing at him, and the more he fought against them, the more that rose up to consume him.

Black, charred skin cracking at the knuckles as each dug their talons into him.

Doing so before he could no longer fight against them as they dragged him back.

Leaving nothing but his severed limb behind as a reminder not to fuck with,

A HellBeast's Queen

“Ella! God’s baby, you did it... you did it!” Jared shouted but when my body deflated back to the ground, his concern for me grew. His form now returning back to the Jared I knew.

“Ella! No, what’s wrong, what’s happening?” He asked looking down at me, cradling my head in his lap. Which was when I couldn’t hold it back any longer, as I started to cry, as tears filled my eyes.

“It looks like our date will have to wait, handsome.” I told him in a weak voice, making him shake his head,

“Hey, what are you talking about, Ella you did it and now we can go home... wait, Ella, what’s wrong...

what are you saying here?” he asked and oh gods, the sound of his voice breaking was too much to bear.

Because he didn’t know. He didn’t know what I just did.

But when his head turned to watch the book starting to fade away, he finally started

too.

“No... no, Ella you can't give up! Listen to me, You can't! I won't let you!”

“I'm sorry Jared. I tried... I tried so hard to keep my promise to you, but I don't think it's going to happen.” I said between my tears, feeling my body as it was trying to shut down. The poison in my veins too much to fight against.

“No, baby no... please... please don't do this...” he said in desperation as he lifted me into his arms and held his forehead to mine. Then he told me with tears now streaming down his face,

“Please don't leave me.” I cried harder at that and forced myself to lift my hand to his face so I could tell him,

“I will always... be with you, Beastman.” At this he sobbed, pulling me closer to his chest,

“Please... I can't live without you... I don't want to.” He cried, hot tears falling through his words,

“This is all my fault. I should have done more, should have protected you, I should have never...”

“No... no please, don't blame yourself. I couldn't pass knowing that.” At this he cried out at the word pass, as if me saying it made it all the more real. But then I tapped my fingers against his neck so he could pull back.

“Kiss me... please... it's how I want to go, with the memory of you on my lips.” I said, making him sob once more whilst trying to hold it back enough so as he could place his lips to mine, our tears soaking our skin and merging as one.

My beautiful goodbye.

The only way I wanted to die.

But I knew that he would never let me go. So, when the cave started to crumble around us, I knew he didn't have much time left to escape. I also knew that he wouldn't want to. That he would rather die in here holding me than live another day. But that wasn't what I wanted for him.

"Do me a favor. Forgive me for what I am about to do." I said, and when he pulled back, I heard him say my name for perhaps the last time,

"Ella?" And I closed my eyes and used the very last of my strength to draw in the last soul in here. Because the book, the first in Summoning history may have been full, but it had left me with something.

A gift.

It had left me with enough power to do this one last thing. To make this very last sacrifice for the man I loved.

I knew that, because it told me, that this was my reward.

So, with chaos erupting all around us and the cracking of the cave, I pulled in the remaining life of Fenrir.

A once mighty beast who now lay defeated on the ground, unmoving.

I drained him of what I had been forced to give, now gifting it to another freely.

And I used it to force Jared to leave me, but more importantly,

To live for me.

“I’m sorry.” I told him as a portal opened up behind him, one I was using the last of Fenrir’s soul to power,

“Ella what are you doing...No, no don’t do this!

” He shouted when he realized why I was saying sorry.

Making me cry harder as he tried to grip me tighter, but the portal was taking hold of him.

Wrapping itself around him and pulling him in.

A sob tore through me as I felt his touch leave me for the last time, as his body was forced backwards. His hand reached out to mine,

“Don’t do this... I love you! Ella, I love you!” So, I told him,

“And now I can die happy, for I... I love you too! Goodbye... My HellBeast.” I said and just before he could beg me to let him stay any longer, I closed my eyes as the sight of him disappeared for the final time.

For I knew that I would never see him again.

My cry of anguish rang out in the cave, echoing louder than the destruction of falling rock.

And just as the last of the cave above me started to collapse, my last thought was that I hoped that one day he would...



Forgive me.

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To Damn Thy Soul

I never gave much thought to where I would go when I died, because Hell wasn't exactly what I expected it to be, and Heaven I had never been to. But clearly, I was going somewhere, as I felt my body being lifted from the ground.

Or was it my soul?

Was your soul weightless?

I also found it odd that I would ask myself so many questions upon my death. But then what else could I focus on, as the last face I saw was Jared's, and one of betrayal?

Gods but it had been so hard to bear, knowing he would be so hurt by it. That I had taken his choice to die with me from him. I just hoped one day in his future he forgave me.

That he understood why I did what I did because I loved him, and his life was all that mattered in that moment. If I couldn't save us both, then I would use the last of my strength to save him.

Love made you selfish and I selfishly wanted him to live for the both of us.

But wait...why did it now feel as though someone was running with me in their arms. Okay, so now it really was time I try and open my eyes and see what was going on. But then, why was that so hard to do if my soul had left my body?

Holy shit... was I not even dead yet?!

In the end, my curiosity out won my body's need to rest. So, I pushed through it and opened my eyes and what I found astonished me. The cave was collapsing all around us, just as it had been doing the last time I closed my eyes and waited for death.

But now? Well now those rocks I could see falling down on us, where being cast away by some unknown force.

No, not entirely unknown. The face of a blurred figure was above me, his face focused on what was ahead, as he ran with me in his arms. So, I turned my head to look, seeing the opening just there, luring us closer with its whispers of escape.

Of course, I felt bad for whoever it was trying to save me, as clearly, they didn't know that I was on death's door as it was. What would they buy me, a few minutes?

In the end, like Jared, I didn't have a choice, we made it through the entrance, and we didn't stop. The large figure just kept running, and as soon as we emerged to where all the bones had been kept, we faced the same problem.

Which meant the entire mountain was collapsing.

I even looked up just in time to see the walkway into the castle now crumbling away.

But the man was determined to save me, as he kept dodging the large boulders, leaping over them, or sliding under them just in time.

If I'd had the strength, I would have screamed as this was like being on some bad ass rollercoaster and not in a good way.

But then, as one large section of the cave wall started to fall, I could see it was just

about to cover the small tunnel we were headed for.

“Hold on!” The voice spoke and I gasped.

Because I knew that voice.

But how?

How was it possible?

Was I actually dead, and he was trying to salvage my body? I just didn’t know. But one thing I did, and that was that we weren’t going to make it!

My eyes widened at the sight of the side of the mountain coming down like an avalanche!

Which was when he gained greater speed as he started to lower his body.

At the same time making us both go skidding under the rock wall as it came slamming down on top of us.

I gripped on tighter and this time, my voice broke through as I screamed,

“AHHHHH!” But then just before it could flatten us, we slid all the way through, landing on the floor and stopping just beyond where the crash happened behind us. The rubble rolling in the tunnel until it compacted enough to stop.

“Well now, that was exciting wasn’t it.” The voice said in an amused tone and I was still trying to cling onto the only memory I had. Or should I say... the only memory Anástasi had.

“Father?” I asked in a broken voice.

“Save your strength my child.” He warned now getting back to his feet and carrying me like I weighed nothing at all.

Perhaps I was dead after all. But as I was lacking the strength he advised I saved, I closed my eyes and let myself be carried to wherever it was he wanted to take me.

And in the end, I didn’t know how long I rested my eyes for.

I only knew that I wasn’t completely dead by the time I got there as I felt myself being placed down.

“I am afraid there isn’t much time.” He said and this time, I spoke his name,

“Hades?” at this he chuckled and leant over the slab of stone he had placed me on.

“Yes, my daughter.” He said prompting me to open my eyes and find that we were in a small cave that used to be what looked like a humble temple of sorts. With nothing but the stone alter he had placed me on and what looked like a pool of water behind the God that was my father.

“Am I dead?” I asked.

“Not yet but you soon will be, as will the life you carry inside you.” At this I cried out, my right hand going to my stomach.

To which I finally looked at the father I didn’t know.

I just remembered his voice kissing me goodbye that single one time.

A voice that had always lingered in my mind, no doubt planted there by him.

As for the man who had just saved me, he was dressed entirely in black.

His long cloak wasn't enough to hide his large, tall frame, or the imposing figure that he made with the spiked armor and horns that curled up from his shoulders.

As for his features, his ink black hair was curled just under the high fold of his cloak.

His black eyes and dark beard matched the rest of him, with only his light grey skin acting as any contrast. He looked like a man in his forties but someone who had seen a hundred lifetimes.

His bare torso also showed an impressive amount of muscle, as all he wore was the cloak and a skirt of black material that hung from his waist.

"I have so many questions." I admitted making him chuckle.

"Yes, you take after your mother that way, she was always so curious." He told me with a wishful sigh before he admitted,

"I miss her, for she taught me what it truly meant to love someone." I swallowed hard at that, and even that hurt.

"Tell me, do you love my Guardian of the Gates?" At this a sob tore through me before I nodded,

"I do."

"Then let's hope he remembers what I told him, and he finds you in time."

“What...what do you mean, in time for what?” I asked but he didn’t answer me, instead he placed a hand over me and said,

“A Venom of God is not for any human, nor for any grandchild of mine.” Then he closed his eyes and I gasped, my body arching up as I felt Loki’s venom coming out of me.

Literally seeping out of my veins before rising through flesh and finally through my skin as it absorbed into his hand.

And it couldn’t have come any sooner, as I had felt the life, I had been clinging to now flow back into me.

The venom no longer taking hold as it travelled around my body, poisoning me.

“I feel...strange.”

“That is because you are a mortal being, living and breathing in the land of the dead. Which you will soon become if you stay any longer.” He told me.

“But how do I get back?”

“There is only one way. You must trust me.” He said leading me over to what looked like a pool of souls. And a memory hit me, as I had seen it once before. No, not just that... I had fallen into it once before. I looked back at him,

“What is this?”

“Thanatos is charged with carrying souls to my realm, he deals with those who die a nonviolent, peaceful death.”

“And that’s who these are?” At this Hades shook his head.

“No, these are the souls of the damned, the souls that do not accept their death and therefore do not want to be here. So, they are caught, between this world and your own, clinging to the mortal life they once had.” He told me and then before I could ask what he was doing, he let a long talon grow before using it to slice into his hand.

Then he squeezed his fist over the water, letting his blood flow, and told me,

“That should last long enough.” I frowned,

“What do I do now.” At this he looked down at me and used his uninjured hand to stroke the back of his fingers down the back of my cheek,

“It is simple... now you live my child. Not as Anástasi but as Ella, who you were always destined to become, your mind no longer split in two, but whole once more.” Then he leaned down and kissed my forehead gently, before warning me,

“Now take a deep breath for me.” I did as he asked and then as my only goodbye, he smiled down at me and then he,

Push me in.

That was when the memory hit me. Because I had done this before.

I had known this terror, as I was pulled under by all the souls that wanted to claim me.

However, this time was different, as ribbons of my father’s blood created a pathway for me to travel without the souls touching me.



Ghostly figures all circling around me, reaching out with gnarled hands.

Gruesome faces with hollow cheeks and empty eyes, snapped their skeletal jaws at me but never once got close enough.

The blood led the way as I sank down into darkness, suddenly my world was flipped on its head and I was instead floating upwards.

Again, my eyes tracked the blood of my father, however, the moment I saw it form a bubble above me, I frowned.

Which was why I quickly dragged water back, trying to get to the surface quicker.

But the second I did, I was met with an icy barrier.

My terror quickly making me panic as I thrashed against it, hammering my fist to the top but it was no use.

And now, the souls of the damned were...

Closing in.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:28 pm*

When Love is All That Matters

Jared

“N

O!” I roared the second I was forcibly pulled through the portal she created. The pain, the pure raw agony was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

Nothing felt like this.

I didn’t know how to breathe.

Didn’t know how to move.

I just fell to whatever ground the portal had thrown me out of and I didn’t fucking care where! I didn’t care about anything other than the heart I had left behind.

The heart I had been forced to leave.

The world could fucking swallow me whole and spit me back out for all I cared, and it could have fucking burned to the ground!

We could have lost to every fucking evil god out there and I just...

Wouldn’t have cared.

Because nothing in my life mattered anymore.

All was lost.

My soul torn in two.

Which was why I fell to my knees, covered my head with my arms and cried. And the tears just wouldn't fucking stop. This pain would never end! I knew that.

I wanted to fucking die!

I wanted to stay there and be with her till the end. The life she sacrificed all to save the fucking world. A world that didn't deserve her! Didn't deserve her light, her heart, her perfect fucking soul. One that till the bitter end she gave in order to save us all.

A life she gave to save me.

It was too much. This pain was too much.

"Brother!" I heard the shout of Orthrus as he raced towards me, my head not even being able to lift off the ground, where I was doubled over, still holding my head. My mind breaking as it replayed our last moments together. Gods it was too fucking much!

"Gods J, what happened?!" he asked as he came to me, dropping to his knees before me and all I had the strength to do was look up and tell him through my tears,

"She's gone."

Those two words ripped from me, with pain blurring my vision, as the tears just

wouldn't stop. I was sure my brother's face showed pain as he closed his eyes and said,

"No." Then suddenly I was in his arms, being embraced by my brother, as I cried on his shoulder.

"Gods no." he whispered but my tears said otherwise. No matter how much I wished it wasn't true. I would have given my life for it not to be true!

"Oh brother, I am so sorry." He told me but his words brought little comfort, for I knew nothing would. And as others approached it didn't take a genius to know what had happened. As I was a broken man without Ella by my side.

"I wasn't strong enough... I... I... didn't do enough... she... she sacrificed herself for us all Orth... why... why would she do that!

How could she fucking leave me!" I shouted in anger. My heart wrenching with grief.

"Oh gods." I heard the cries of others then, all around me. The sobs of her aunt, of her cousin.

The tears of so many. So many fucking tears! The cries of her sister. The roar of anger from her father, so much fucking pain!

"Because she loved you." My brother said ignoring it all.

"Then why didn't she let me stay with her? Why did she force me to leave?" I asked him, now raising my head up off his shoulder to look at his own tearful eyes.

"Why did... she let... me go?" I asked him, through broken words, my heart breaking over and over again. To which his own tears fell as he told me,

“Because she loved you, brother.” He said once more and I shook my head,

“But then why did she have to go and die, Orth?” I asked my voice thick as I finally said the word. Finally admitting what had happened to myself, as if a part of me hadn’t wanted to believe it.

Again, the sounds of pain coming at me from everywhere. A testament to how many people loved her. At this he let his head hang for a moment as more of his tears fell to the earth.

The world in which she saved would never know.

Never know who they owed their lives too.

“Why didn’t we get our Fate? She is my Chosen one and I only got to have her for a short time.” I cried and more sobs rang out at my pain.

The other Kings I knew would be holding their queens in their embrace. I hoped they knew how lucky they were. That they got to keep theirs.

All I had was loss and memories of something wonderful. Something so perfect, most of the time it didn’t feel true. But it was and it was all mine. And now I had lost it.

Faced with nothing but a lifetime of grief and suffering.

I thought I had known it well after believing I had lost Lerna. But now I knew the truth. This was what it truly felt like to lose your soul mate. The one person in the world who made you whole.

Gone.

Forever with a piece of me.

“Jared!” I heard my name being shouted and I looked away, for I didn’t want to hear it. Not even from my best friend. I didn’t want to hear the ‘you did all you could crap’ or the ‘she’s in a better place!’ I didn’t need any of it!

“Marcus wait, you don’t know what’s...”

“Fuck that! Jared! Jared fucking listen to me now, Hades...” At this I lifted my head and looked at my best friend, his face the most serious I had ever seen it.

“Marc, just let it go man!” Orth snapped when suddenly he grabbed my brother by the shirt and shook him,

“NO! I will not let this fucking go! Now fucking listen to me, Jared remember, try to remember, Hades told you something!” I frowned at this, asking myself what the fuck did any of this have to do with anything.

“Leave me the fuck alone!” I snapped but then the bastard actually grabbed me, and everyone surrounding us gasped as the asshole actually fucking slapped me.

Like some little bitch! I growled low in my throat, too close to the fucking edge not to kill him, as I rose to my feet just as he did the same.

“Whoa! Don’t kill him!” Keira shouted, making Amelia shout through her tears,

“Aren’t you going to do something!?” this was said to my brother, as now I was stalking my prey as Marcus walked backwards, still going on about fucking Hades.

“Stupid fucker slapped him after finding out his Chosen just died, what do you think!” Orth snapped making me wince as fresh new pain sliced across my heart.

“For fuck’s sake, J, I can’t fucking speak it, so your gonna have to figure it out on your own...

what did fucking Hades tell you!” Marcus said, the panic in his voice was so faint, it actually made me stammer to a stop.

And then I thought on his words, finally infiltrating the red mist of rage.

What couldn’t he say...fucker could say a lot of things but nothing about... fuck!

“Hades...he told me something about...oh gods!” the second I remembered, my blood turned to ice and suddenly, I was scanning the crowd for the one and only person I needed.

“Dariush, I need you to get me back to my club, right fucking now, back to Devils!” He nodded once and thank fuck he knew it!

Because suddenly the portal opened and I ran inside it.

My brother and Marcus following me, and no doubt everyone else, but it was only the three of us that took off running!

I didn’t stop to explain. There wasn’t time.

Not if there was a single fucking hope left.

So, I tore through the club, thankfully that it had remained empty since all the shit had started.

It meant I had no one slowing me down as I made it across the cave quicker than ever before.

I threw myself into the door, practically breaking the fucking thing down as I kept running.

My one chance to save her! One in a fucking million and Hades had known it! Because he had told me that even the Well of Souls can sometimes hold life!

Her life.

I didn't know how and I didn't care, I just needed to get to her in time. I couldn't fucking lose her again. So, I ran until my fucking lungs burned, down to the dungeons and into the room where the veil between my realm and here was at its thinnest. The only way she could ever make it back!

Which meant the second I saw it, I just reacted, the souls be damned!

I hammered my fist onto the ice and cracked it with one hit.

The souls all reaching out to me. My voice hoarse as I called her name, my brother and Marcus quickly doing the same.

But when we didn't see anything, my heart felt like it was going to beat its way out of my chest. There was no sight of her and I wanted to roar in frustration and pain.

"Come on Cookie! Remember what I fucking said!" Marcus said making me roar her name,

"ELLA!"

"RED!" my brother called as Marcus did the same. And when I stopped Marcus told me,



“Don’t stop, keep calling out to her.”

“Ella, come on, please hear me! Please hear me baby, I am here! I am right fucking here!” I said knowing I couldn’t fucking go in there searching for her. I would be dead in a heartbeat. But then just as I was starting to lose all hope,

“There!” I shouted as suddenly I saw something red in the dark water. Red like her hair!

“Fuck! There she is!” I shouted and the second I saw her panicked face looking up at me, I knew she was in trouble. So, I shouted,

“Hold me, I am going in!” Neither of them argued, I just held my breath and dipped half my body under and reached out for her.

Her hand merely inches from mine, she was so close!

Then the second I saw a ribbon of blood rise up and entwined around our hands, it was as if it was linking us together.

Suddenly her hand found mine and the best feeling in the world as her fingers tightening around my own.

I grasped them tight, vowing never to fucking let them go and I pulled her close. Her eyes finding mine in silent relief.

My brother and Marcus seeing this, yanked my legs back and pulled us both free just as the first of the souls tried to reach out and grab us. Their gnarled hands missing us by centimeters.

The second I got her out, I helped her get the water out of her mouth, tipping her head

to the side so she could be sick. The sound of life was like a fucking elixir for my soul!

“Ella baby, Gods...I am here, you’re here... you’re really here.” I stammered overcome with emotion, now holding her to me, fully intent on never letting go of her ever again. But then she went and opened her eyes and the first thing she said to me,

“Did I keep my promise?” at this a sob tore out of me, my tears making my vision blurry once more. I whipped them away, not wanting anything to come between the sight of her. I then stroked back her hair, lifted her head to mine and told her,

“Yeah baby, you did.”

“Good, because there is something I have been meaning to tell you.” At this I grinned down at her but the next words out of her mouth no one could have ever prepared me for...

“You’re gonna be a daddy.”

Days later

“You know, I think from now on we have maple syrup with everything.” I said whilst dipping my potato chips in a pot of it, making Jared chuckle.

“Baby, you had it drizzled over fucking pizza yesterday, what you gonna do next, dip me in it?” Jared teased making me laugh.

“Oh, like you would mind, not when I get to lick it off you.” I said before crunching the chip in my hand, doing so right in front of his face and making him groan as I moaned around my fingers.

“Fuck me Red, you trying to put me in a sex induced coma, cause I ain’t gonna complain.” he replied making me giggle. Because, yeah, since saving me, we had spent most of our time in bed.

But as of right now, instead of doing these sticky, licky things, I snuggled in closer and looked at the screen. Because it turned out, we made that date after all. In fact, we would have had it a lot sooner, had the turbulent events after he saved me not taken a day to get over.

Gods but there had been so much to process for us both, but nothing was compared to the utter relief at surviving it all. The relief to all of my family and everyone who cared. All of whom, even for a short time, had mourned me.

And in the end, all it had cost me was my little finger. One that would forever be a reminder of everything I loved in my life. Most of all, the man lying next to me in our

bed. A bed that looked like a junk food massacre had happened.

But as for the future, then that was looking more than bright.

It was actually blinding!

Because not only had we won the war and saved the world. We also had a wedding to plan and a baby to look forward to. Something that had felt like a gift at the end of all we had endured.

All the pain and suffering we had been through, all of it meant appreciating the life we now had to live for. And I for one couldn't wait for every second of it.

So, with Jared's hand at my belly and my heart full of love, I knew that in the end, it had all been worth it.

Worth falling in love with my HellBeast King as now,

I was eternally...

A HellBeast's Queen.

The End.