

Nine Years Ago

The kiss tasted like beer. And his hands were sliding under the edge of her top. Eliza's stomach turned and she pushed the guy away.

He stumbled back. "What? You wanted it."

She wiped her mouth. "No." All she'd wanted to do was kiss a guy without her braces on. Turns out they didn't make much difference. She certainly didn't want what he was offering. Ew. He was one of her brother's friends and she hardly knew him.

"Don't be a tease." He ran his finger along the strap of her top, then hooked his finger underneath. "No one likes a tease."

Her heart gave a sudden squeeze of panic and began sprinting even though she wasn't moving. He leaned closer and she froze. The two bottles of beer she'd drunk churned in her stomach like on off-balance washing machine. The kitchen gave a little twirl. She put her hand on the counter to steady herself. The noise from the music pumped through the air. She needed to get away, get some fresh air.

His hand tightened on the strap. He tugged her closer as she pulled back and the delicate fabric snapped. Backed against the counter she had nowhere left to go. None of her brother's other friends came in, and if she yelled, no one would hear her over the music. She had to get rid of him.

"Why don't you get me another beer?" She forced a smile while her hand was making sure she was still decent. The top stayed up, held by one equally flimsy strap on the other side.

"That's more like it." He stepped back. "I'll be back in a minute."

She waited until he'd left the kitchen, counted to ten for him to get to the laundry where the beer was sitting the trough full of ice, then she slipped out of the kitchen. The lounge room was full of people dancing, kissing—she averted her eyes—and doing possibly more. Matt's university friends filled their parents' house, and he was nowhere to be seen. No doubt he was upstairs in his room with his girlfriend. If Dad was here, he'd have a heart attack. He'd said no parties, and usually Matt listened. This was the first time he'd broken the no-party rule. And she'd been keen to join in and act older than her sixteen years.

It had been fun at first, drinking beer and dancing. Catching a boy's eye and getting kissed—right up until he'd thought she was going to put out and the beer hit her stomach like a kick so all she wanted to do was lie down or throw up. She still wasn't sure which one would happen first.

With one hand on the wall for balance, Eliza stuck to the edge of the crowd. She didn't relax until she reached the stairs. She'd had enough of the party, the music pounded too loud in her head, and the crush of bodies made her claustrophobic. Her foot slipped on the stair. She grabbed the rail and pulled herself up. When she got to her room, she was going to lie down. But there were more stairs than she remembered, and her legs didn't want to obey. Maybe she should sit down for a moment? Halfway up she saw the guy coming back with the beer. And he saw her.

"Shit." She ran up the rest of the stairs even though they were jumping around beneath her feet. She looked over her shoulder. He was following and getting closer.

She needed somewhere to hide. Bathroom? She tried the handle but it was locked. Her bedroom was at the end of the corridor, opposite Matt's. The guy was almost up the stairs. She wasn't going to lead him to her bedroom. The nearest room was her parents'. She opened the door and shut it behind her with her back against the wood. Had he seen?

"I know where you are," he sung out.

The door rattled against her back. Oh God. She held her breath, but her heartbeat drowned out all other noise. Her gaze darted around the dark room for places to hide. Under the bed? Wardrobe? Beer climbed up her throat. No.

He gave the door a shove and she ran, crossing the carpet in unsteady steps made worse by the heels. She went into the bathroom, closed the door on him, and turned the lock. He knew where she was, but he couldn't get in. Eliza slid down the door, her legs unable to stand.

He knocked on the door. Shit. It was only a privacy lock and easily opened from the other side. Could he not take the hint and find some other half-drunk girl to pursue?

She glanced up at the bathroom window. Too high and too small. She was trapped. Her stomach bottomed out.

"Open the door and we'll have some fun." The handle jiggled. "I got your beer."

No. No. No. Why hadn't she gone to a friend's place for the night instead of trying to be cool? Why hadn't Matt made her go? Why did her father have to go east for work? Tears welled in her eyes. She wished he was home, that he would come home early and would see what was going on. She wished her mother were alive. She would know what to do, she always knew what to do. Why couldn't her mother be here? The tears trickled down her cheeks, but she kept the sobs locked in her chest. She didn't want to be heard. What she needed was to get away.

The lock scraped. She lifted her gaze and watched it turn. He would force the door open and then...Her eyes widened as the handle moved.

"I wish..." She hiccupped and it echoed around the bathroom. Her mother had said always be careful what you wish for as she'd told stories about a man who'd been cursed for loving gold and had been given a heart of gold as punishment. Damned to be goblin, now he was forced to answer other people's wishes. She closed her eyes. He had to answer hers. "I wish the Goblin King would take me away from here."

The summons pulled tight on his gray skin, dragging his attention from the on-screen violence as machine tore through man. He ignored the magical call that wanted to drag him away from the movie and ate another mouthful of popcorn loaded with butter and salt. It was pointless trying to resist, but he did it anyway, because he could—if only for a few moments.

The cry reverberated through his body again, but Roan held out a moment longer almost enjoying pain as his body prepared to fracture and split with the effort of obeying the compulsion. He glanced once more at the screen. He was going to miss the ending by about ten minutes, but he'd never been able to resist a direct summons for any length of time.

He'd tried. His body had peeled apart and obeyed while his mind resisted. Arriving in front of his summoner wounded and in agony had never served him well. He would attend and then leave. It's not like he was damn genie—he had to answer the call but could choose for himself whether he granted the wish. Maybe, if he were quick, he'd make it back in time to see the end of the film.

The shadows of the dark cinema came at his beckon and wrapped around him. No one knew he was here, and no one would notice him leave. It was the way he liked it when he visited the Fixed Realm. If humans had seen him, there would've been screaming and running...no, it was much better he hid in the dark where goblins belonged, clinging to the edges of nightmares. Cloaked in darkness, he let the summons pull him to his destination.

ground reached beneath his feet. One had reached the other his gun. He'd been attacked more than once after a summons because people called without realizing what they were asking, or who they were summoning.

Summoning the Goblin King was not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach.

For what should have been a couple of heartbeats—had he had a heart to beat—he stood still, taking in his surroundings while wrapped in the shadows and hidden from view. Music pounded through the walls, reminding him what it was like to have a pulse.

He was in a dark bedroom. His summoner was crying. Her whispered words hung on the air, drawing him closer. He had attended, now he could leave. The urge to obey was now just an inconvenient prickle that would pass. Centuries ago he'd learned to resist further orders, though once he'd been at the mercy of his summoners. Now all that was required of him was attendance, and that he could tolerate except for when it interrupted his trip to the cinema. Through films he could live a life denied to him by a druid's mistaken curse.

But he wasn't alone in the bedroom with his crying summoner. A young man leaned on the door, trying to get to her. To help her? To protect her from him? Roan hesitated, his eyes narrowed.

"I know you're in here." The youth jiggled the handle of the closed door where the sobs were coming from. There was no concern or care in his words.

Roan scowled at the youth pushing on the door that protected the woman who'd called him. She wasn't hiding from the Goblin King. She was hiding from this lout.

Something inside his chest stirred. Not the cold lust for gold that had corrupted his soul and kept him chained to the Shadowlands, but something else he couldn't name. It had been too long since he was human. But this young woman hadn't called on him for wealth or battle. All she wanted was his help...even though that wasn't what she'd wished for. The exact words of her wish echoed in his mind.

I wish the Goblin King would take me away from here.

She'd wished to be taken away.

By him.

No woman had called on him for at least five centuries. And the last one who had, had met a fiery end he wouldn't wish on anyone.

The youth stroked the door. "Come on, sweetheart."

Roan sent the man sprawling away with a flick of his wrist. The magic of the Shadowlands bent to his will, as much a part of him as the golden lump that filled his chest instead of a heart. The youth hit the carpet like a corpse. The bottle he'd been holding onto spilled, the scent of beer filling the air.

A grin twisted Roan's wide goblin lips as the urge to use more dark magic bubbled to the surface. He would make sure the girl behind the door wasn't bothered again tonight and have some fun. It might almost make up for the summons.

With a howl of the un-dead he stepped out of the shadows, sword drawn. The youth screamed and scrambled to get up and away. The music was silenced and all lights in the house went out by Roan's will. The darkness didn't bother him. He was a goblin, he could see in the dark as well as he could in the light. The youth ran and Roan followed, the black magic of the Shadowlands streaking after him and he made no effort to rein it in.

Doors slammed and he laughed like a madman, a sound sour enough to curdle milk, the gold and amber beads in his dreadlocks bouncing in a jagged melody. He leapt down the stairs after the youth and into a fleeing crowd of teenagers. They poured out of the house as if their nightmares had come to life. Maybe they had. Nightmares grew in the Shadowlands the way plants grew in the Fixed Realm. And he was the embodiment of the Shadowlands.

Outside the house streetlights burned, so he stayed in the dark, watching them run. It was one thing to chase after people who couldn't see him, but another to step into the light and let them gaze upon his goblin body in all its hideous glory. Cars revved and drew away, speeding down the street.

"Cowards." In his time men would have stayed to fight, not run like children, and these youths were old enough to be considered men. By the time he was their age he'd been ruling his tribe after years of fighting and killing the invading Romans. By the time he was their age he'd been cursed. His life over.

Roan sheathed his sword with a snap and let the magic fall away. As good as it had felt to let go of the control he usually kept a tight grip on, he would pay for the reckless use of magic with a piece of his soul. How much was taken and how much he had left he didn't know, but it was less than he liked, and he knew that when it ran out, the curse would have him in its death-cold clutches forever. Forever was a long time. The nineteen centuries he'd spent fighting the curse was a long time. Longer than any man should live.

With heavy steps he walked back through the silent house to check on the crying girl. A few kids hid but he ignored them. Tomorrow they would think him an illusion brought on by too much alcohol. It was better for everyone that he was forgotten. Over the centuries the legend of the Goblin King had faded and the number of summons had decreased. But he didn't want to exist only as a terrifying goblin. He'd been human once, a king, and he wanted to be remembered as a man.

But he never got his wishes granted.

He paused at the doorway to the bedroom, his gray, gnarled hand resting on the wall. The young woman was still behind the door, her sobs catching her breath. How had she known of him? Why call him for help?

He didn't help anyone. He was a goblin, selfish and worried only about gold. He swore in the long dead Celtic language of his birth. She'd commanded him better than any Roman general seeking the blood of his enemies or thief seeking wealth. He'd helped her. For the first time in six centuries he'd pretty much obeyed a full summons. He'd done exactly what she'd wanted—but without taking her away. All she'd really wanted was to be safe, and now she was. He should leave before he did anything else.

But the temptation to grant her wish and take a woman to the Shadowlands burned in his veins like slow boiling poison. It had been too long since he'd had company, besides the men who shared his curse. He could take her back to the Shadowlands and complete her wish to be taken away. Was it abduction when she asked?

Roan crossed the carpet without a sound except for the empty rattling of the beads in his hair. His mottled fingers brushed the door handle, but he didn't open it. Instead he pulled the shadow tight around him and crossed to the other side.

His summoner was huddled against the door, tall enough to be an adult, young enough to be scared from an overzealous suitor. Dressed in clothes that showed far too much skin, she kept her eyes down and her hands over her ears. Roan crouched down. For half a second she glanced up, her eyes wide as if she could see him through the shadows draped over his body.

Hazel, flecked with a gold he'd never be able to own.

She was too beautiful and innocent to ever survive in the Shadowlands. His touch would only corrupt her. Roan drew back from the girl. She was a couple of years younger than the boys perhaps. But for a young woman a few years could make a big difference. She was no jaded whore or Gaulish princess wanting something from him, like gems or a crown. All she wanted was his help. Something he once would've given freely when he was a man.

He had given it freely tonight. His lips twitched in a cruel semblance of a smile. Maybe he wasn't as far gone as he'd thought if he was still capable of helping someone without payment or an order.

But the hunger that clawed at his soul had been woken and wouldn't be silenced. He wanted her golden gaze on him. He wanted to add her

to his collection of things he'd stolen from the Fixed Realm and valuables and treasures lost from the Fixed Realm of man. But he was still human enough to know what he wanted was beyond his reach. Trapped there, she would tarnish. Owning her would make him more goblin and less human. He didn't want to lose the fragile gift she'd given him to greed.

She belonged in the Fixed Realm where she could live and grow up and hopefully be smarter about the kind of parties she attended. Yet the need to be seen by another human being as something other than a monster smothered rational thought. She'd asked to be taken away, and he would grant her wish. She would know who had helped her, and for a moment he would be able to stand in her gaze.

Shadows slid from him to the young woman. When they touched her, her sobs stopped and her head lolled as sleep took over. A sleep he controlled. But instead of taking her to the empty gray wasteland of the Shadowlands, he took her to its brighter sister, the Summerland. Where the Shadowlands was death and darkness the Summerland was light and life.

Coming here was a reprieve that wouldn't last. He wouldn't be able to remain in the lush fields under the crisp blue sky for long. He'd tried. After learning to enter the Fixed Realm at will by using people's nightmares, he'd learned to move through their dreams to the Summerland, hoping to get away from the despair of the Shadowlands. But everything he touched he poisoned. The Shadowlands had tainted him. Now only gold survived his touch.

The young woman appeared in front of him. She glanced around, taking in her surroundings, and then her golden gaze landed on him. She took a step back, the long grass sweeping her bare legs. The skirt was shorter than he'd thought. The straps on her skimpy pink top were ripped on one side.

"Who are you and where am I?" Uncertainty tightened her words.

"I am the Goblin King, and I did as you asked. I took you away." Roan inclined his head.

Beneath his feet the grass was starting to wilt and die. If he looked at the horizon, clouds would be forming as dreams turned to nightmares. At least here he was as he had once looked—more or less. More scars, longer hair, less soul.

In the Fixed Realm his appearance would have made her scream. It made most people scream. Twisted and gray with the knotted joints, yellow eyes, and hooked nose of a goblin.

Her lips moved without sound as if she were thinking of a reply. "You're the Goblin King?"

"I am." Usually people dropped to their knees and begged for their life, but then people usually only saw him as a goblin. Very few had seen him as he'd once been before he'd lost his heart to a curse he didn't deserve and which had destroyed his tribe.

Her gaze flickered over his weapons, but she held her ground. "Where are we?"

"The Summerland. Where dreams begin." Unless he ended them by dragging the Shadowlands with him. The cold death was creeping closer, strangling the summer beauty.

"Why here?" she said with a frown that didn't belong on her pretty face.

She hadn't asked to be taken back. Roan kept the surprise from his features.

"Why not?" The Summerland was as good as it got. Eternal sweet summer days, all denied to him. But that was no reason she had to share his curse and join him. These were a few moments to remind himself he was once a human with a heart that beat. Helping her had reminded him of that even if it hadn't brought life to the golden muscle. It was more than anyone had done for him in far too long. Serving her had been a reward he'd never expected a summoner to grant.

"I just wanted to leave the party." She spun around then back to face him. Her long honey-blond hair swirled around her like the finest gold thread.

Roan fisted his hand. She wasn't an object to possess, that was the goblin in him heeding the empty call of the curse. Take more, always more to feed a hunger that could never be sated. It was a question of when, not if, he faded to gray and became one of the true goblins that roamed the Shadowlands looking for battle and gold. When he succumbed, the men who shared his curse would fall with him. It was for them he fought.

Now he had a new weapon to fight with. This girl, with her simple wish, had given him back what he'd thought lost. The simple ability to be kind, a trait no goblin could lay claim to. "Then be more careful what you wish for." He worked an amber bead, one of many in his hair, off a dreadlock. Each one was placed after he'd resisted the orders of a summoner. Tonight he'd failed. But he would fail many times to feel this human. To have her gaze at him as if he were once again a man. A savior, not a thief.

The doubt in her eyes lessened, but she still watched him as if unsure what he would do next. "I thought goblins were meant to be ugly and scary."

Roan blinked, then laughed. She had more courage than many men he'd faced—she just didn't know how to use it. "Would you prefer I looked like a monster?"

She shook her head and cast her gaze down, her cheeks turning pink. "I like the way you look now."

Her head turned as she took in the damage he was doing to the dream. The death of the Summerland was spreading. But where she stood the grass remained green as if she were made of the same pure magic of the Summerland. Would she keep him human if he had her or would it last only as long she remained untainted by the Shadowlands?

"What's happening?"

"Where I go the Shadowlands follows. I bring darkness, death, and despair. I rule land made of dust and famine. My subjects are goblins who'd eat you alive. Do not summon me again for next time I may not return you." It wasn't a casual threat. The temptation to see if she'd save him was one he could only ignore for so long. If she were to call him again...

Her eyes widened and she nodded. "I won't. I didn't even think you were real."

"I am real." He took her hand and placed the amber bead in her palm. Then closed her fingers over it. "A token to remember me by."

By morning this dream would fragment and it would be all she had left. Maybe he shouldn't give it to her, but he wanted her to know she hadn't imagined him. He wanted to exist for someone, if only as a half-forgotten dream. Better a fading dream than a nightmare.

"Thank you." She smiled, her eyes bright in the sunlight. She didn't open her hand to study the gem, just him. "I won't forget you."

Roan pressed his lips together. He wished that were true.

"It's time for you to wake up." He touched her shoulder and she vanished.

His fingers burned from the contact and the cold in his chest ached at the loss...almost as painfully as if he'd been forced to part with gold. In a way he had, but in keeping her, he would've lost the very thing he wanted.

Roan watched as the patch of grass she'd been standing on wilted and turned to dust as the Shadowlands caught up with him. The sun went out and the sky became as empty as the land. Nothing glimmered. No stars, no moon, no sun. The trees at the edge of the field shed their leaves, their bark blackened and their limbs twisted, reaching for the heavy gray twilight. The only things that grew in the Shadowlands were the things people feared. The river was black and slick, the dust barren, and the few animals wandering around were little more than hide and bones.

Nothing survived here. Not even hope.

The girl's smile stayed with him, warming him where everything else had failed. It wouldn't win back his soul, but it would help him hold on to it for a little longer...Maybe his brother would find a cure to the curse and they would once again be free.

Eliza's head jerked up as she woke, and her stomach rolled at the sudden motion. She closed her eyes again and took a slow, deep breath. Even with her eyes closed the room seemed to tilt and sway. How had she managed to nod off while sitting on the cold bathroom floor? With unsteady legs she eased herself up. Something fell out of her hand and bounced across the floor. Her heart gave a solid thump as if trying to leap out of her rib cage.

Her hand slid over the wall to the light switch, but she already knew what it was. A bead. An amber bead given to her by the Goblin King... who'd looked very human—and incredibly hot. He wasn't like Matt's friends...or any of the boys her age. Everything about him was sharp and hard, and yet the tenderness in his eyes spoke of a deep sadness and longing. The weapons he wore left no doubt he was a fearsome warrior. After all, he'd saved her. But who would save him?

The florescent light flickered and came on. She shielded her eyes from the glare as she cast her gaze across the floor looking for the bead. It glinted like a drop of sunshine on the white tiles next to the bath. She picked it up and held it to the light.

One amber bead delicately engraved with a Celtic knot. His hair had been full of them. But even as she tried to remember the details of his face they slid away. Until all she was left with was an impression of blue eyes like the sky above a desert, hungry and deadly, and dark hair full of gold and amber beads.

He wasn't really a goblin. He was a cursed man with a heart of gold, just like her mother's stories. She smiled and closed her hand. Her warrior.

"Eliza?" her brother called out. "Eliza, are you okay?" She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, removing the worst of the tearstains. Her hand went to the broken strap, but beneath her fingers it was whole. She turned and glanced in the mirror. Both straps were perfect. She frowned and touched her shoulder. He'd touched her shoulder, his fingers cool and firm. Had he fixed her top at the same time? Or had she imagined it was broken?

"Eliza!" Her brother began opening doors and slamming them closed.

She opened the bathroom door. "I'm here. I'm fine."

"What the hell happened?"

Eliza shrugged.

"Are you okay?" Amanda, Matt's girlfriend, leaned into his arm.

"Fine, I, um...didn't feel very well so I came to the bathroom."

"You'll feel worse tomorrow," Amanda said.

"Did you hear anything strange?" Matt pressed.

"I heard the music stop." She raised her eyebrows and tried to look innocent.

Her brother and his girlfriend studied her.

"Really, I'm fine. I shouldn't have had the second beer." She shouldn't have any. She wouldn't get drunk ever again. And she would never let another guy talk her into anything she didn't want. One kiss had rapidly become demands for more.

"Where is everyone?" Were they the only people in the house?

"Gone."

"Oh." The Goblin King had chased everyone away. Not that she could tell them that, and if she did, they wouldn't believe her. They'd just think she'd drunk too much—which she had. If it weren't for the bead fisted in her hand, she'd be tempted to agree he was a dream brought on by beer. But he wasn't. She'd been saved by the Goblin King. She tried not to smile and lost.

"I'm going to lock up the house." Matt gave Amanda a kiss on the cheek.

She turned with him. "I'll take out the garbage so we don't have to do it all in the morning."

Eliza sighed. She should help them. Because she was here, she was part of the crime, and if they didn't get it cleaned up before their Dad returned he'd ground them for life. But there was something she needed to do first.

She put the bead on her bedside table so it wouldn't get lost, then took off the strappy sandals that were making it hard for her to keep her balance with a belly full of beer and shoved on her sneakers. The Goblin King had saved her and although he hadn't asked for gold, she knew that would be what he'd want in payment. She knew the stories and had a book full of goblin lore. While she had no real gold to thank him with, there was plenty of liquid gold in the laundry—beer. She hoped that would be enough.

Amanda was picking up empty bottles off the lounge room floor as Eliza went past her, half expecting someone to jump out of the shadows, but the house was empty. In the laundry she pulled the plug on the trough so as the ice melted it could drain away. There were still nearly two cartons of beer and a couple cans of pre-mix spirits on ice. Her stomach somersaulted at the thought of alcohol.

With quick moves she put the beer into an empty box, then scribbled thank you on the flap. It rattled and clanked as she carried it out into the dark yard. She shivered in the cool night air. Maybe she was being silly, and maybe it would be there in the morning. But maybe not. And that was enough of a reason to leave payment for the man who'd saved her...and shown her the Summerland.

He was the first person to listen to something she said. Since her mother's death three years ago her father had focused on his work. No matter how well she did at school, she could never do enough to shift his focus from the law firm. Her brother was just as bad. All he ever thought about was Amanda and his studies. If her father and brother spoke, it was always with raised voices. They probably wouldn't have noticed if the Goblin King hadn't returned her. For half a second she entertained the idea of living in the Summerland with the Goblin King in some kind of fairy-tale existence. Couldn't all curses be broken? But at the back of her mind his warning remained clear and cold.

Do not summon me again.

Yet for those moments with him she'd felt safe, like he would protect her from anything and everyone. Though she didn't dare tempt her luck and call him again. He might've looked human, but she had to remember he was goblin inside. She'd seen the Summerland wither in his presence.

She swallowed hard. He was dangerous. And she couldn't afford to forget it. The trees trembled, their limbs creaking in the breeze. Eliza rubbed her hands up her arms to smooth out the sudden goose bumps. She took a step back toward the house, away from the dark shadows in the yard. They crept forward after her.

"Are you there?" Her voice didn't shake, but it was quieter and higher than it should have been. Another step back.

Sirens cut through the night, slicing the quiet. She startled, the ill feeling in her stomach growing. Whatever magic she had unraveled tonight by calling on the Goblin King, it hadn't finished unfolding. It reached out through the night as if looking for something. She ran inside and locked the door. Would the beer be enough of a thank you? Or would he demand something more in payment since he hadn't taken her?

She crawled into bed, listening for the sound of beads chiming that would signal his arrival, half-hoping to see him once more, not sure what she would do if she did. She touched the bead, the only proof she had that she hadn't dreamed him into existence.

Her eyes closed and she found herself in the impossibly bright field. No natural grass was this green. No sky was this blue. This was the Goblin King's Summerland. Her stomach twisted in anticipation. She turned around, looking for him, only this time he wasn't here. She was alone.

Jewel-colored butterflies flitted past in a spiraling dance. As lovely as this place was, it seemed empty. If this was her dream, shouldn't she

be able to control it? Eliza bit her lip.

Do not summon me again.

Was a dream considered a summons? And what would she do if he did show up here? Ask what it was like to be a goblin? Ask whether he thought about her as much as she thought about him? She shook her head. It was better not to risk it. He didn't look like the forgiving type—not that she could remember exactly what he looked like.

All she had was a vague impression of thinly veiled power. His hand had been rough against hers, as if he were used to working...or swinging the sword that hung casually at his side. She bit her lip. Something about him didn't fit with her mother's stories. Why had he been cursed? If it was for a love of gold, shouldn't he have demanded some from her? He hadn't acted like the greedy monster she'd read about in the stories.

But if she'd learned anything from her trip to the Summerland, it was that things weren't always what they seemed.

She lay down in the long grass to watch the butterflies dance. What was the point of all this beauty if no one could see it and she had no one to enjoy it with? This was becoming a boring dream. Her eyes grew heavy as the warmth crept into her and made her sleepy.

Sunlight streamed past her open curtains. Eliza squinted through the pounding tightening her skull. The amber bead on her bedside table shone in the sunlight as if lit from within. She blinked. It had really happened. All of it. She'd gotten drunk and summoned the Goblin King last night.

Eliza flipped back the blanket and ran over to her window. The box of beer was gone. Her breath caught in her throat. He'd been back.

Roan surveyed the gold piled from wall to wall in his gold room, the biggest cavern in the rock spire that passed as his castle. It glittered and gleamed with stolen treasure. Statues, crowns, a throne, and more coins than he cared to count were strewn across the floor. Today it was dull.

He flicked the cap off a beer and took a swig. Beer tasted so much better when he didn't have to steal it. Not that he could drink much of it. Too many bottles and he'd forget to hold onto his soul with both hands.

"Celebrating?" Dai said in Deceangli as he looked up from his book. They used the language out of habit even though they spoke many more.

They'd spent so long together bound by the curse that they could sense when one departed the Shadowlands or arrived back from the Fixed Realm. Dai's gaze travelled over the gold as if he were looking for a new addition.

"A gift from a summoner." He gave his brother a bottle of beer so he could share in the celebration even if he didn't understand the reason behind it.

"What did you do?" Dai's eyebrows slashed down as if he was expecting Roan to suddenly fade to goblin.

Dai might be younger, but he was always the voice of caution, making sure he didn't misstep and become goblin by accident.

"Nothing that would cause you concern, brother." Yet he doubted Dai would approve of him breaking up the party with magic when he could have just scared the youth tormenting the young woman. It had been worth the price. A small piece of his soul to have her see him as man.

"Nothing that made you human."

He wasn't human, even though for a few shining moments he'd felt human...or what he thought being human should feel like. It had been so long he wasn't sure he remembered.

"No." He couldn't have used her to save himself—he wasn't that goblin. He stared at the gold. Its empty promise of satisfaction that never came. His life's achievements could be measured by the ton, but it still amounted to nothing.

Roan hadn't expected anything from her. He'd only gone back to make sure she was truly safe. As much as he'd like to see her again in the Summerland, he knew he couldn't—no matter what she dreamed. From another realm he could feel her dreams sliding over his skin like silk. Not a summons. But she thought of him. Remembered him. Holding on to his soul didn't seem so hard when he knew she was dreaming of him. He touched the dreadlock missing the bead and smiled. It was enough. It had to be enough because he was too goblin to resist the lure if it was constantly put in front of him, and she was a prize worth all the gold in his gold room.

"To summoners bearing gifts." Roan raised a toast to the young woman. The bottles chinked, the hollowness echoing in the gold. There was nothing for him here. Nothing that could fill his heart and nothing that could heal his soul.

The memory of the young woman with the golden eyes stayed with him. The temptation to meet her in the Summerland lingered, but it was a false dream. Maybe it had been a mistake to take her there. But it was a mistake he would gladly make again to be seen as human and not the monster he'd become.

Roan downed the rest of the bottle in a long swallow, then let the glass crumble to dust in his fingers. Perhaps one more glimpse into her golden eyes would ease his pain. Or would it only make it worse—to know she could never be his? The thought caused him an anguish he couldn't fathom. For her, he wanted a chance to live. She'd looked so alone and frightened, cowering from her stalker. What if she needed him? His chest ached in the hollow where his heart should have been. But he knew if she needed him, she would call for him and would willingly go to her side. Until then, he would bide his time and redouble his efforts to achieve the impossible:

A cure to the curse.