



# Loving a Demon

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Arthur was a mess. A single dad, newly divorced, who realized a little late he wasn't as straight as he thought. When he stumbles into a bar to wallow, he doesn't think he'd be falling in love with a band of paranormals. Much less going on a date with the lead singer.

Hendrix lived and breathed his music. So when he and his band had to start fresh in the human realm, he didn't blink twice. He'd do what he had to in order to make it big. And when his first real human fan turns out to be his new muse, he's determined to keep him.

But not everyone is happy for them. And there are some things in life that are more important than love. Right?

**Total Pages (Source):** 56

## CHAPTER ONE

### HENDRIX

“Hen, you ready?”

“In a minute.”

I knew they were getting antsy. They were before every gig. But I started every gig the same way. I took slow deep breaths, mindful of each muscle and coaxing it to relax. Some guys smoked, some drank, I meditated. It worked for me.

“Is he ready?”

“No. He’s doing that thing again.”

“Ugh. We’re gonna be late.”

I ignored my bandmates. If they wanted me to sing well, then they had to let me get ready. It wasn’t like we were world famous. We might be more popular in the Other Realm, but in the human realm, we were more of a novelty than a claim to fame. Over time, we hoped to change that. Every gig counted. Which meant I didn’t change my routine for anyone.

Sometimes it was frustrating that we were starting over from scratch. We still did gigs now and then in the Other Realm, but with most of our usual attendees crossing over during the integration, it isn’t the same anymore. We figured we’d try again out

here, but it was harder than I thought it was going to be. I almost wanted to quit once in a while. I just couldn't stand the thought of doing anything else.

Pushing those depressing thoughts away, I focused again on my breathing. Once my body and mind were relaxed, I opened my eyes. Like I expected, my bandmates hovered around the door, all staring at me. I lifted an eyebrow accusingly.

"You know, it would go a lot faster if I wasn't distracted."

Ruby rolled her eyes. "No, it wouldn't. You drag it out on purpose."

I sighed. They were so impatient. "I don't know what to tell you. It takes—"

"... as long as it takes," they all chorused together.

"We know," Duncan finished, with an exasperated look.

I grinned. "If you know, then why do you insist on interrupting me?"

"Because you look like a tool."

"Feeling the love tonight, guys." My eyes narrowed. "Wait, where's Zion?"

Laz shook his head. "Don't think he's making it tonight. I can't get ahold of him."

"Again?" I didn't know why I was surprised. Zion thought he was a big shot and only showed up when he wanted to. He was lucky I could cover him on lead guitar because otherwise we'd be screwed. I had to get creative with the claws, but I learned to deal with that a long time ago. The band had talked more than once about booting him, but I hesitated to pull the trigger without a replacement.

“Did you actually expect him to show?” Ruby drawled. “Can we just go now? The crowd could dwindle if we don’t hurry.”

Our presence had no effect on the crowd. Not yet anyway. Our band, Children of Myth, was still getting its bearings in the human realm. We took every gig we could get and didn’t complain about anything. Time slot, dressing room state, nothing. Not until we made it big.

Tonight’s gig wasn’t the worst. The dressing room was clean and the time slot was decent. Eleven was a little late for a decent crowd, and most people came to see the show before us, but when I finally stepped on stage, there was a good amount of people still hanging around. Enough to get my blood pumping. I loved this part. The adrenaline, the thrill. It was like your first flight all over again. A dash of nerves, an insane amount of excitement, and the thrill of finally getting off the ground. It was worth every bad gig and disappointing payday. It was all worth it.

The warmth of the stage lights settled on my skin, hiding the crowd that wasn’t right by the stage. It did nothing to block out the feeling of eyes on me, the swell of interest as people gathered closer to watch.

“Let’s do this.”

Heart still pumping wildly, I lifted my hand to the crowd. “Thank you! Good night!”

Their cheers warmed my soul, and we were all smiles as we headed off stage. Duncan was practically bouncing, a huge beaming grin on his face.

“That was a good night. Right? Good crowd.”

I nodded, ruffling his hair. He was the youngest, and I loved his exuberance. “Yeah. They were into it. We did good. Well done, guys.”

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Laz clapped my shoulder, squeezing once. “You too. I know it's harder when you take on Zion’s role too, but you were great tonight. Not one missed note.”

I chuckled. When I first started learning music, that had been almost impossible for me. Doing two things at once wasn’t my strong suit. But after years of practice, I was better at it now. I still struggled sometimes, which was why we had Zion in the first place, but I’d do in a pinch.

“Thanks, man. I’m gonna get a drink. Anyone else?”

Most of them shook their heads. Unlike me, they had actual day jobs. I was the only one living the starving artist lifestyle. I raised my eyebrow at Ruby, who hadn’t acknowledged me yet.

“You down, R?”

She pursed her lips, frowning at her phone before tossing it aside. “Yeah. I need to feed and my usual feeder just canceled on me.”

I grimaced. Vampires were barely better treated than demons were in this realm. Finding a decent feeder was hard. I understood that life events came up, but Ruby only had the one feeder. If they ditched out, she didn’t eat.

“If you need someone to supplement, you know you can ask any of us,” I offered.

She made a face. “No offense, but that’s not going to happen.”

I snickered. There was a level of intimacy involved with vampire feedings, but she was my friend and I didn't want her starving. After the other guys headed out, I stopped her from following, leveling her with a look.

“I’m not gonna push, but I am going to make sure you heard me. If you need help, tell me. We can close our eyes and pretend we’re with someone else. It’s better than you starving yourself.”

Her usual scowl softened, and she sighed. “I know. I’m not there yet, but I appreciate the offer. I’ll have a few drinks, scope out any potentials, and get back to you.”

Nodding, I tossed my arm over her shoulder, my guitar slung over my back as we headed to the bar. Ruby and I had been friends since we were teens, and I never wanted her to suffer. We toyed with the idea of a relationship when we were younger, but while we were great friends and bandmates, the spark wasn’t there. We agreed to stay friends and when I started this band, she was the first person I asked to join me.

Setting my guitar protectively between the bar and my feet, I lifted my chin at the bartender. “Hey, Maya. Two beers, please.”

She nodded to acknowledge us, grabbing our drinks when she had a spare minute. Sliding them in front of us, she offered us a smile.

“Nice show tonight.”

“Appreciate it.” I handed her some cash, leaning my forearms on the bar top. “How’d the crowd look?”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Decent. Interested. I heard a few people ask your name and at least two were looking you up on their phones while I got them drinks.”

That made me smile. Each fan counted, and I loved that we even snagged one person's attention. When Maya got us this gig, I had my reservations. The club she worked at was nice, but not our usual kind of venue. It was a little higher class than I was used to. I came here with the guys for drinks, but I never thought about playing here. But they had a drop out in their line up last minute and when Maya offered it to me, I couldn't say no. I was glad we did.

"So what am I gonna have to do to appropriately thank you for doing this?"

She raised an eyebrow, a teasing grin pulling at her lips. "You know what I want, Hen."

I made a face. "We don't play weddings. Pick something else."

She laughed, her eyes dancing with amusement. I loved her and her fiancée, Isla, but we were a rock band, not a wedding band. I shuddered at the thought of playing sappy love songs all night.

"Well, we're willing to pay. So when you become desperate enough, let us know."

Ruby had been busy scanning the crowd, but she turned around at the word 'pay'. "Hold up. What are we talking about?"

Maya gestured to me with a tip of her head. "We asked if you guys would play at our wedding. Mr. Big Shot over here thinks he's too good to do weddings."

Ruby scowled at me. "We aren't in a position to turn down gigs, Hen. How much are we talking about, exactly?"

"We offered two thousand," Maya replied. "We know wedding bands usually ask for more, but it's all we can afford. Weddings are stupid expensive."

Ruby's eyes widened, and she shot me an incredulous look. "And you said no?!"

Oh great. I could see where this was going. I shot Maya a dirty look before trying to reason with Ruby.



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“It’s not our style. Our songs aren’t wedding appropriate and you know I hate covers. I—”

She waved her hands, her face a mask of irritation. “Stow it. You might be the leader, but this is a decision we make together. And I know the guys will be on board with that kind of money.” She turned to Maya. “We’ll do it. Give us a time and place. We’ll be there.”

Maya beamed, elated, while I sank in on myself. This was why I didn't bring it up to them. I knew they'd want to do it. It just felt like another gigantic step down from where we'd come from in the Other Realm.

Maya patted my shoulder, doing her best to hide the joy on her face. “Cheer up. This isn’t one of those fancy weddings withcheesy music. You know Isla and I aren’t those kinds of people. We want to have fun. And I’m sure Isla will have more than one of your songs on request. She loves you guys.”

It settled me a little and I let out a slow breath. “Yeah, alright. Just keep the torment to a minimum. They only have to play the music. I’m the one who has to say the stupid words.”

That made her cackle, but I found less joy in it. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. I needed to do everything in my power to make sure my dad and my uncle never found out. I’d never hear the end of it.

## CHAPTER TWO

## ARTHUR

Swallowing hard, I tried to sink a little farther into the shadows. This was the third Children of Myth show I'd come to see and I was worried I was starting to look like a stalker. I couldn't help myself. Listening to them got me out of my head for a while. The lead singer especially had that kind of soulful, alluring voice that kept me coming back time and time again. I felt like I was way too old to follow a band around the city, but here I was. Again.

While I hadn't intended on eavesdropping, the bar was small enough that I could overhear them talking to each other. I secretly agreed with Hendrix. His band didn't scream wedding to me. Then again, my own wedding had a string quartet and every cheesy love song my ex-wife could think of. It wasn't exactly the wedding I wanted, but everyone said the wedding was more about the bride, so I let Val make all the decisions.

Like she was summoned by my thoughts, my phone buzzed with that special tempo I set to let me know my ex was calling me. I fumbled with my phone, almost running out the door so she wouldn't hear the noise of the club in the background. I wasn't fast enough and missed the call by the time I got outside, but I was quick to call her back. Her tone still held a level of annoyance to it when she answered.

"Why didn't you answer the first time?"

"Sorry..." I knew better by now than to throw out excuses. She'd yell at me either way. "What did you need?"

"You are picking up Sofia tomorrow, right?"

I frowned. "Yes. I have her every weekend. Why?"

She clicked her tongue, but I couldn't figure out if she was irritated with me or something else. I usually assumed it was me. It had been since the day we got married.

"She's been asking. She doesn't believe me when I say you will. And she won't go to bed until she is sure."

My heart ached a little at the thought. The divorce was a little over a year ago, and Sophie was still struggling to cope. If I could've, I would've convinced Val to stick it out until Sophie was in college, but Val got tired of me and wouldn't even discuss other options. She wanted a divorce, and I didn't fight her on it.

"Can I talk to her?"

Val didn't like to let me talk to Sophie when it was her night, but if she was fed up enough to call me, I figured she'd take the offer. It was beyond late and Sophie had school in the morning. Val wasn't happy about it, I could hear her muttering under her breath, but she handed Sophie the phone anyway.

"Sophie?"

"Daddy? When are you coming to get me?"

"After school, baby. Why are you still up?"

My little girl was my life. I'd go through the whole awful marriage again and the years of verbal abuse just to have that little girl. She was so smart and thoughtful and she was my light in the darkness when things were at their worst.

"I couldn't sleep." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I like your house better."

A part of me wanted to be smug about that, but I also wanted my daughter to have a good relationship with her mother. I put my own feelings aside, keeping my voice gentle for Sophie.

“There’s something to love at both houses, sweet pea. Your mom’s house has that beautiful garden and all those books. You’re allowed to love both, Sophie. We just want you to be happy.”

I could hear the frown in her voice and I could practically see the look on her face. When Sophie didn’t agree with me, she looked so much like her mother. Her brows drew together tightly, her lips pressed into a thin line. But unlike Val, Sophie was a lot more diplomatic when she disagreed with me.

“But your house has my purple room and all my stuffies. It's fun there.”

“And you’ll be there tomorrow. But you’ve got school in the morning and you can’t learn well if you’re tired. So go to bed and get a good sleep. I promise, I’ll pick you up right on time tomorrow.”

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“Okay, daddy. Good night.”

“Sleep well, honey. Good night.”

She handed the phone back to her mother, who hissed at her to stay in her bed before she spoke to me again.

“You can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“You let her get away with anything when she’s with you. You’re doing it on purpose, so she’ll hate me. I won’t let you turn her against me.”

My chest tightened painfully. If I didn’t go along with what Val wanted, I was worried she’d try to take Sophie from me. We had a custody agreement, but she also had her cousin as her lawyer and they’d bury me if I caused any trouble. They already took away more time than I wanted, forcing me to only see Sophie on the weekends.

“I’m trying, Val. I reminded her about her favorite things at your house. Maybe if you let her paint her room or—”

Val scoffed. “That is not important. She needs to focus on school. Her grades are dropping. Stop distracting her with childish things.”

I rolled my eyes, only because I knew she couldn’t see me. Sophie’s grades had

nothing to do with her focus. I spoke to the school counselor, and she said every kid whose parents divorced went through something similar. Sophie needed more time and reassurance. She didn't need Val hovering over her about her grades.

"We'll work on her homework together. I promise."

She made that irritated noise again and hung up without another word. I was expecting it, so it didn't shock me like it used to. Tucking my phone back in my pocket, I leaned against the side of the club with a sigh.

I never expected my life to turn out like this. I did everything I was supposed to do. I studied hard in school, married my college sweetheart, got a stable, well earning job in accounting, and a big house. I thought my life was set. And once Sophie was born, I actually felt happy. But ten years later, everything fell apart. I came home from work one day to divorce papers on the table, and Val and Sophie's bags were already packed. I'd been in a free fall ever since.

The door to the club swung open, and I nearly swallowed my tongue when a certain someone stepped outside. He had his arm around the drummer, Ruby, and a lazy smile on his face.

"Are your friends going to give you hell for missing poker night?" Ruby asked, looking at her phone. Probably ordering a ride.

"Felix will," Hendrix drawled. "Maybe. I don't know who showed up tonight. If there were enough people, he probably won't say anything."

My pulse spiked, my eyes locked on the couple. I loved the band itself, but a small part of me knew I showed up for him. Hendrix Lovegood was everything I wasn't. A free spirit musician who lived life the way he wanted to live it. I never thought I'd have a crush on a man, but the feelings I harbored for the demon were borderline

obsessive.

“Have I thanked you recently for moving in with me?”

Ruby shook her head, wry amusement overtaking her face. “Every day. Seriously, Hen, how do you get drunk off a couple of beers? I thought demons were tougher than this.”

Hendrix scrunched his nose adorably. “I’m a lightweight, you know that. It’s my dad’s greatest shame.” He flashed her a grin, leaning heavily against her. “You know you love me anyway.”

My spirit sank a little. I never had any intention of actually talking to him, much less admitting I was interested. My family would lose their minds if they knew I was interested in men. That didn’t mean I couldn’t dream. Not knowing his relationship status made me feel less guilty about thinking about him like that. But I didn’t think I could ignore the fact that he had a girlfriend.

“Did Maya tell you this might be a recurring thing? Are your friends going to be pissed?”

I didn’t get to hear his reply because the rideshare stopped by the curb and Ruby shoved him into the back before he could answer. She put his guitar in back with him and shut the door, poking her head in through the passenger window.

“He’s probably going to fall asleep before he gets there. If you buzz apartment B, the guys will come grab him. I’ll send a big tip once I hear he’s home safe.”

The driver nodded, completely unfazed. She patted the top of the car, sending them on their way, before spinning around and heading back inside. I frowned, following the car with my eyes as it drove off. It seemed really unsafe to put a drunk person in

the care of someone you don't know. I almost wanted to follow them to make sure he got home safe. But that felt even more creepy than following a band around.

Resigned, I headed to my car. I needed to get some sleep, so I had plenty of energy to play with Sophie. Spending the entire week with her mom, who wasn't a big fan of letting her play, she usually showed up bursting with energy. We spent most of the weekend playing together and running around so she could burn off as much energy as possible before going back to her mom's Monday afternoon.

Sliding behind the wheel, I considered my next move. Val wanted Sophie to work on her grades. If Sophie came back having learned nothing, Val would start pushing to take more time away from me. I had to make a plan for Sophie to work on her grades while still letting her be a little kid. Maybe I could figure out a way to make her math homework fun. I was an accountant, after all. You didn't get a career like mine without enjoying math, at least on some level.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HENDRIX

While the rest of my friends had jobs during the day, I bounced around a lot to earn money. I taught some guitar lessons at a guitar shop in town once a week, did some modeling for an art studio, whatever I could get my hands on really. It wasn't glamorous by any means, but it paid my portion of the bills. And I didn't have to do as much now that I was splitting the rent with three people instead of one.



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It had been some kind of miracle that my bandmates' leases were up right after Mal said he was moving in with his mate, Zach. He knew my situation and offered to continue to pay his half of the rent, but that rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't want to have to rely on my friends for money. When Ruby mentioned getting a new place, I asked if she wanted to room together and the other two followed suit a few months later. Only Zion refused, saying he was too good to have roommates. No one else complained about that. It was cramped, since it was a two bedroom, but none of us minded. It meant most nights afterwork we could practice as a band and we didn't have to herd people to get to gigs.

I shared the loft with Ruby, since I was the only one in the band who didn't hit on her regularly. Pretty sure Duncan was teasing, his type was more sweet girl next door, but Laz and Zion were definitely interested. Zion because he was a douche, always looking to get laid. Laz... Poor Laz. He actually really liked Ruby. I'd seen the looks he gave her when she wasn't paying attention. He was crushing hard, and it killed him when she didn't look his way. Ruby was pretty adamant about the no dating band members rule, and I didn't think Laz could change her mind any time soon.

Narrowing my eyes, I frowned at Athena. "What exactly am I delivering this time?"

Athena was an oracle and an old friend. Usually Callum did deliveries for her when he visited home, but he had an extensive project at work this week, so I picked up the slack for a little extra cash.

"Never you mind. Just make sure not to say anything when you cross over," she snapped, handing me the package. It was small, easily fitting into the palm of my hand, but heavier than I expected. I turned it this way and that, trying to figure out

what it was, until Athena smacked the back of my head.

“If I find out you opened that before delivering it, I won’t pay you. When is Callum coming back? He asks fewer questions than you.”

I fought off a grin. “I’m going to tell him he should be asking more questions then. He seriously never asked?”

She scowled at me, but since she was a tiny little thing with a hunch and a bum knee, I wasn’t afraid of her. Even sitting down, I was taller than her. Besides, she was a friend of Callum’s family, so I’d known her for over half my life.

“Are you going to deliver it or aren’t you? I’ve got customers waiting.”

“Shouldn’t you already know the answer to that?” I drawled. I loved teasing her. It drove her batty, but it always made her smile in the end. And I was less obnoxious about it than Felix.

She opened her mouth, probably to say something snarky, but then she froze, her eyes darting back and forth. We’d all experienced this before, and I knew better than to interrupt her until the vision passed. I got her chair and moved it closer to her. Sometimes the visions were strong enough that she needed to sit down afterwards.

When she finally blinked a few times, I let out a breath. “You okay?”

She looked around slowly, nodding slightly. I gave her a minute to process, helping her sit in her chair, when suddenly she thrust her hand out at me.

“Give it back. That won’t work anymore.”

Frowning, I handed the package back to her. “Okay... So you don’t need a delivery,

then?”

Her brows creased tighter together, her head tipped. “No, you still have a delivery. Just not that. I need to cross over and I’m too old to do it alone anymore. Bring me to the tunnel, boy. And make it snappy.”

Giving myself a mental shrug, I followed her out of her little tent. She snapped the curtain closed, pinning a sign to the front, and turned to the person waiting on the other side.

“Something has come up. Come back tomorrow. And don’t eat the dumplings. They’ll make you ill.”

The woman who was waiting blinked rapidly, obviously confused, but Athena didn’t wait around. She wrapped one bony arm around my waist, giving me an impatient look, and barked at me.

“Let’s go, boy. I don’t have all day.”

Fighting back a laugh, I teleported us to the tunnel to the Other Realm. It didn’t require much energy to use it, the government built it so anyone could pass through freely, but Athena was slow moving and needed a hand to navigate the passage. I led her through, helping her over to a bench on the other side to rest.

“Where are we going from here?”

She waved me away. “Together? Nowhere. My ride will be here soon. You should check on your father, though. He and your uncle were kicked out of the bar last night.”

I sighed heavily. “Of course they were. Which one?”

“McNeelys.”

There were times when I hated the fact that my dad lived so close to a bar. Like most musicians, he had a vice and no matter how many times I told him to cool it, he didn’t listen. As long as people bought him drinks, he was going to accept them.

“Alright. I’ll go check on him. What time am I meeting you here?”

Her face softened a little. “Bless you, boy. I’ll be back just after lunch. You can meet me right here.”

I was still unbearably curious about where she was going in such a hurry and why she needed to go by herself, but I knew better than to argue with her. I waited for the car to show up to get her before teleporting home. Dad and Uncle Marley hadn’t even made it into the house. They were passed out in the front yard. Luckily, this wasn’t a nightly occurrence. Just more often than I’d like.

With a heavy sigh, I moved past them to the side of the house. I grabbed the hose, filling up two buckets of water. I used to be nice enough to drag them both to bed, but this was funnier. And they kind of deserved it.

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I went to my uncle first, since he took longer to wake up. Dumping the water on him, I nudged him with my foot. “Up. Before I get the ice.”

He groaned, rolling onto his side, but didn’t immediately wake up.

Moving on to my dad, I dumped the second bucket out over him. He gasped and spluttered, sitting up quickly. “Wha– What?”

“You two make terrible lawn ornaments,” I commented dryly.

He looked up at me, his eyes narrowed like he was trying to figure out who I was. Once he was awake enough to figure it out, he beamed at me.

“Hendrix, my boy! I didn't know you were coming for a visit.”

I shook my head with a smirk. “I was in the neighborhood. I hope you didn’t forget your guitar at the bar this time.”

He flapped his hand dismissively. “Don’t gotta worry about that no more. Me and Bob made a deal. I can keep my guitar stored there as long as I don’t play any more songs about your mama. He said I was depressing the crowd.”

My mom, the smart woman that she was, left my dad when I was still a baby. She naively thought he’d straighten his act to spend more time with his kid, but no such luck. I was raised mostly by her while Dad wallowed and wrote songs about lost love to ease the pain. She loved him enough that she’d probably have taken him back if he at least put in the effort, but Dad was a free spirit at heart. He loved music more than

he loved her. It was a shame, but she remarried right after the integration and she was happier for it.

“You need a new muse, old man. You’re going to lose your fans if you don’t move on.”

“Psh. I’ve been playing these parts since before you were born. My fans are die hard. I’m not losing nuthin’.”

Another groan behind us signaled my uncle finally waking his ass up. Good. He was heavy, and I didn’t want to hurt myself by dragging him inside.

Despite the trouble he caused, I loved my dad. I really did. He taught me about music and used to sneak me into the human realm when I was just a kid, using expensive glamours to make us look human so we could watch bands together. When he wasn’t drinking, he was a fun guy, and I loved playing music with him when I came to visit. As long as the visits were short. Taking care of him got tiring after a while. He was also the reason I very rarely drank and never had more than two drinks a night.

“Come on. Let’s go inside. I’m sure you’ve got hangover cures in the bathroom.”

Dad took my hand when I offered it, getting to his feet. When he was balanced, he pulled me in for a hug, slapping my back hard. “I missed you, kid. We gotta jam sometime soon.”

“We can do that. At your place, though. Ruby says you’re not allowed in the apartment.”

He wasn’t even offended, chuckling as he went to nudge Uncle Marley again. “Can’t say I blame her. Come on Mars. Get your ass up.” He looked over his shoulder at me while hauling my uncle off the ground. “You finally got under that skirt, then?”

I made a face. “Ew. Don’t say it like that. And no. Ruby and I are just friends. I don’t hook up with my bandmates.”

And even if I did, I wouldn’t step on Laz’s toes like that. I wasn’t a douche. Besides, I wanted something new. Something exciting. It’d been a while since I was truly excited about something. I didn’t know what I was looking for yet, but I’d figure it out once I found it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ARTHUR

I had to wonder at what point this obsession moved from fanatic to borderline pathetic. I was probably toeing the line, if not completely on the other side by now. The Children of Myth wasn’t a big enough band to have people following them around. But here I was, at my tenth official show, my eyes glued to the stage as Hendrix belted out the final notes of the song. I had most of them memorized at this point. If they were online, I would’ve downloaded them by now. Even Sophie noticed me humming their songs on the weekends. Not well, I couldn’t actually hold a tune, but she thought it was funny. I was just glad she wasn’t close enough with her mom to confide in her. I didn’t need Val to know I came here every week.

When Hendrix smiled and thanked the crowd, I swallowed down my disappointment. He couldn’t play all night just because I was obsessed with the sound of his voice. I just wish they had a CD or something to tide me over until next week.

“You know, I see you here a lot. Big fan of the band?”

Startled, I whipped my attention off the stage to where the bartender was watching me. Other than taking my order and checking if I needed a refill, she never really looked my way before. Or so I thought. Apparently, she recognized how pathetic I

was.

“I—I—”

The band cleared off the stage, and my stomach flipped over. My mind told me to leave to avoid the bartender’s questions, but my body refused to move. Hendrix almost always came out here at the end of the night. He didn’t drink much, usually asking for a soda while his bandmates got beers. It was creepy that I knew that, right? I needed to go.

I was pushing out of my seat, ready to bolt, when a familiar alluring voice made me freeze.

“Maya! You haven’t sent us a song list yet.”

The bartender’s gaze swung away from me to where Hendrix and the band were walking up. She raised an eyebrow at Hendrix.



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“Can you sound a little more anguished about it?”

Hendrix pursed his lips, but Ruby beat him to the punch. Literally. She whacked him with a closed fist on his stomach to silence him and smiled at Maya.

“Maybe you shouldn’t ask him things like that. He’ll do it just to be a butthead. Musicians are all drama queens. But yeah, a song list would be helpful. There’s only a month until the wedding and we want to practice the songs we aren’t familiar with.”

Hendrix scowled at his drummer, rubbing his stomach to ease the pain. The bar was more crowded tonight, so more of the barstools were taken than usual. The few that were left were near me. I almost whimpered when Hendrix sat down next to me, his guitar case settled between his knees against the bar.

“I think Isla was working on the music list last night. I’ll text her and see where she’s at with it. I promise to have it to you by the weekend.” She glanced in my direction and my stomach filled with dread. She wouldn’t. Would she?

“By the way, have you guys met your biggest fan yet? He’s been here every night you’ve played for weeks now.” She gestured to me with a tip of her head.

All eyes of the band swung my way. I wanted to curl in on myself and cry, but that’d only draw more attention to myself. Instead, I ducked my head, my shoulders up by my ears like I could hide from them.

“No shit. That’s awesome, man. What’s your name?”

I couldn't outright ignore him. That'd be rude. So, despite my better judgment, I forced myself to croak out an introduction. "Arthur... Arthur Lewis..."

He didn't need to know my last name. I was making it worse. I grimaced, staring holes into the bar top. Meeting Hendrix in person was a fantasy. I never actually thought I'd get to do it and I wasn't prepared. What do I even say to an amazing musician who I was slightly obsessed with.

"Are, uh... Are you afraid of us? Is it the paranormal thing? Because we're not gonna hurt you or anything."

He sounded dejected, and my head jerked up automatically in alarm. "N-No! I- That- I don't care-" That sounded bad, but I couldn't figure out what to say. I was an awkward person by nature and I was sitting next to a guy I'd had fantasies about. If the lighting here wasn't so dim, they'd see the fact that my face was on fire. There was no hiding it with my complexion.

Unfortunately, when I locked eyes with him, I only got more tongue tied. He was gorgeous. He looked like a statue come to life, his features all carved to perfection. Deep brown eyes, full lips, crimson skin. His horns didn't point up like other demons I'd seen. His swept back along his hair before curling around in a hook behind his ears. His black hair was a little wild right now, tossed haphazardly into a bun, but when he was on stage, he left it down and flowing. This close, it looked silky, and a stupid part of me itched to tuck the stray strand on his cheek behind his ear. Speaking of ears, he had several piercings on both sides and a stud in his nose. And that was just his face. Since he wore loose shirts and jeans on stage, it hid a lot, but he was tall and his arms were cut with lean muscle, his hands and wrists stacked with rings and bracelets. He flared his wings sometimes when he was singing, adding shock and awe to an already amazing performance.

I was staring. Like an idiot. I begged my subconscious to stop, but it was like I was

locked in his eyes and I couldn't look away. Not until the drummer spoke.

"I'm not getting fear off of him," Ruby said, stepping up to my other side. She tossed an arm around my shoulder, her head tipped and a grin on her face showing off her fangs.

Hendrix looked curiously at her. "What are you getting?"

"W-What?" I was almost afraid to ask, but I didn't know what she meant by that.

She tapped her nose and winked at me. "Vampires have a great sense of smell. I can pick up strong emotions and I'm definitely not getting fear. Embarrassment, sure, but it's strongly overwhelmed by—"

Horried, I straightened and shot her a pleading look. "P-Please don't!"

She chuckled, but thankfully didn't continue. My eyes darted around, looking for an escape, but her arm was heavy on my shoulders, keeping me in place.

"What'd you get, Ruby?" Duncan, the one who played the keyboard, looked excited and a little mischievous.

This was what I got for having an obsession. I should've stopped coming after the first time. I was now inches from the man I had a major crush on, surrounded by the band I loved, and moments away from being absolutely humiliated.

"You guys are mean. I regret mentioning it now," Maya interrupted. She slid a glass of what looked like whiskey towards me, frowning at the band. "I thought you'd be happy to have a dedicated fan. I didn't think you'd torment him. Let him be."

Ruby pouted. "We're not tormenting him. He's our first human fan. I'm glad he's not

afraid of us. Besides, it's not like I can tell exactly who—"

My whimper cut her off, and Hendrix came to my rescue, pushing her arm off my shoulders. "You need to go feed. You're a bitch when you're hungry," he teased. With little effort, he grabbed the edge of my stool and dragged me closer to him, effectively putting more space between me and Ruby. He was trying to be kind, but he didn't know he was making things worse. My entire body went on high alert, hyper aware of the demon next to me.

Ruby took a deep breath and smirked. "Well, that answered that question. Sucks for me, but whatever. I'm out of here. I've got a date with my feeder. See you losers later."

"I'll head out with you," Lazar, the bassist, volunteered, slipping off his own stool. "Nice to meet you, Arthur. Thanks for supporting us." He gave a backward wave, rushing to follow Ruby out the door.

That left Hendrix, Duncan, and another man I recognized from a few shows. He wasn't at all of them, but when he did show up, he was lead guitar. Zion, I think. He leaned against the bar top, watching Ruby and Lazar leave with a slight frown.

"Could he be any more pathetic?"

"Because you don't drool after her the same way?" Hendrix drawled. "He has more of a chance than you do."

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Zion swung around and glared at him. “Fuck you, man. I’m way better looking than him.”

Duncan snorted. “Sure. Let’s go with that.” He turned his attention to me, effectively dismissing Zion. “So, Arthur. How many shows have you been to?”

I didn’t want to answer that. I also didn’t want the attention back on me. For a minute, the focus had shifted to Ruby, and I was glad for that. I was having a hard enough time still sitting so close to Hendrix. But I didn’t want to be rude either. I didn’t know what kind of power the band had, but if they stopped me from coming to their shows, I’d be heartbroken.

“This is my tenth,” I murmured, my cheeks burning so hot I was worried I’d give myself a fever.

“What’d he say?” Zion demanded, irritation laced through his words.

Hendrix ignored him. He was the only one close enough to hear me clearly, and he beamed at my admission, stealing my focus again.

“Ten? Really? That’s awesome. We haven’t had dedicated fans since we crossed over. What’s your favorite song?”

Biting my lip, I frowned. I liked all their songs. I wasn’t sure I had an actual favorite. I went with the one that got stuck in my head the most, just because I didn’t want him to stop talking to me.

“Free Forever.” I loved that song. It was all about living life on your terms and abandoning the people who held you back. It was the first song I heard when I snuck out to a bar to wallow ten weeks ago. I’d gotten into another argument with Val, desperately trying to do what she wanted so I could keep Sophie with me. That song gave me hope that one day I could live freely like that, once Sophie was old enough to influence the custody agreement. It meant a lot to me.

“That’s one of my favorites, too!” Hendrix’s face lit up, a big beaming smile on his face that took my breath away. I could forget all the embarrassment leading up to this moment just because of that smile. I never thought in a million years he’d even look in my direction, but he was smiling at me like I just gave him a million dollars. The embarrassment was definitely worth it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### HENDRIX

From that night on, whenever we finished for the night, I went looking for Arthur. He was always there. He was a little awkward, a little shy, but he warmed up to us eventually. I dropped myself onto the stool next to him, beaming at him when he pushed a sparkling water my way.

“Good show tonight.”

“Thanks, Artie! The crowd is really growing lately. I think you’re our good luck charm.”

Even in the dim lighting, I could see him blush. Ruby never outright said what she could pick up off Arthur the day we met, but I figured it out on my own. He didn’t blush as much around the others. I was flattered and definitely interested, but I didn’t want to chase away our number one fan by coming on too strong. I figured I’d let him

come to me, but three weeks later, he still hadn't made a move.

Worried he'd never get up the nerve on his own, I figured I'd throw out something to get his attention.

"Hey, do you like weddings?"

He frowned. "Uh... I guess? Why?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Maya's wedding gig is coming up. I'd hate for you to miss a show. I need a date anyway. Interested?"

His mouth opened and closed in shock, and I had to roll my lips between my teeth to hide my laugh. I didn't want him to think I wasn't serious, I totally was, but his reaction was adorable.

"I-I'm- Uh... When?"

"A week from Saturday. The girls picked this nice joint in the mountains. We went up there last week to check out the set up and make sure we had everything we needed for the gig."

Her brow furrowed a little. "Oh... I'm... I'm sorry, I can't on weekends. I'll have my daughter with me and--"

My eyebrows shot up. "You've got a kid? Are you married?"

That'd seriously put a damper on the evening. I wouldn't take back the invitation, Arthur was a nice guy, but I wasn't a home wrecker.

He shook his head quickly. "Divorced. I get Sophie on the weekends. I'm sorry I'll

miss it, but...”

I pursed my lips. Divorced I could work with. He was unattached, and I was too interested in getting to know him better to let it deter me. He was a nice dude, showing up for every gig and giving us his support. He was the one who pointed out that we didn't have any social media or any songs up online for people to buy. No videos either, even free. I wasn't really tech savvy, so I never thought of that. I put Duncan in charge of social media and we were working out getting some studio time so we could record our songs and find a distributor. They were smart ideas, and I loved that he cared enough to suggest it.

“Well, I don't see a problem with bringing her along. Lemme ask Maya, though. Yo, Maya!”

She was on the other end of the bar, talking to her fiancée. I waved at Isla, who slipped off her stool and came to join us when Maya did.



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“What’s up?”

“You guys don’t have a no kids rule for the wedding, right?”

Isla made a face. “No one we know has kids.”

Not really my point. I lifted my eyebrows at Maya. She was more forthcoming.

“Uh, no? I really wouldn’t care either way. Why?”

I pointed at Arthur. “I asked our biggest fan to come as my date, but he’s got his kid on weekends. Can she come?”

Isla and Maya looked at each other before they both shrugged. “We’re cool with that. How old is she?”

We all turned to Arthur, who looked a little overwhelmed. His eyes darted between the three of us, his voice a little shaky. “She’s, uh... She’s nine. You don’t have to go through the trouble. I know weddings are expensive and you probably already have your guest list. I—”

Maya, my beautiful hero, waved his worries away. “Don’t worry about that. The wedding isn’t big enough for us to worry about an extra guest.” She looked thoughtful for a minute before her eyes lit up. “Oh! Does she want to be a flower girl? Like I said before, we don’t know anyone with kids, so I was going to just skip that part, but if she wants to do it, that’d be a major help.”

Isla let out a dramatic sigh. “Oh, yeah, that’d seriously help us out. Your mom has been asking random kids at her church to do it because she wants one so bad. I didn’t realize a flower girl was an integral part of a wedding.”

Maya rolled her eyes. I’d heard plenty over the last nine months about the wedding planning. Maya’s mom was a bit of a mother-of-the-Bride-zilla. She wasn’t happy about Maya and Isla’s vision for their wedding and threw a fit whenever they nixed certain traditions. I’d kind of been hoping she’d talk Maya out of having us play at her wedding, but apparently she didn’t care as long as we played the songs she requested. Hers were the sappiest on the list, but luckily Maya stopped her at two requests.

Turning back to Arthur, I nudged him with my elbow. “What do you say, Artie? Will you be my date to the wedding?”

He flushed dark red, ducking his head, but he didn’t turn me down. He bobbed his head a little, scrubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Uh, sure... Sophie loves dressing up and playing wedding. I think she’d really enjoy that. I can pay for her meal if—”

“Not a chance,” Isla interrupted. “She’s basically part of the wedding, which means her dress and her food are on us. What size is she? I’m sure Madam Demanding has an outfit in mind.”

Maya snorted, shoving her shoulder. “Don’t call her that.”

They continued their playful bickering while I beamed at Arthur. “Looking forward to meeting your kid. Is she a fan, too?”

He shook his head. “No. I wanted to show her, but you guys don’t have anything online, remember?”

Ah. I forgot about that part. I grinned sheepishly. “My bad. We’re working on that. I honestly thought we had to go through a label to put our music online. But you could sing it to her, right?”

The way he shook his head, with a bit of horror on his face, was hilarious.

“I’ll take that as a no, then.”

“No, absolutely not. I can’t hold a tune to save my life. Sophie’s caught me humming a few times, and she says it sounds like I’m an injured animal.”

“Ouch. Harsh,” I grimaced.

He nodded, though he didn’t look offended about it. “She gets that from her mother. She isn’t afraid to give her opinion.”

Now I was a little nervous about inviting them along. I’d heard plenty of criticism about our music over the years, and it was never easy to hear. And it wasn’t like I could tell a little kid to fuck off.

Like he could see my trepidation, Arthur put his hand lightly on my forearm. “You don’t need to worry. Sophie loves all kinds of music. When she’s home with me, the radio is almost always on and she picks random stations to see if we can find something new that we love. The only reason I’ve never brought her along is because her mother has her on weekdays.”

Maya had tuned in at one point and leaned against the counter to join in. “Really? Aren’t their shows a little late for a nine-year-old?”

Arthur shrugged, drawing away from me uneasily. I was disappointed, I liked him touching me, but he shied away from me whenever people were around. I wanted to

get him alone so I could see what he was like without an audience.

“I usually stick to her bedtime on the weekends, but I’m not against letting her stay up now and then as a treat. We went to the midnight release of her favorite movie once, just so she could experience it. I had to make her swear on her favorite toys that she’d never tell her mother, but she was happy to keep it to herself as long as I promised to take her again for the next movie.”

“Man, if you were my dad, you’d be my favorite parent,” I chimed in.

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Arthur's face fell. He averted his gaze, frowning at the bar top. "I know I'm a lot older than you, but I don't think I'm old enough to be your father."

My mouth fell open. "That's not—"

"Harsh, Hen. Artie doesn't strike me as a Daddy," Ruby drawled. She was flirting with her feeder, who'd come for the show tonight, but apparently she was listening enough to torment me.

"I didn't mean it like that!"

The band ribbed me relentlessly, but my entire focus was on Arthur. He still looked dejected, and I hated that I made him feel bad about himself. I didn't even know how old he was. With the big glasses and the freckles on his nose, he looked young to me.

"Artie..."

"I, uh... I'm gonna head out."

"Wait! Gimme your number so we can send you the details," Maya pleaded. Arthur handed his phone over, but he didn't smile back when she grinned at him. The look on his face killed me and when he headed for the exit, I followed after him.

"Artie, wait!"

## CHAPTER SIX

## ARTHUR

I'd never been so embarrassed in my life. I knew I was older than the band. I heard them teasing Duncan about not being able to drink once and he complained that they weren't that much older than him. I had over a decade on him, at least. I didn't know how old Hendrix was, but I didn't think he'd see me as a father figure. It stung, and I couldn't get out of the bar fast enough.

I wasn't expecting him to follow me, but when he called my name, I froze on the sidewalk, my eyes locked on my feet. If he came out here to tell me I was too old for him, I didn't need the reminder. I was well aware of how pathetic I was, crushing on someone so much younger than me. I was usually stuck on the fact that he was a guy, so I'll admit I didn't focus on that before now. Just another reason this would never work out.

Hendrix stepped in front of me, a little out of breath. "Man, you're faster than you look." He took a second to catch his breath before dipping so he could meet my eye. "I didn't mean it like that. I in no way think of you as a dad or whatever. I just meant what you're doing for your kid is really cool. My parents were divorced and it would've been nice to have that kind of relationship with my dad. She's lucky to have you."

It was nice to hear, but it didn't really change anything. Hendrix was still way out of my league. The disappointment was heavy, and I wished I could walk away just to get some space to breathe.

Hendrix put his hands on my shoulders, drawing my attention up to him. "Hey. I mean it. I don't see you that way. Honestly, I've been waiting for you to make a move for a while. I figured because you're shy, I'd freak you out if I asked you out myself."

My mouth fell open, his admission stunning me speechless. “I– You–”

A smile tugged at his lips, and for a second I worried he was teasing me, but then he dipped his head and pressed his lips against mine. My brain stalled out, and I stood frozen until he pulled away from me.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have–”

“Do it again. Please?”

His eyes searched mine, for what, I had no idea. I was too focused on his mouth and getting him to kiss me again. I was out of sorts, confused, and way too embarrassed to bridge the gap myself. I could only plead with my eyes for him to take the leap again.

He huffed out a small laugh, the air warm against my lips, and then he was kissing me again. His lips were soft, almost tentative, brushing lightly against mine like a question. I’d never kissed another man before, but I leaned into it, giving him all the control while I was swept away in the tide. It was over too soon and I swayed forward when he pulled back, my mind completely blown.

“So, I wasn’t just imagining it then,” he murmured. He hadn’t stepped away from me, I could feel the heat of his body only scant inches from mine, but he didn’t kiss me again. He waited for me to respond, beautiful brown eyes locked on mine.

“I... I’ve only ever been with one person. I’m not sure–”

His eyebrows jumped a little. “So you’ve never been with a guy before?”

I shook my head quickly. I’d been curious when I was younger, but never brave enough to experiment. Then I met Val, and I dismissed it for hormones. Once we

divorced, I flirted with the idea of being with a man. I even let my coworker set me up with a guy once my divorce was final, as a way to get myself back out there. It'd been awkward, to say the very least. I figured that answered my questions about it and put it in the back of my mind. It wasn't until I saw Hendrix for the first time that I admitted to myself that I might not be as straight as I thought.

“So are you hoping for an experiment, or—”

“No. I don't... I'm not sure I'd ever be comfortable with the idea of a casual thing. I honestly never thought you'd look at me twice. I'm a lot older than you, and significantly less interesting. Few people are interested in a divorced single father.” The reminder knocked some sense into me and I took a step back, giving me enough room to think. “You don't... You didn't have to come out here to make me feel better. I'm fine. Please, go have fun with your friends. I'm just going to head home. I can't stay up too late. I have to pick up Sophie from school tomorrow afternoon.”

He caught my wrist before I could escape, stalling my forward motion. The back of my neck burned from embarrassment, and I couldn't look back at him. I figured he was just trying to be kind, but it would be kinder to let me crawl in a hole and hide.

“I already asked you out, Artie. I'm cool with dating, if that makes you more comfortable.”



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Startled, I whipped my head around. “What?”

He tugged me back until I was facing him, his voice dropping into a low murmur. “I don’t know why you’re so sure I wouldn’t be interested in you. I told you, I’ve been waiting for you to make a move. If you wanna take it slow and date, I’m cool with that. Just tell me what you want.”

I must be dreaming. It was the only explanation I could think of. I went home and passed out from embarrassment, and I was dreaming. What other reason would there be for my crush to be truly asking me out?

The door to the bar crashed open, and Duncan’s head poked out. “Hen? You leavin’? Maya wants to talk to us about some requests.”

“I’ll be right there,” Hendrix called, without once breaking eye contact with me. He lifted his eyebrows at me. “They’re calling my number, handsome. What’ll it be? Is the wedding going to count as our first official date?”

I couldn’t resist that playful grin, even if I wanted to. I’d probably regret it later, but for once I wanted to give in and indulge in something I craved. I dipped my chin once.

“It’s a date.”

Sophie was ecstatic to be part of the wedding. I think she would’ve been happy just to go. She loved any excuse to get dressed up, but actually taking part was like a dream come true. She twirled around my room in the dress Maya and Isla had bought her,

watching herself in front of the mirrors on my closet door.

“Daddy, do I look pretty?”

“You always look pretty, baby girl.”

“Daddy,” she pouted, drawing the word out a few syllables.

I snickered. “Yes, baby. You look beautiful. Very grown up. How about me? Do I look okay?”

I was nervous, since Hendrix said this was our first date. I saw him a few days ago at the bar and he upped the flirtation by a lot, but he told me he wasn’t going to kiss me again until after our date. I was both excited and nervous for that part. Hopefully, I could get Sophie to sleep beforehand. I wasn’t comfortable introducing Hendrix as anything other than a friend just yet.

She flounced over to me, looking at me through the mirror as I fixed my tie for the fourth time. “I think you look cute.”

I could work with that. She was always honest, so at least I knew she wasn’t saying it to placate me. I offered her my arm, winking at her.

“May I escort the princess to the car?”

She made her voice more dramatic and austere when she replied, “Yes, sir, you may.”

We both snickered, heading downstairs together. Val was aware I was taking Sophie to a wedding this weekend. I didn’t want to hide it from her, especially because we’d be at least an hour away. The only part I kept to myself was my date with Hendrix. Val wasn’t interested in how I knew Maya and Isla. I told her they were friends of

mine and she didn't question it. She just scowled at me for wasting time when Sophie could be studying. Her knowing meant I could take as many pictures as I wanted without having to hide them, and Sophie didn't have to lie to her mother for me. I stopped in the front yard, taking a bunch of pictures of Sophie in her pretty dress, before loading us both into the car and plugging the address into the GPS.

While we drove, I quizzed Sophie on her spelling words and played a car game I used to play as a kid. Val didn't like Sophie having a lot of screen time, but Sophie didn't complain during the drive. I kept her entertained for the most part. Only once we got into the mountains and we got closer to our destination did she start getting antsy.

“Daddy! Look how close to the edge we are!”

I forced a smile, even though my knuckles were white on the steering wheel. “Yes, I can see that. That's why it's important to drive slowly and carefully, right?”

She bounced in her seat, her face almost pressed to the glass to see. I hated driving in the mountains. Hendrix offered to teleport us, but I knew he'd be busy setting up and getting the band ready, so I politely refused. I regretted that now.

We finally pulled into a small town, following the GPS to a bed-and-breakfast right up against the trees. I parked closer to the exit, blowing out an unsteady breath. This was nerve-wracking. I barely knew the band or the brides. It felt a little weird to be here when I wasn't family or a close friend. But I didn't have time to stress over it. Sophie got out of the car and came around to my side, dragging me out of my seat and towards the back where the ceremony would be taking place.

“Wow! Daddy, look! It looks like a fairytale!”

Sophie was busy looking at the decorations and the guests. Meanwhile, my eyes were locked on where the band was set up in one corner between the ceremony location

and the reception area. Hendrix stood in the middle, laughing at something someone was saying. My breath left me in a hurry and I could only stare at him. I thought Hendrix on stage was gorgeous. Hendrix in a tux? My imagination couldn't even touch that.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### HENDRIX

“Your favorite person is here.”

Turning away from Ruby, I followed Duncan's gaze across the yard. Standing near the entrance, Arthur was a stunning sight to see. He was holding hands with a sweet little girl, who was too busy pointing and looking around to notice her daddy wasn't paying any attention. He was too busy staring at me. I preened at the attention, ducking past Laz to head Arthur's way.

As I got closer, I took him all in. I never realized before now how much hid in the dim lighting of the bar. I knew he was cute, with his thick glasses and tousled hair. But it was dim enough that I didn't know just how much his hair looked like copper, with hints of gold when he stood in the sunlight. He styled it neatly to the side, probably gelled to stay in place. He had freckles across his nose and on his cheeks, which tried to disappear when he blushed. I was staring, and probably embarrassing him, but I couldn't help it. His wide green eyes watched me as I stopped in front of him, my gaze trailing over him. His suit was well fitted, showing off his thin frame, lightgray, with a paisley bowtie that matched the flowers pinned in his daughter's hair. They looked like a matching set, which was cute, and they both matched the color scheme of the wedding.

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It took me a second to do anything but take him in, but when I finally locked eyes with him, I grinned.

“Hey.”

His face was bright red now. I both hated and loved it. I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable, but he was adorable when he blushed, that bright red color scorching all the way down his neck. It made me want to poke at him and see how many times I could make him blush in one night.

“H-Hi.”

The little girl was finally looking our way, curiosity all over her face as she looked up at me. She didn't look much like her dad, her hair long and brown and her skin a little more tan than pale like his. But she had freckles on her nose like Arthur did. For a second, I was worried she'd be scared of me, but she didn't look bothered. Her big brown eyes looked between us for a few seconds before she tugged on her dad's hand.

“Daddy. Who's that?”

Arthur blinked a few times, like he was just remembering that we weren't alone. I fought back a grin, lifting my eyebrows at him. However he wanted to introduce us was fine with me. I knew all about parents introducing their kids to the people they were dating. I wasn't surprised or even offended when Arthur introduced me as his friend.

“This is Hendrix. He’s a friend of mine. He plays in a band.” He pointed toward where the band was setting up earlier. Most of the members had dispersed by now, getting drinks and relaxing before the ceremony. The only people who had to be up there during the ceremony were me and Laz. Zion was supposed to be there too for a little acoustics for the brides as they walked out, but he was going to be late. Again.

“Hendrix, this is my daughter, Sofía. But she likes to be called Sophie.”

She offered me her hand, her handshake surprisingly firm for a little girl. “Nice to meet you. What instrument do you play?”

It felt awkward to have her craning her neck to look at me, so I squatted to be more at her eye level. “Well, I can play guitar and I do sometimes with my band. But my main role is vocals. I like to sing.”

Her eyes lit up. “Me too! I wanted to join the choir, but Mommy said I had to learn violin.” She scrunched up her face to express her disinterest.

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “Well, it’s always good to have an instrument as a backup. You don’t want to sing in silence, right?”

She bobbed her head slowly. “I guess. But it’s hard to sing when you’re holding the violin with your chin.”

“When you’re bigger, your mom said you can play the cello. It’s just too big for you now,” Arthur reminded her.

“Well, there you go. You don’t need to hold that with your chin,” I pointed out.

She seemed satisfied with that answer, and Arthur smiled at her like she was the best thing in his world. She probably was. It was sweet to watch and when she dragged

him towards the wedding arch, I couldn't help but follow behind them so I could listen to them interact.

"Daddy, can I get married here?"

"You can, but you might want to wait until you're older to decide. You might change your mind."

"You know you can get married at Disneyland, right?" I offered.

Sophie spun around, her eyes wide like her daddy's whenever he was surprised. "Wait, really?"

I nodded. "I went to a wedding there once. It was crazy. Right in front of the castle and everything."

She gaped at me, spinning to look at Arthur. "I want to get married at Disneyland!"

He twisted his lips to hide his smile, giving me an exasperated look when Sophie looked away again. I grinned at him, putting on my best innocent face. Before he could ream me for giving Sophie big ideas, MoB-zilla, as we came to call Maya's mom, swooped in out of nowhere. In the few times we'd met, she was always short with me and the band, and Maya especially. But her face softened when she leaned down to talk to Sophie.

"Are you Sofía?"

Sophie looked a little uncertain, her brows furrowed. "Uh huh. Why?"

"Well, you see. I got this very pretty tiara for the flower girl. I've been looking all over for her. I want to give it to her before the ceremony. You wouldn't be my flower

girl, would you?”

Sophie’s eyes lit up, all hints of trepidation disappearing. “Yes! I’m the flower girl!”

I studied Maya’s mom, trying to figure out who replaced the tyrant with this kind and sweet woman who spoke so softly to the little girl. She offered Sophie her hand, smiling tenderly at her.

“Well, then you’ll have to come with me. We have to get you properly adorned before we begin. I have your basket of petals waiting for you, too. Do you want your daddy to come along, or can he wait here for you?”



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Sophie nodded emphatically. “I don’t get to see him much. I want to stay with him.”

Yikes. Way to rub it in thick, kid. She wiped out anyone taking her away from her dad for even a second in one smooth move.

Maya’s mom looked surprised, but there was no way she was going to argue with that. She gave in instantly, gesturing towards the bed-and-breakfast. “Okay, he can join us. We’re going to Maya’s room. You get to see the bride first, but that’s our little secret.”

Sophie zipped her lips and crossed her heart, tugging her dad along as they headed inside. As she passed, MoB-zilla made an appearance, and she hissed at me.

“The wedding will start soon. Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

I wasn’t going to argue with her, so I gave her a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am. Hey, Sophie. Save me a dance, okay?”

She dropped Mob-zilla’s hand long enough to give me a thumbs up before she was the one leading the two adults inside. I shook my head slowly, fighting off a laugh.

“Cute kid.”

I hummed, looking over my shoulder at Azriel. The whole gang was here, most of them already in their seats. Turning, I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Haven’t seen you around in a while. Where you been, man?”

“Busy. I can’t stay through the whole thing.”

I sighed. Something was up with him lately. He was acting weird and avoiding us. I couldn’t remember the last poker game he went to, and he rarely answered his texts anymore. There was a story there, but now was not the time or the place to grill him about it. He seemed guarded, like he was waiting for me to say something, but I just pulled him in for a hug, slapping his back roughly.

“Good to see you. Don’t be a stranger, alright? We miss you.”

He hesitated for a second before hugging me back. It surprised me. I kind of expected something quick, but he stayed for a few extra seconds, his grip tight and uneasy. It was telling, and once this thing was through, I was going to check in on him more. Whatever he was going through, he didn’t have to deal with it alone.

Clapping his back one more time, I straightened and squeezed his shoulders. “I gotta get up on stage or MoB-zilla will eat me alive. And not in the fun way. Have a drink with me later?”

“If I have time. Never thought I’d see you playing a wedding,” he smirked, a hint of the guy I knew making an appearance.

I made a face. “Tell me about it. They manhandled me into it. Blame Ruby. If you’re gonna hide in the back, do me a favor and take a few clips. A friend said we should be putting stuff on social media to get more fans. Apparently, word of mouth isn’t what it used to be.”

Something flickered across his face, but he dipped his chin, and it was gone again. “Sounds good. Break a leg.”

I lifted my chin in acknowledgement and headed for the little stage they set us up on.

Laz was waiting for me, and he frowned at my approach.

“Is that Aziel? Haven’t seen him in a while.”

I nodded. “Same, man. You ready to do this?”

“As I’ll ever be. Who conned us into this again?”

I snorted. Not everyone was on board when they heard the plan, but Ruby was right. The money swayed them. At least the rent was fully covered this month.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ARTHUR

Somehow, I managed to pry myself away from Sophie. She was a combination of nervous and excited, and for a few minutes I worried she might not be comfortable walking down the aisle. But then they introduced her to Maya’s brother, an affable young man who was saddled with the job of ring bearer even though he was at least college aged. He worked with it by pretending to be Sophie’s security, dark glasses on his face as he stuck close to her. Sophie thought it was hilarious and would purposely run off to see if he’d keep up with her. After a quick kiss, I snuck off to find my seat near the back so I could get as many pictures as possible without being in the photographer’s way.

The ceremony itself was short and sweet. Maya and Isla chose a gorgeous location, the sun filtering through the trees at just the right angle. I took a few pictures, planning on sending them to the couple after the wedding was over. I wouldn’t consider myself a professional, but I watched a few videos online before Sophie was born and took pictures of every stage of her life. By this point, I knew how to get good angles and lighting, and I enjoyed my little hobby, even if Val said it was a

waste of time.

I took a few pictures of Hendrix, too. He crooned an acoustic love song as the brides walked down the aisle, the alluring lilt of his voice making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. If he wasn't a demon, he'd be a siren with how beautiful his voice is. And selfishly, I wanted some pictures of him without making myself look creepy.

After the ceremony, Sophie followed the brides back down the aisle, beaming and waving at me as she headed inside. I got up to follow her, stopping to listen as Maya's mother showered her with praise.

"You did such a wonderful job! I'm so glad you came to the rescue! The wedding wouldn't have been the same without you!"

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Sophie beamed and twirled, loving the attention. When she noticed me, she raced over and threw herself into my arms. She was getting a little too big for me to carry her around, but until she asked me to stop, I'd keep doing it. If I'd had a say, I would've wanted at least one more baby. Children are a joy and I'd love for my daughter to have a playmate. Val wasn't interested in more, though. She put all her focus on Sophie and making sure she did well in life.

"Daddy! Can I see the pictures you took?"

"Sure, sweet pea. How about we go find a table and I'll let you look through my phone."

She nodded, opening and closing her hands in a gimme motion. I twisted my mouth to hide my smile, handing my phone over to her. Glancing at Maya's mother, I nodded politely.

"Thank you for letting her take part. You're really great with kids."

She smiled brightly at me. "I've been a teacher for over twenty years. Kids, I can handle. Grown women who are still defiant in their adulthood are harder to deal with." She rolled her eyes at her daughter, who was peeling off the gloves and tiara her mother no doubt insisted on. "Keep your little one close. They grow up so fast."

The last murmur was wistful, and I could see the conflicted emotions in her eyes. I was in no way ready for Sophie to get married, but I got the feeling I'd feel just as conflicted when it was her day. I'd want her to be happy with her partner, but I doubted there would ever be a day where I'd be willing to let her go.

Waving away the emotions, Maya's mother smiled. "Well, now I get to look forward to grandkids. You two go enjoy the ceremony. I told Sophie she could keep the tiara. It's a gift for helping make the wedding perfect."

"I appreciate it. Thanks again."

Carrying Sophie out of the bed-and-breakfast, I rested my forehead against hers as she browsed through the pictures I took. "No weddings. Not until you're my age."

She snickered, not even bothering to look up at me. "You're too old. I'll get married after college, like you and Mommy did."

I didn't appreciate the old comment, but I moved past it. If I drew more attention to it, she'd only latch on and tease me. "I can agree to that. But only after you find a good job. Something you love and makes you happy."

Sophie was going to get enough pressure from Val about her career. I wasn't going to push any harder. And I definitely wasn't going to demand she do something boring just because it made good money. My job took care of my family, and I did like math, but even I could admit it was boring. If I'd had a choice, it wouldn't have been the career I settled with.

The tables weren't assigned, so we picked our seats closer to the band. They were mostly just riffing while waiting for the wedding party to come back, and Hendrix took advantage, sneaking off stage to come talk to me.

"Hey, I know you don't know many people here, so I asked some friends of mine to sit with you. Don't let Felix sucker you into helping him prank his mate. You'll be sucked into their war and you'll never get a break. See the short blonde over there?" He pointed to a young man with curly blonde hair by the bar. I nodded. "That's Zach. He's the most extroverted person on the planet. If he finds out you're shy, he's going

to adopt you. You've been warned."

He winked at me, ducking away with a laugh when Maya's mom came out and glared at him.

Sophie looked up at me with a frown. "What's an extrovert?"

"Someone really outgoing who likes to talk to people."

She tapped her chin with her pointer finger. "Can you really adopt adults?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "No, baby. It's a figure of speech. How did I do with the pictures?"

We were going through her favorites when Hendrix's friends joined us. Zach sat beside me, radiating happiness and goodwill as he introduced me around the table. The prankster Hendrix warned me about was sitting next to Sophie, and he leaned over her seat to look at the pictures without a hint of shame.

"Hey, those are really good. Are you a professional?"

"No. It's just a hobby."

Not really looking to be adopted by an extrovert, I made sure to speak clearly. I wasn't actually a shy person. The only person I was shy around was Hendrix, and it was only because of the stupid crush that was raging out of control, watching him pluck at the strings of his guitar, his tie already loosened and a relaxed grin on his face.

"Oh, pretty!" Zach exclaimed. He'd popped out of his seat when I wasn't paying attention and now stood behind Sophie, peering at the pictures I took. He beamed at

me. “You’re really talented.”

My first instinct was to disagree, Val absolutely hated the pictures I took, but Sophie replied before I could.

“Daddy has always been good at pictures. He took pictures of me as a baby. See?” She swiped to a different folder, pulling up the newborn pictures I took. Val had professional ones taken, but I took some just for me that felt less staged. I felt my cheeks heat as Sophie passed around my phone, shooting me a mischievous grin. Maybe I had been adopted by an extrovert nine years ago when she was born. She always did stuff like this.

Luckily, the attention turned away from me as the brides came back out and the first dance began. I was a little more embarrassed taking pictures, but Sophie started asking me for specific pictures, and I followed her lead. I liked candid shots, so I took a few of the band and of Hendrix’s friends as they ate dinner. A lot of Sophie. She danced with the brides, with the mothers-in-law, even with Hendrix when he took a break. He invited her on the stage afterwards, letting her sing along with him to a popular song on the radio. I was a little worried she was stealing the show, but the brides didn’t look upset about it. I approached them on the dance floor, lifting my phone with a shrug.

“Mind if I take a few? Sophie says you look like princesses and she requested some of just you two.”

Maya smiled brightly. “Absolutely. You’ve got the greatest kid on the planet.”



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Pride swelled in my chest, and I beamed at her. “I like to think so. She got the best of me and her mother.”

As painful as our relationship was to think about, I didn’t think badly of Val. She gave me Sophie and I couldn’t be upset about that. I just wished she would meet me halfway on co-parenting. I sent her a picture of Sophie in her wedding attire as a sign of goodwill after snapping a few pictures of the brides dancing together. She didn’t reply, but I wasn’t really expecting her to. I went to the stage instead, getting a front row performance with Sophie center stage, tapping a tambourine with a huge smile on her face.

The band finished up, and they switched over to a music playlist for the rest of the night, allowing Hendrix and the rest of the band to finally relax. Isla and Maya set aside meals for them, so Hendrix dragged me with him into the kitchen when they were through. He plucked Sophie off her feet, setting her on the counter, and raised a bottle of water.

“To our new rising star!”

I knew I’d face arguments from Val when we got back. Especially when Sophie’s grades didn’t instantly improve the following week. But it was so worth it to bring her here today. I couldn’t remember the last time she smiled so brightly. And it was all thanks to Hendrix.

## CHAPTER NINE

### HENDRIX

Little Sophie was quickly becoming my favorite person on the planet. She was energetic and bright, lighting up the room wherever she was. There wasn't a shy bone in her body, and when she danced, she danced just for her. No embarrassment, no awkwardness. She spun and jumped and laughed and was unapologetically herself. I could see how proud Arthur was of her. As long as she was smiling, so was he. He swept her off her feet a few times, holding her in his arms as they spun about or letting her stand on his feet. He didn't care about the price of his fancy shoes or the scuffs she left on them. He only cared about her.

I never saw myself as the parenting type, but watching Arthur with Sophie made me a little jealous. And I wasn't the only one. At least I had the excuse of being single. From the look Zach was giving Mal, kids were definitely in their future. Brandon and Callum too, if their soft smiles were anything to go by. I couldn't imagine Tyler and Felix with kids, but they'd be those hilarious uncles who taught the kids to cause trouble and started a cousin prank war.

When Zach snagged Sophie for a dance, I stole Arthur's attention, spinning him into my arms. He looked surprised and a little uncertain, but I didn't give him a chance to freak out. He told me he'd never had a relationship with a guy before. There were bound to be times when he was a little unsure of himself. As long as I wasn't making him uncomfortable, I was happy to show him new things. I settled one hand on his waist, the other holding his gently. We swayed to the music, and besides the blush on his cheeks, Arthur didn't look upset about the position.

"So you've got Sophie on weekends, right?"

He nodded, his brow furrowed a little. "Yes, why?"

"Just planning our next date. We only do one to two gigs a week, depending on what's available. My schedule is free most days."

I wasn't exactly rolling in dough, but I knew how to have a decent date on a budget. Hopefully, Arthur wasn't the type of dude who needed fine dining and roses.

"Ah. Um, weeknights are fine except Fridays. I pick up Sophie after school and I have her until I drop her off at school Monday morning."

Frowning, I glanced at where Sophie was standing on Zach's feet, smiling brightly. "That doesn't seem like enough time. Is your schedule too busy for her to stay during the week?"

A layer of sadness washed over Arthur's face, and he sighed heavily. "No. If I had my way, I'd have her every day of the week. I asked my ex wife if we could do every other week so I could see Sophie more, but she refused."

"And she just gets to dictate that?" I knew divorces were messy, but at least in the Other Realm, one parent couldn't stop another parent from seeing their kid unless it was dangerous to do so. Arthur wasn't dangerous by a long shot.

"Her lawyer was better than mine. He's also her cousin and he can't stand me. None of her family can. I got lucky with the time I got at all. I think Val gave me weekends because she has plans and doesn't want to bring Sophie along. She sees me as a glorified babysitter on weekends."

The pain in his voice was hard to hear. I wanted to wrap him up in my wings and protect him from the world. Or at least from his bitch of an ex-wife.

I couldn't do that, though. He was a grown man, older than me actually, and I never wanted to make him look weak in front of his daughter. He was her hero, that was easy to see, and I wanted her to always see him like that.

The song ended, and I reluctantly drew away from him. Playing innocent when I

wanted to kiss him so badly it hurt was difficult. I held myself back by the skin of my teeth, waiting impatiently for the party to be over.

It was late by the time people started filtering out. Maya and Isla threw a decent party, and no one wanted to leave before they had to. Sophie was listing on her feet, the night finally catching up to her, and she came without argument when Arthur scooped her into his arms. I followed him out to the parking lot, hovering as he tucked Sophie into the back and buckled her seatbelt for her. He closed the door quietly, frowning at the road people were leaving on.

“What’s wrong?”

“It was a little terrifying just driving up here. I planned on leaving earlier so we wouldn’t have to drive that winding road in the dark. I’m just nervous, that’s all. I don’t enjoy driving at night with Sophie in the car.”

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “Want me to drive? I can see really well in the dark.”

He looked surprised. “Really? I didn’t know that. Um, yes, please. If you wouldn’t mind. It’s a lot safer for Sophie.”

I bobbed my head in agreement. “No problem. Let me just grab my guitar. I came up with the band and Duncan’s the sober driver. They won’t miss me.”

Eager to spend more time with Arthur, I hightailed it back into the venue, grabbing my guitar and letting the guys know not to wait for me. They waved me off, already packing up for the night. I’d owe them for not helping with breakdown, but Arthur was totally worth it.

He took my guitar from me when I got back, gently placing it in the back seat. I had to readjust the seat to make room for me, and sitting comfortably in a tiny car with

wings was nearly impossible, but I made it work. I pulled out of the space, heading for the town exit.

“Do you drive often?”

I could tell he was nervous, his hand clutching the oh-shit handle tightly. I wanted to touch him to ease his worries a little, but I got the feeling that would only freak him out more. It was better for me to keep both hands on the wheel and distract him with talking.

“Pretty often. Someone has to drive the truck with our instruments. Everyone trades off, but since I’m not a big drinker, it’s me or Duncan more than anyone else.” I didn’t mention that I’d been driving since I was a kid. My dad used to sneak me over to the human realm so I could drive him and my uncle back after a night out. As soon as I was old enough to see over the steering wheel, he taught me how to drive. I was the one who taught my friends, since cars didn’t exist in the Other Realm until after the integration.

“I noticed you don’t drink much. Is it the taste? It took me a while to find something I actually enjoyed.”

“No. Not only am I a lightweight, my dad is a big drinker and I don’t want that kind of life. My mom took me to some yoga classes when I was a kid to help me sort through the divorce. I do that and meditate, and I don’t wake up the next day hungover and nauseous.”

I studied him out of the corner of my eye, waiting to see if he’d judge me. I wasn’t my dad, but I got a lot of judgment sometimes when I said I was related to a drunk. And sometimes people went in the opposite direction, complaining that they wouldn’t be able to have fun with someone who only drank a few times a month.

Arthur's nose scrunched up, and I held my breath, but his response surprised me.

"I've never been able to do yoga. I can't even touch my toes."

I barked out a laugh, wincing when I remembered Sophie was asleep in the back seat. "Shit. Sorry. Do you work out at all?"

He nodded. "I swim a few days a week. Since I work in an office all day, I need to work the energy out somehow. I wouldn't say it makes me overly flexible, though."

I tipped my head back and forth thoughtfully. "I'm sure it loosens you up a bit. It probably wouldn't be hard to stretch out those muscles. I can show you some yoga positions that could help, if you're interested. I'm not one of those guys who thinks everyone should be doing it, though. I'm of the 'you do you' persuasion."

He chuckled lightly, the sound washing over me and making my heart stutter. Arthur wasn't the first human I'd spent time with. After years of sneaking over here, I didn't have the same fears as my friends did. But he was the first human I wanted to spend more than one night with. I wasn't sure what it was, the shy smiles or the way he blushed whenever I sat next to him, but I couldn't stop thinking about him during the week. Seeing him was part of the excitement for each show. I knew he'd be there, and I looked forward to spending time with him again.

Whatever the reason was, I was glad he was giving me a shot. I'd been feeling drained recently and the love for the music was tempered a little. Arthur brought it back with his raw enthusiasm and dedication. His excitement fueled mine, and it showed when I got up on that stage. If he was that effective just being there, there was no telling what he could accomplish if we spent more time together. Only one way to find out.

## CHAPTER TEN

## ARTHUR

Hendrix got us safely home without any incidents. I wasn't a big fan of driving at night, especially on weekends when drunk drivers were more prevalent. I tried to avoid it as often as possible. But knowing Hendrix could see better and that he wasn't a new driver helped a lot, and when we finally got to my home, I was more relaxed than I normally was after a nighttime drive. He took my keys and went to open the door for me while I gently pulled Sophie from the back seat. She'd slept the entire drive and didn't even stir as I brought her upstairs. Hendrix waited downstairs while I got her ready for bed, and after tucking her in, I went to join him.

"Thank you for driving us. I really appreciate it. I've become a little overcautious since Sophie was born. Val always complained about it, but..." I shrugged helplessly.

"I get it. You want to keep your kid safe. Nothing wrong with that."

He was always so understanding, and it made it harder to control my crush. My heart pounded in my ears and I felt breathless just standing there with him. We were both staring at each other, the tension in the room dialed to eleven. I wanted so badly to cross the room and kiss him again, but I also wasn't comfortable making the first move. I hovered by the stairs, pleading with my eyes for him to kiss me.

Either I wasn't very good with non verbal conversation, or Hendrix took my anxiety as a rejection. He didn't come closer. Instead, he tipped his head towards the door and smiled at me.

"I'm gonna head out. Thanks for coming with me tonight."

I choked back a whimper, following him towards the door. I'd never been brave enough to ask for what I wanted. Val always decided on when we were intimate or when we kissed. The few times I tried to initiate, she got angry with me. I wasn't



even sure how to best go about it. But I knew if I didn't do something, Hendrix would walk away. I caught his hand, my face burning.

"You... You said you would kiss me again after our date."

I almost crumpled in on myself from embarrassment. I sounded like a petulant teenager. It was no wonder I couldn't date.

Hendrix's hand on my cheek pulled me out of my shame spiral. He gently tipped my head up, a smirk pulling at his lips. He was going to laugh at my pathetic attempt at asking for him to kiss me. My blush deepened to where my ears were burning and it was spreading down my neck. I regretted holding him back now. He could've been gone already and spared me the embarrassment. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself to melt into the floor and disappear.

"You're so freaking cute," Hendrix murmured.

Before I could question that statement, his mouth was on mine. Slow at first, but with enough passion to sweep me off my feet. Tentatively, I settled my hands on his chest, leaning into him. I thought kissing a man would be weird, the differences too sharp for me to focus. But I really liked how it felt to be pressed against him. His body was firm, muscular, without being overbuilt. It felt like I could lean into him as much as I wanted and he wouldn't falter. His hand slipped around my waist, dragging me closer, and I gasped at the feel of his erection brushing against mine. Hendrix took advantage, slipping his tongue past my lips, and pressed me against the door.

It was like someone struck a match in a gas filled room, heat and need burning through me. I felt almost frantic for more, my fingers digging into his hair to keep him close. He groaned quietly, pushing me harder against the door. When his erection ground against mine, vibrant colors exploded behind my eyes and one hand moved to his hip, encouraging him. My knees felt weak and I almost worried about being able

to keep myself on my feet. If Hendrix didn't have me so securely in place, I'd probably sink to the floor.

I was eternally grateful that Sophie was a heavy sleeper, because I couldn't help the needy noises escaping me. Hendrix muffled them with his tongue in my mouth, but not entirely. And they dialed up a few notches when he slipped his leg between mine, giving me his firm thigh to grind on. I ripped my mouth away from his, gasping and moaning as I rocked my hips.

Hendrix's lips skimmed down my neck and I arched to give him more room. I never really considered my neck as an erogenous zone. Not until he sucked lightly on my pulse point. I let out a strangled moan, my hips bucking automatically.

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Hendrix huffed out a laugh, resting his head against my shoulder. “Damn. I love how sensitive you are. If we don’t move somewhere else, I think we’re both gonna make messes of our suits.”

That was probably true. I was already on edge and I couldn’t seem to stop my movements against his thigh. But I was too lost in what was happening to figure out where to go. Hendrix’s schuckle made me shiver, and he captured my lips roughly for a moment before he spoke again.

“Couch it is then.”

That was all the warning I got before he lifted me off my feet. A startled sound escaped me and I wrapped my legs around his hips automatically. We didn’t have to go far, but it was a few seconds too long for me and the second he dropped us both onto the couch, I dragged his lips back to mine. It was the most forward I’d been so far, and it seemed like he liked it. He groaned into my mouth, rewarding me with his tongue tangled with mine.

The new position was better, in my opinion. Hendrix’s weight pinned me to the couch, his erection pressed tightly against mine. When he rolled his hips, pleasure danced up my spine, and I moaned loudly. Maybe too loudly. I froze, pulling away long enough to listen for Sophie.

Hendrix shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll be able to hear if she wakes up. We’re okay.”

I trusted him not to lie to me, and when his mouth met mine, my lips parted eagerly.

Each time he rolled his hips, his tongue mimicked the action. It made me feel a little wild, and I clutched at his back almost desperately, only ripping my mouth away when I felt like I was going to explode.

“Hendrix...”

He didn’t acknowledge me at first, his mouth moving back to my neck. I squeezed my eyes shut, desperately trying to hold back my release. I’d never been this needy in my life, and holding back was almost painful.

When Hendrix did pull away, I wasn’t sure if I should be grateful or disappointed. At least until I felt my shirt part. I hadn’t even noticed him unbuttoning it or undoing my tie, too focused on the feel of his erection grinding against mine. He pushed up the undershirt underneath, and when his warm hands ran over my skin, I shivered. He shifted to his knees, making quick work of his own buttons. Unlike me, he didn’t have an undershirt underneath, and the lean muscle he exposed was immediately the subject of my full focus. I reached for him tentatively, running careful fingers over his crimson skin. He caught my hand with a chuckle, shaking his head.

“That tickles.”

Embarrassed, I grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. But if you’re going to touch me, don’t be so hesitant about it.” He pressed my hand more firmly against him. “I want you to touch me, Art.”

Art. I’d never heard that nickname before. A few people had tried using Artie, the band included, but I didn’t enjoy it. Art, though, sounded better in my head. It made me sound refined and a little poetic. I liked it.

Since he wasn’t upset about my blunder, I tried again to touch him, this time not as

gently. My touches were smoother, my palm tracing over his muscles and up his chest. His smile was gentle, but the fire behind his eyes was exhilarating, and when I tipped my head up for another kiss, he didn't fight me. He tangled his tongue with mine, groaning when my hands moved south to cup his erection.

I kept waiting for my mind to rebel, to get uncomfortable with the idea of touching another man. It never happened. The feel of his erection against my palm was thrilling, and I was eager for more. He thrust against my palm a few times, pulling away with a shake of his head, his breath unsteady.

"You're gonna make me come in my pants. Take my cock out, Art. I'd rather come on you."

My mouth fell open at his sultry demand and I stalled out for a second, staring up at him with wide eyes. He smirked, making my stomach clench, my erection twitching in response.

"No?"

"Y-Yes," I stuttered, fumbling to do as he asked. My hands trembled both from nerves and from excitement, and when his slacks parted and I slipped my hand into his boxers, I almost came on the spot. I was holding his cock in my hand. The thought alone was thrilling, but the sounds he made as I pulled him out and stroked him set me on fire. I knew without a shadow of a doubt listening to him was going to get me off. To save myself the dry cleaning costs, I pleaded with him. "M-Me too. Please?"

"Hell yes," he growled. He was a lot smoother than I was, no hint of a tremble as he pulled my boxers down. My erection bounced back up with the motion, slapping me in the stomach, the head already leaking precum. I nearly swallowed my tongue when Hendrix touched me, fisting my erection just rough enough to make me throw back my head on a groan. I tightened my grip automatically and Hendrix thrust his hips,

burying his face against my neck to muffle his moan. He matched the pace of my hand, jerking me off slowly. I wanted to speed up, to get us both off quickly, but I also wasn't ready for this to end.

I was getting close when he nudged my hand out of the way. He wrapped his fist around the both of us, jerking us together, and my whole body almost arched off the couch. I thought his hand on me was good, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of his cock against mine. He thrust lightly into his fist, his cockhead rubbing against mine, and my eyes nearly crossed from the pleasure.

“H-Hendrix!”

He shushed me lightly, his face a mask of pleasure. I knew I had to be quiet, but I had never experienced this kind of pleasure before. When his hand twisted over the heads, smearing our precum down our lengths, I had to bite back a shout. As much as I wanted to keep this going, my release was barreling down on me, and I was helpless to stop it. I dragged Hendrix closer, fusing my mouth to his, and when he tightened his grip on the next stroke, that was it. He swallowed my shout as colorful explosions wracked my entire body. I felt it from my toes, the base of my spine, my chest, all the way to the top of my head. It dragged on and on, until Hendrix groaned through his own release, his head dropping with relief.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ARTHUR

We were both breathless and panting, smothering each other with desperate kisses. My stomach and chest were a mess, and I had to be careful not to move to keep the puddles of cum off my clothes, but I didn't care. I would ruin every item of clothing I owned just to do that again.

Hendrix's kisses slowed, shifting to something more sweet. Almost like a thank you, which was insane since he was the one who rocked my entire existence. I cupped his face, trying to say without words how much it meant to me. He leaned into it, drawing it out for a second before pulling away.

"I'm gonna get something to clean you up. Don't move."

I didn't want him to walk away, but he had a point. Without moving too much, I pointed towards the hallway. "There's a half bath under the stairs. There should be a box of tissues in there."

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He kissed me softly once more before getting off the couch. It felt awkward waiting for him, but he didn't take too long. He kneeled beside me, gently wiping the mess off my stomach. I saw a smile tugging at his lips and tipped my head curiously.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just wasn't expecting that. Not that I'm complaining. I just thought you'd be more hesitant with your lack of experience.”

My face flushed so quickly, I almost felt like I could spontaneously combust. “I'm sorry. I—”

“Nope. No apologizing. That was hot. And I'm glad. I was honestly worried about being with a first timer. I'm not exactly patient and I was worried I'd push too hard, too fast.” He finished cleaning me up, studying my face as I tucked myself away again. “I didn't, right? It felt like you were into it.”

I huffed out a laugh, ducking my head as I sat up. “Definitely into it. More than I expected, honestly.” Way more. It was something I'd have to look at more closely later because nothing I'd ever done with Val ever came close to that.

“What do you mean?”

I shrugged, tugging my shirt down and smoothing it out self consciously. “I don't know. I thought maybe I wasn't as into sex as much as most guys. I wanted intimacy, but I never felt that desperation before.”



I was glad the only lights that were on were from the light above the stove and what little filtered through the front windows from the streetlights. We never turned on the overhead lights because I didn't want to wake Sophie. The shadows hid my blush, which was working its way down my chest, the heat of it feeling like a sunburn.

Hendrix hummed, stretching his legs out and settling himself on the floor next to me. “You said you’ve only been with one person, right? No fooling around in high school? Stray hookups in college?”

I shook my head quickly. “Never. I wasn’t exactly popular, a little nerdy and awkward, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.” I gestured to my glasses and the bowtie hanging off my collar. “It honestly surprised me when Val asked me out. She initiated every interaction, and I was happy to go along with it because at least she picked me.”

Something flashed over Hendrix’s face, but I couldn’t make it out in the shadows. He could probably read everything on my face, but I couldn’t see well in the dark. He wiped away whatever he was thinking, tipping his head back to look at me.

“Well then, I think there’s a lot you still have to discover. You figured out you like frotting, but there’s a whole list of stuff we can try later.”

The thought of him wanting to do more with me made my cock twitch. If I was younger, I’d be half hard already. I didn’t have that kind of recovery anymore, unfortunately. I needed at least an hour. And I didn't think Hendrix was going to stay that long. It was already incredibly late, and he had been working tonight. He needed his rest, just like I did. No doubt, despite her late bedtime, Sophie would be up bright and early, asking for pancakes. Still, I didn't want Hendrix to think I was kicking him out.

“I... I’m looking forward to it.”

He grinned at me, grabbing the lapel of my suit jacket to drag me closer to him. My earlier trepidation was gone, and I met his lips with enthusiasm, shivering when he nipped at my bottom lip.

“I need to get going or I’m gonna attack you again.”

It was disappointing, but I knew I couldn’t keep him here forever. I stood when he did, walking him to the door. Grabbing his guitar, which he’d left by the door, he headed out. He spun around on the stairs outside the front door, making me pause halfway to shutting it.

“You know, it’s a little weird that my friends have your number and I don’t. Am I gonna have to beg the number off of Maya?”

If I kept blushing like this, I was going to permanently stain my face red. I grimaced, shooting him an apologetic look.

“Sorry. I forgot about that part.”

In my defense, people didn’t normally ask for my number. I didn’t have many friends. There were a few people at the office I was friendly with, but none who I’d consider an actual friend. We never spent time together outside of the office. The only reason I had a phone was so Val could call me about Sophie.

Hendrix put out his hand, and I offered him my phone, watching as he typed in a number and called himself. He handed me my phone back with a wink.

“Good. Now I can text you and figure out when our next date will be. See you later, Art.”

That name still warmed my middle, and I ducked my head to hide the giddy smile on

my face. “Good night, Hendrix.”

He chuckled, muttering something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘so damn cute’ before he disappeared. That wasn’t a figure of speech either. I looked up, and he was gone, disappearing into thin air. I was a little jealous that he could teleport like that. I shut the door behind me, locking it and leaning heavily against it. Tonight had been nothing like I’d expected, and I was already counting down the minutes until I could see Hendrix again.

The rest of the weekend was pretty uneventful. Both Sophie and I slept in the following morning, and we spent most of the day relaxing and playing together. I took her to her favorite park, we grabbed some ice cream cones from our favorite shop, and we practiced her math together. I found some videos online about making math more fun, and we played some games to make it interesting. She didn’t get it right away, but eventually it clicked and she had fun.

We were cooking dinner together when she started asking me questions.

“Daddy, your friend Hendrix isn’t human, right?”

Turning to her, I studied her little face. “That’s right. He’s a paranormal. Does that bother you?”

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She shook her head slowly. “No. Was everyone at the wedding a paranormal?”

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “Not everyone, no. The brides weren’t. The band was. Why do you ask?”

Looking up from the bowl she was mashing potatoes in, she frowned. “There’s a new kid at school who isn’t human. He seems okay, but a lot of parents got mad that he was there. Is there something wrong with him?”

I’d actually gotten a letter from the school about that. There were schools solely for paranormals, but our school system was progressive and allowed their first paranormals into the school system starting this year. I’d dismissed the letter because I didn’t have any problem with it, but maybe I should’ve talked to Sophie about it first.

Plucking her off her little stool, I sat her on the counter. “I think that every life deserves to be treated equally. Human, paranormal, neurodivergent, queer. All of us should be treated with kindness and support. There’s nothing wrong with being different. Life would be really boring if we were all the same. And I don’t want you treating people poorly just because they’re different. Treat people how you would want to be treated. If you were that boy in a new school all alone, what would you want to happen?”

She thought about it, which was one thing I loved about her. She thought things through before reacting.

“I think I’d want a friend. It’d be scary being all by myself.”

“I think so too. So why not say hello? If you get along, you can ask him to be your friend. Don’t force it, you deserve to be treated nicely too, but it’s a kind thing to ask.”

Her brow furrowed a little. “Mom said to stay away from him. She said I needed to focus on school.”

It took considerable effort not to roll my eyes. I had to have a lot of long conversations to get Val to even consider Sophie’s social development and allow her to make friends. All she cared about was Sophie studying. I was a little worried she’d make Sophie miss her childhood if she didn’t learn to give her some space.

“Well, your mom and I see differently on that point. But if you want, you could always ask if he wants a study buddy. You can do homework together. Maybe show him some of the games I taught you.”

Her face lit up, and she beamed at me. “That’s a good idea. I’m gonna try that.”

Pride swelled in my chest, and I brushed a kiss over her forehead. “You are a wonderful girl, Sofía Grace. I’m sure this boy will be happy to have you as his friend.”

She hopped off the counter and went back to her food prep, a bright smile on her face. I turned back to my own meal prep, my mind wandering to Hendrix. I brought Sophie to the wedding because I wanted to show her the band I loved so much. I never expected it to be a lesson for her. Unless parents were willing to bridge the gap, little kids wouldn’t be exposed to paranormals that often. If I wanted Sophie to be open-minded, I had to remember to show her the world was a lot bigger than just her immediate family. I made a vow to myself to expose her to the world as a whole, not just paranormals, but different cultures and beliefs, as often as I could. Val might not agree, but I wanted our daughter to be open-minded. I wanted her to see only

possibility and to be okay with being different.

Maybe next weekend I could invite Hendrix over to play for a little while. They got along at the wedding, and if Sophie had questions about paranormals, Hendrix would be a safe bet to ask. I made a mental note to text him later, giving my focus back to Sophie and the dinner we were prepping together. Hopefully, he would be interested in spending more time with her, too. Because there was no future for me without Sophie in it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### HENDRIX

“You looklike you’re in a good mood.”

Blinking a few times, I looked up from the papers in front of me. I barely fell asleep after my night with Art when I woke up with a song in my head. I crept downstairs, grabbed my guitar and a few blank music sheets, and snuck out of the apartment. I flew up to the roof, resting my back against the short wall that wrapped around the edge, and started playing. It was still a little raw, but I hadn’t written a new song in a while and I was excited that some of my passion was coming back.

I hummed, smiling up at Laz. “I am. What are you doing up?”

It’d been a few hours, but the sun was just coming up and most of the others liked to sleep in, especially after a late show. I didn’t get home until well after midnight last night, and a few of them were still awake when I arrived.

Dropping to sit beside me, he sighed. “Can’t seem to stay asleep. Might be hungry.”

I frowned. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he didn’t mean regular food. As an

incubus, Laz fed off sexual energy. Hewas old enough now that he could go awhile between feeds, but now that I was thinking about it, I hadn't seen him hook up in weeks.

“How long has it been?”

He shrugged, but his non-answer was answer enough. I sighed heavily.

“Laz, I know you like her, but you can't skip eating. You know her rule. Even if she did feel that way about you, she might not go for it.”

The dejected look on his face killed me. I wanted to make him feel better, but he'd been pining for a while. Nothing I could say was going to make it easier. And with him starving himself, I felt like I had to be blunt. I put a hand on his shoulder, shaking him a little.

“She doesn't skip feedings, Laz. And you know her and her feeder hook up after.” He winced, but I kept going. He needed some sense knocked into him. “You need to take care of yourself. She hasn't even acknowledged your interest yet. You'll kill yourself waiting for her.”

He nodded slowly, but the hurt on his face made me think he wasn't going to do what I suggested.

“Laz...”

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He sighed heavily. “I know. I just... No one even sparks interest anymore. It’s hard to get into it. All I want is her.”

“So why not just go watch? Your cousin owns that sex club downtown, right?” It was a new place, popular with incubi and succubi, as well as anyone interested in feeding them for a night. It was pretty exclusive, you needed to fill out a lot of paperwork to go, but I think Felix went a few times before he met Tyler. Being around the sexual energy would be enough to take the edge off. It was a little like drinking a bunch of water when you were hungry, but at least he wouldn’t die.

“Yeah, I guess. I just wish she’d give me a shot.”

“I know, man.” So did a lot of guys. Ruby was gorgeous and sassy, with her sleek black bob and rocker outfits. She fit the band to a T and people flocked to her like moths. I understood why Laz was interested, but Ruby was also stubborn and we talked plenty before about her dating. She’d never break her rule about no band members. Not unless something insane happened.

In a lame effort to distract me from pestering him, Laz jerked his chin towards the papers in front of me. “Whatcha working on?”

I gave him a flat look. “Nice redirection, man.”

“You know you want to show me,” he wheedled with a smirk.

True. I was never patient enough to wait for a song to be finished before I showed the band. They usually helped me smooth out some of the raw aspects of it. I still didn’t



like him avoiding the subject, but I kind of doubted I'd get him to take up my suggestion right now. The club wasn't even open this morning. I'd bug him more about it later tonight. Or I'd call his cousin and force the issue. It'd make me a dick, but I'd rather be a dick than let my friend starve.

"Fine. Go easy on me. It's been a while."

He snorted at the innuendo, taking the papers I handed him. His eyes flicked over the notes and the words, his brows raising ever so slightly. When he glanced over at me, I grimaced.

"Shut up."

It wasn't my usual style. Sort of. It was our style of music, but it was more upbeat than I usually swayed toward. We were normally all about going against the crowd and having a good time. And since the integration, there were a good few songs that revolved around how the humans saw us. One of my favorites was all about how we'd act like they saw us if they asked nicely. It was hilarious and edgy, and Art said he loved it.

This song was... a love song. Sappy as all get out. It still had an edge to it, we were a rock band, not teen pop, but I saw Art's influence in it. I couldn't stop thinking about him and this was the result.

"Play me a couple notes," Laz urged, his eyes back on the paper.

I plucked the guitar, giving him the beat. He could probably hear it in his head reading the notes, but he preferred to focus on one aspect at a time, either the words or the notes themselves. He bobbed his head, pursing his lips as he read over the lines.

“It’s raw, but I like where it’s headed. I’m guessing this has something to do with our number one fan?”

I didn’t even try to deny it. I wasn’t the love song type of guy. My dad was a big influence on my music and we had similar rebellious themes to our songs. But that wasn’t where the music took me this time. And if I learned anything from years of doing this, it was to never question where the music was going. All my best stuff came from following that rule.

“He had a part in it, yeah. Is that a problem?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Like I can talk about anyone else’s love life right now. You’re a grown ass demon. You can decide for yourself who you’re into. Just do me a favor and don’t scare him off. His suggestions have been helpful. Duncan said we’ve already got over a thousand followers on our socials now that we’re posting more. Could explain the crowd increase. Artie’s a smart dude.”

I hummed my acknowledgement. I had no intention of scaring Art off. I had a lot of plans, and the list was getting crazy long with the stuff I could show him, but it wasn’t just about sex. I liked hanging out with him, spending time with him after the shows. I wanted to get to know him better. Which meant not coming on too strong.

“Well, if you don’t want me scaring him off, then maybe don’t tell him about this one. It’s just a concept right now anyway.”

“Probably a good idea,” he chuckled. “Wouldn’t want him knowing how much of a sap you really are.”

“Hey, fuck off, man,” I growled, shoving his shoulder. My tone lacked any genuine conviction. I knew the song was sappy, but still. “Help me fix it if you’re gonna judge. It doesn’t hit quite right on the second verse to me.”

We spent a little while out there, throwing out ideas on how to make the song a little less of a sap fest without ruining the message. After it got too hot to sit on the roof, we went back inside, and eventually the rest of the band joined us. Minus Zion, because he'd never actually come hang out with us without a decent reason.

I got plenty of teasing about the song and its new direction, but they supported me anyway and after a few hours of going back and forth, we managed to smooth out a few of the more problematic areas. I had pulled out my phone to order us some food when I got a message from Art. Nothing special, just checking in, but it included a picture of him and Sophie eating ice cream together. A stupid huge smile spread across my face and when Ruby noticed, she smirked at me.

“Is that Artie?”

I wasn't paying attention to her, too busy typing out a reply, asking him to get me one next time. I was looking at the picture again when she snatched the phone from me, sidestepping me when I tried to get it back.

“Aw, how cute. Kinda makes me want some ice cream right now.”

“Give it back,” I demanded.

She chuckled, holding the phone out to take a selfie with the band in the background, me included, with a big scowl on my face. She stuck out her tongue and snapped the picture, sending it off to Art with a grin before tossing the phone back to me. “You're welcome.”

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Rolling my eyes, I studied the photo she sent. I looked pissed, which was not how I wanted Art to see me. “You’re the worst friend on the planet.”

She cackled, grabbing a drink from the kitchen, while I waited for Art’s reply. I saw the bubbles pop up, and I was debating explaining what was going on in the picture, when my phone started buzzing in my hand. I frowned. He almost never called me.

“Who is it? Is it Artie? Tell him to come hang out!” Duncan called.

I shook my head, putting the phone to my ear. “Z? What’s up?”

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### ARTHUR

Hendrix’s schedules suddenly got busy, so I didn’t get to see him again until the next show. He promised we’d go out afterwards though, so I was looking forward to it. They even got an earlier slot, the band playing at nine instead of closer to midnight, so I could justify going out afterwards. I spent too long agonizing over what to wear, since I didn’t know exactly what Hendrix planned after the show. I would be happy with anything, but if it did lead to sex, I didn’t want to look like a hot mess.

I showed up early, as usual. Maya was on her honeymoon, so there was a new bartender at the bar. She seemed friendly, and after grabbing me a drink, she stopped by to chat. I was a little awkward, but once she got me talking about the band, I couldn’t shut up. She looked bemused, leaning against the counter as she listened to me babble. She tipped her head towards the stage when the first band came out.

“That them?”

I shook my head. “No. Children of Myth is made up of all paranormals.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Really? That’s freaking cool. What kinds?”

I listed them while ticking off on each of my fingers. “The drummer, Ruby, is a vampire. Duncan, the keyboardist and back up vocalist, is a witch. Laz is the bass player, and he’s an incubus. Their lead guitar isn’t at every show, but his name is Zion and he’s a werewolf. And the lead vocalist is Hendrix. He’s a demon.”

She pressed her lips together, trying and failing to hide her grin. “You’ve got a thing for that one, don’t you?”

My face flushed, and I started tripping over my own tongue. “I– How–”

She shrugged, grabbing a towel and wiping down the counter after someone left a stool nearby. “Your tone changed when you were talking about him. The rest, you were excited, but tempered. Him you got all dreamy eyed about. No shame in it. I couldn’t tell you how many rock stars I crushed on in my life. Pretty sure my childhood bedroom was all band posters with lipstick stains on them.”

Her attempt to ease my mind helped a little, but being compared to a teenager with a crush was a little embarrassing. I didn’t argue with her, though, considering I was dating the lead singer anyway. She moved on for a bit, filling drink orders as the bar got more crowded. After she was through, she headed back to me and sighed.

“I should’ve gotten more background information before starting here. People keep asking me questions I don’t have the answer to. They didn’t even give me a schedule of what bands were playing tonight. I’m out of my depth.”

My brow furrowed. That didn't sound like Maya. Peeking around her, I spied the little blue notebook Maya kept under the register and pointed at it. "Have you looked in there? Mayausually has the schedules for the bands in there, as well as a few notes."

She backtracked a few steps, grabbing the notebook and flipping it open. After a few seconds, she groaned, dropping her chin forward. "It's all here. They seriously could've mentioned that sooner. Thank you, this helps a lot. Your next drink is on me, okay? I'm Aliyah, by the way."

"Arthur," I replied, shaking the hand she thrust at me. "The regular bartender is a friend of mine. I knew she wouldn't leave her replacement hanging."

We chatted a bit while I waited for the band to show up. The first band wasn't terrible, but it wasn't Children of Myth, so I didn't pay much attention to them. I mostly played with my phone, looking through the updates Duncan had done with their social media. Their pages looked better, more professional, but they still needed more content. I made a mental note to ask Hendrix if he wanted to post some clips I took from the wedding. He wasn't happy about playing at a wedding, but I got some clips of their originals and he might like them online.

I was scrolling through some pictures and videos I took so I could show Hendrix after their gig when a rough voice snapped at Aliyah. "How do I get back stage?"

She frowned at the speaker, crossing her arms over her chest. "Are you with a band?"

The guy, who looked like a rat in a suit, with greasy brown hair and a terrible mustache, sneered at her. "I will be. I'm a scout for Broadcast Records. I'm here to meet with Children of Myth. Zion knows I'm coming."

That caught my attention, and I put my phone away to listen. Aliyah didn't look

impressed by the guy, her eyebrow raised defiantly. I was glued to the conversation, both excited for the band and a little concerned. This guy gave me bad vibes and, if the way he spoke to Aliyah was any indication, he wasn't a nice person.

"If you're not in a band, you don't go backstage. Meet them when they're through."

He bared his teeth at her. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

She lifted a shoulder carelessly. "Does it look like I care?"

"You will care when you cost a band their future! My name is Wallis Weatherby. I am one of the best scouts in the country. Do you really want to ruin the band's chance at meeting me just because you're on a stupid power trip?"

He sounded important, and I didn't want to jump to conclusions, so I interrupted them before Aliyah could piss him off any more. "The band almost always comes to the bar after the show. You can meet them then, if you want?"

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Weatherby swung his gaze to me, sucking his teeth to show his irritation. “I don’t wait for bands. They come to me. Either someone gets me backstage or I’m walking. I don’t have all night.”

This guy was an ass, and I almost wanted him to walk away, but I didn’t want to ruin the band’s chance at meeting with a label. Maybe the scout was only their first point of contact. They could get a manager who was a lot more friendly.

“I can text them, have them come out to see you. They’re getting ready, so it might be a few minutes.”

Weatherby studied me, his eyes trailing up and down like he was sizing me up. “Who the hell are you?”

“A friend of the band,” I answered casually. I didn’t want to say I was dating Hendrix when I didn’t know how Hendrix wanted to approach that. He might want to keep our relationship quiet for all I knew. We hadn’t really discussed it.

He gave me another once over before making an irritated sound. “Make it quick. I’ve got places to be.”

He turned his back to me while I shot off a text to Hendrix. I didn’t get a reply right away, but I didn’t really expect to. They were usually busy before a show, getting ready and tuning their instruments. That kind of thing. I didn’t expect him to drop everything to check his messages the second I texted him.

While we waited for him to respond, I tried looking up information on the label



Weatherby mentioned. They represented some big names, but I couldn't get a list of the managers and there were some concerning articles about bands going to court after dropping their contracts. It made me nervous, and I checked my messages again to see if Hendrix replied.

Luckily, he got the message, but he said he needed a few minutes. I was going to update Weatherby, but he got a phone call before I could. He moved toward the back hallway where the bathrooms were, his phone pressed against his ear. I didn't know what possessed me to do it, but I followed him, staying out of sight while I eavesdropped on his phone call.

"What? No. I'm signing another band tonight." He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up, ignoring the no smoking signs right in front of his face. "Should be. They'll take what I give them. No one else will hire a bunch of freaks. They'll be grateful for the contract or I'll walk."

An uneasy feeling swept over me. I took a few steps back, pulling out my phone to text Hendrix again. I couldn't hear the entire conversation, but it made me nervous. It sounded like the guy was going to lowball them because he thought they wouldn't get a better offer. I knew this band, and I had full faith they could get any label they wanted once they got the attention of the right people.

"Art?"

Spinning around, I let out a sigh of relief. "Hey. Can we talk for a second?"

His brows drew together, and he looked around with a frown. "Sure. I thought you said the scout was here?"

I waved my hand towards the hallway. "He's on the phone. Did he already give you a contract?"

He nodded slowly. “He gave one to Zion when they met. Zion looked over it. He said it was a good deal. It’s exciting, isn’t it? A real label is asking to sign us.”

He looked giddy, and I hated even thinking about taking that away from him. Still, I didn’t want him getting into something he couldn’t come back from. “Can I look at the contract? I’m good with numbers. I can check it over for you.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Sure. That sounds good. Lemme go grab it.”

He headed backstage again while I stayed put, frozen between the hallway where the scout was still talking and the stage. I wanted to check the contract before Hendrix met with the man, but Weatherby came back out of the hallway right as Hendrix approached me with the contract. His entire demeanor changed, smiling as he came to join us.

“You’re Hendrix, right? Leader of Children of Myth?”

Hendrix’s eyes lit up, and he stepped around me to shake the man’s hand. “Yep. Are you Mr. Weatherby?”

I hovered, unwilling to let Hendrix sign up for anything without someone watching his back. Luckily, he texted the band to come out and introduce themselves, giving me a few minutes to look over the contract. The longer I studied it, the deeper my frown got. While the rest of the band shook hands with Weatherby, I tugged Hendrix’s shirt to draw his attention.

“Can we talk for a second?”

He looked concerned about the look on my face and bobbed his head, leading me with a hand on my back to the hallway that led backstage. The walls muffled the band on stage enough that I didn’t have to shout when talking to Hendrix.

“Did you look at this contract?”

“Uh, not myself, no. Zion said he looked at it. I was going to look it over after we met with the guy.”

I shook my head quickly. “That’s not what he thinks. He thinks you’re signing tonight.”

The eagerness that passed over Hendrix’s face killed me. I put up my hand, guilt and determination at war in my stomach, making me feel nauseous.

“Look, Hendrix, I know you’re excited about a label, but I looked over the contract. They’re setting you up to fail.”

His face fell and his eyes dropped to the contract in my hand. “What do you mean?”

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“I mean, I think this guy preys on bands who are too eager to succeed to argue with him. The numbers in here are awful. Even if you made it big, you’d be making pennies compared to the label. And they expect a lot out of pocket. Not only that, but they’ve got a loyalty clause that will basically force you to stay with them, no matter what. I saw some articles online about artists who have worked with them in the past. They were put through the ringer to get out of their contracts and most of them ended up broke. I don’t think you should sign this contract. You can do better.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### HENDRIX

I’d been so damnexcited when Zion called to tell me a scout from a major label approached him. Broadcast Recordings was a huge deal, and they produced a lot of big names. I didn’t know those contracts were so messed up, though. Zion told me the contract was fine, but he didn’t have time to show it to me until tonight, before the gig. I was going to go over it, but I’ll admit I was so excited I probably wouldn’t have taken in much past the fact that they were interested.

I wanted so badly to make it big. The whole band did. But Art wouldn’t be telling me this for nothing. He was our biggest fan, and he wanted us to succeed. He wouldn’t fight a contract without good reason.

“Can you show me?”

He nodded, moving until we were shoulder to shoulder so he could point out the points in the contract he didn’t like. It was all complicated legal jargon, but Art

explained it in a way I could understand. They used complicated language to make it look like a good deal, but when it came down to it, Art was right. We wouldn't even get five percent of our earnings, and that had to be split between the whole band. And the loyalty clause was fucking binding. We'd belong to the label and be stuck with them for life. They even had a say on what we produced. They could make us play stuff that didn't fit our sound and if we refused, they'd charge us.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I dropped my head a little. Art put his hand against my shoulder, an apologetic look on his face.

"I'm so sorry, Hendrix. I really want you to get signed with a label, but I didn't want you stuck with something you'd regret."

"I know. You're not at fault here. This asshole knew what he was doing, approaching us. We want this so bad, we wouldn't have had the balls to negotiate. Thank you for telling me."

From the sounds of it, the band ahead of us was finishing up. We didn't have much time between sets to switch out instruments and get things set up, so we didn't have time to mess around. I took Art's hand, pulling him through the crowd where the band was still talking to the scout. Handing the scout back his contract, I shook my head.

"Sorry, but we aren't going to sign this. We appreciate your consideration."

Most of the band looked confused, shooting me questioning looks. I tipped my head towards the back. "We gotta get on stage. We'll talk about this later. Come on."

Art squeezed my hand, waving his hand toward the bar. "I'm going to see if my spot is still there. I'll see you after, okay?"

I let him go, my expression tight as I turned to head backstage again. Weatherby grabbed my arm, masking his scowl with a tense smile. “Surely we can talk about this? If you’ve got questions about the contract, I can go over it with you, maybe make things a little clearer.”

The eyes of the band pinged between me and Weatherby. I jerked my arm away from him, stepping out of range.

“We’ve gotta get on stage. Thanks, but no thanks.”

Without another word, I walked away from him, my bandmates following closely behind me.

“What the hell was that?” Zion snarled.

“What happened, Hen? What changed your mind?” Laz asked at the same time.

I shook my head. “I’ll explain after the show. Let’s just say Art found a lot to be wanted in that contract. The asshole was ripping us off. We’ll find something better. Let’s just go out there and rock this, yeah?”

Zion looked petulant, his arms crossed over his chest, but I ignored him. I wasn’t changing my mind just to appease him. I’d explain the contract to him after the show. Art mentioned that they wrote the contract to seem like a good deal. Zion just didn’t understand yet. And we couldn’t keep everyone waiting long enough for me to explain.

Heading onto the stage, I took a few deep breaths. I’d just finished up my meditation when Art texted me, but all that calm focus was crushed under the disappointment. I wasn’t at all in the right headspace, and it was going to take a considerable amount of effort for that not to show during the gig. I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly,

and gave my focus to the crowd. The stage lights weren't on yet, the band still setting up, which meant they didn't blind me to anything past the front row yet. I saw first hand when Weatherby grabbed Art, yanking him closer with a scowl on his face.

The sound of the band behind me, the noise of the crowd as they got excited for the next show, it all fell away. All I could hear was white noise, a snarl echoing into the mic that I was standing in front of. I was off the stage and barreling through the crowd before I knew what I was doing. The only thing I could process was the fear on Art's face.

ART

While the band headed backstage, I went back to the bar. I still felt guilty, and when I slid onto the stool at the bar, Aliyah stopped in front of me with a frown.

"That looked intense. Is everything okay?"

I nodded, but I didn't explain. I wasn't sure if that was my place or not, and I didn't want to embarrass them or anything. It wasn't the band's fault they were targeted by a scammer. Aliyah offered me another drink, but I shook my head. My stomach was still upset and adding alcohol to the mix sounded like a bad idea.

The first band was just heading off stage when a rough hand grabbed my shoulder, spinning me around on my stool. I jerked back, surprised, and came face to face with Mr. Weatherby.

"What the fuck did you say to him?"

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My heart thundered in my chest and I eased back on my stool to put some space between us.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “They were all ready to sign until you pulled the vocalist aside. Are you a lawyer or something?”

“No, I’m an accountant.”

I don’t know why I said that. He didn’t need to know that. And it only seemed to inflame him more. His face got red as he shouted at me, drawing the attention of the people around us.

“Then you should mind your fucking business! What happens between me and my client is between us!”

“They deserve a fair shot,” I argued. “Your contract was basically theft. You’re angry right now because your manipulation tactic failed.”

Weatherby snorted derisively. “They’re gonna fucking hate you when they realize you’ve ruined their chances at becoming big. No one’s gonna hire freaks like them. I was their one shot at fame.”

The guilt ate at me, but I lifted my chin, refusing to let the rat see his words had any effect on me. The way he said it was telling, and I knew more than ever that I made the right choice by talking to Hendrix.



“So you think they can’t make it because they’re paranormal? Did you even plan on giving them a shot? Just because they aren’t human doesn’t mean they don’t deserve a fair shake. Have you even listened to their music? They’re good! Really good. They’re going to make it one day and they don’t need your help to do it.”

Weatherby made an irritated sound, shooting me a flat look. “You’re fucking delusional.”

“And you’re a rat. I feel sorry for whoever ends up taking your offer. No one deserved to be treated like that.”

Weatherby growled, his face turning red with his anger. I glanced uneasily over his shoulder toward the stage. Hendrix was just off stage, probably getting things set up. He didn’t notice the man in front of me.

“Watch your mouth, you piece of shit.”

I didn’t know what came over me, but I shot back, “Why? You don’t want the world to know how you screw over bands who are just looking for a chance? How you hide the fact that you’re robbing them blind with fancy legal jargon? People should know who they’re dealing with when you come along with your slimy smile. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

I probably should have backed off before things got so intense. I wasn’t a fighter, by any means. I barely had the muscle to carry Sophie up the stairs. But I’d dealt with bullies all my life. Backing down would only make him feel powerful and he’d double down on the next poor band he set his sights on. I was kind of hoping the crowd surrounding us would deter him, but he didn’t seem to care. He grabbed the front of my shirt, dragging me towards him until our faces were inches apart.

“You’re gonna regret getting in my way,” he hissed. “I’m gonna—”

I didn't see Hendrix coming until he ripped the guy away from me, the force of it tossing Weatherby onto his ass a few feet away. Hendrix placed himself between me and Weatherby, his fury coming off him in waves. He had a crown of fire from his horns and he seemed to swell, making him way more intimidating than the guy I knew. I couldn't see Weatherby with Hendrix between us, but I heard him get to his feet, shrieking at Hendrix.

"You're going to regret this! I'll make sure you never sign with another label! You'll come crying to me eventually and I'll remember this!"

"Oh, go cry to your mommy," Ruby snapped, moving to stand next to Hendrix. Laz and Duncan followed, making an actual wall between me and Weatherby.

It shocked me that they wanted to protect me. No one had ever stood up for me like that before. I heard the murmurs of the crowd, felt their eyes on us, and I flushed from embarrassment. But not even the embarrassment could bypass the swell of emotion in my chest when Laz spoke up.

"You're shit out of luck, asshole. We trust Artie. If he's got a problem with you, then we aren't interested. Touch him again and you'll face all of us. Now fuck off."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### HENDRIX

I growled my agreement with Laz, glaring at Weatherby. He could look indignant all he wanted. He wasn't going to get a contract with us. Not while I was around. Especially after he grabbed Art. No one touches my man and gets away with it.

It must've finally clicked that he wasn't going to get his way with us, because his gaze swung to Zion, who stood off to the side, glowering at us.

“You should’ve told me you worked with a bunch of pathetic shits. You should consider branching out. They’re going to hold you back. I’m out of here. I don’t have to stand this.”

Watching him walk away, I glared at his back. Once he was out of sight, I swung around to face Art.

“You okay?”

He looked wide eyed and a little shell shocked, but not hurt. He looked up at me, his brows drawing together tightly.

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“I... Thank you. For standing up for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

I made a face, but Zion cut us off before I could argue with him.

“Exactly what I was thinking. What the hell was that? We had it in the bag!”

I expected him to still be pissed, but we really didn’t have time to go over the contract points right now. The whole crowd was watching us, and we were supposed to be on stage. Now that I knew Art was alright, I needed to focus.

“We’ll talk about this later. I—”

“No, we fucking won’t! You chased away our shot to sign with a label! A big fucking label, Hen!”

Art frowned, trying to interject. “That contract wasn’t—”

Zion’s head snapped toward Art and he snarled, his teeth bared. “No one fucking asked you! You’re not part of this band! You’re just a fucking roadie who thinks he’s smarter than us! Just because you’re fucking the vocalist doesn’t make you a part of this!”

Hurt and embarrassment flashed over Art’s face, and a growl rattled my throat. Zion was crossing all kinds of lines and I was already pissed off.

“Zion, shut the hell up. Art has done a lot to support us.”

He swung his furious gaze back to me, snarling. “We’ve been in this way longer than he’s been bending over for you. I—”

My temper got the better of me and I lashed out, punching Zion and knocking him on his ass. I regretted it the minute I did it. He was a friend, and we had been in this band together for a long time. But I couldn’t take the shit he was saying about Art. He was a good guy and didn’t deserve to be shamed like that.

Scrambling to his feet, Zion stepped forward. It looked like it’d become an all-out brawl before Laz and Duncan stepped in, shoving him away. Ruby hovered at my side, still protecting Art behind me. The rest of the band was standing with me, leaving Zion on his own. He hesitated, eyeing the group, before stepping back with a scoff.

“You know what? Weatherby is right. You guys are just going to hold me back. If you aren’t going to actually take a shot at a real label, then I’m out. Have fun doing the show on your own.”

Spinning on his heel, he shouldered through the crowd, hopping on stage long enough to grab his guitar before he stalked off through the back. Pain echoed through my chest at the loss. I’d known Zion for years, but this was a long time coming. He stopped being part of the band a while ago, and this would’ve happened eventually.

With a sigh, Ruby shook her head. “Well, that could’ve gone better. Come on. We’ve got a show to do.”

The rest of the band looked back at me, waiting for me to move, but I hesitated. I didn’t know why, I just couldn’t make myself move away from Art. Not until the bartender spoke.

“He can sit back here with me. I’ll watch out for him.”

Turning around, I studied her. She wasn't human, but I couldn't tell what kind of paranormal she was just by looking at her. Still, she looked like she was strong enough to protect Art. I dipped my chin, glancing down at Art. He looked hurt and confused and I hated that I couldn't comfort him right away, but I needed to get on stage. I lifted his chin with a knuckle, raising my eyebrows at him.

"Stay here. I'll come right back when we're through. Okay?"

His frown deepened, and he looked like he wanted to argue, probably looking for an escape after everything that happened, but I wanted to talk to him about this. He needed to know it wasn't his fault. The stuff with Zion would've happened eventually. Art's gaze flicked over my shoulder and he blushed, ducking his head.

"O-Okay."

I'd take what I could get. Kissing his forehead quickly, I rushed to join the band on stage. The crowd was quiet, having watched the entire thing since this place wasn't big enough for actual privacy. The air felt awkward and tense, and I needed to take a deep breath before I could start.

Flashing the crowd a grin, I shrugged. "Anyone know a decent guitarist?"

The crowd chuckled, and the tension eased a little. Since they probably heard plenty about what happened, I decided to be honest.

"We thought maybe we were getting our big break. But thanks to someone special, we saw that con for what it was. And you know us. No one is gonna hold us back."

My little comment tipped the band off on the song I wanted to start with and gave us a decent segue into starting our set. I poured my heart into the music, dragging us out from the awkward situation we had started in. By our third song, the crowd was

cheering, the confrontation forgotten, and the music pulsed through my system, setting me at ease. I cleared my head of everything other than the band and the music and we finished our set on a high note.

While the band cleared the way for the next people in line, I hopped off the stage to look for Art. People smiled at me, reached for me, and clapped my shoulder, giving me hope that Zion's tantrum wasn't a big setback for us. I found Art on a stool out of the way behind the bar. He was still frowning, probably still blaming himself for what happened. I knew I wouldn't be able to convince him alone, so I didn't say anything until I dragged him into the back with the rest of the band. Nudging him onto the sofa, I kneeled in front of him.

“Thank you.”

His head jerked up, and he looked around, confused. “What? Why?”

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Ruby hopped over the back of the couch, plopping herself beside him. “Because you saved our asses. We could’ve been stuck with that guy if we signed that contract.”

Duncan nodded, dropping onto the couch opposite us. “Even if we didn’t sign tonight, he was a slimy shit. You showed us his true colors. I’m not interested in signing with a label that hires dicks like him.”

Art still looked like he didn’t believe us, and I squeezed his hands gently to get his attention. “This isn’t your fault. You were looking out for us. I’m glad you said something. Yes, it sucks that we didn’t get a contract with a label, but you made me realize we were jumping into things without looking first. I’m supposed to look out for the band, and I should’ve been paying more attention. I’ll do better next time.”

Laz put his hand on Art’s shoulder, standing beside him. “And there will be a next time. You said it yourself. Everything you’ve brought up to us so far has been true. We trust your judgment.”

“But Zion—”

Ruby scoffed, and I shook my head quickly. “We all knew he was on the way out. He wasn’t interested in starting from scratch and he resented the late night gigs and the bad venues. We knew we’d need a new guitarist soon. I’m not as good as he was, and I don’t want to drag us down, pretending I can do both. We’ll find someone to replace him. And I’ll practice more in the meantime, just to keep us afloat.”

“Honestly, I’m glad he’s gone,” Duncan said, relaxing into the cushions. “He’s a dick. He thinks because I don’t play guitar, I’m not as much a part of the band as he



is. At least I can hold a tune without an instrument.”

“True,” Ruby snickered. “You should’ve heard him trying to sing when we were writing our first few songs. It was like nails on a chalkboard.”

“We can use our social media to look for a new guitarist. Someone who we vibe with better and is more dedicated to the band. And won’t throw a tantrum the second things don’t go their way,” Laz added.

Duncan whipped out his phone, already drawing up a few ideas on posts. Holding trials for a new member would make me a little busier, especially working around all our schedules. If I wanted to spend time with Art, I had to take whatever chance I could. I pushed to my feet, offering him my hand.

“Come on. You promised me a date. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### ARTHUR

The guilt over what happened with Zion and Mr. Weatherby sat with me through the entire show. I never thought it’d go that far. The whole crowd was watching as they argued, and the band split in two. And then Hendrix had to go up on that stage and play it off, like something huge didn’t just happen. I couldn’t enjoy the music like I normally would. I was wallowing too much to really be present in the moment. I didn’t even realize they had finished until Hendrix appeared at my side, pulling me along through the crowd and backstage to where the band was resting after the show.

I thought for sure they’d blame me. That me dating Hendrix would become a problem because I caused so much trouble for them. I braced myself, waiting for the worst to happen, only to have them thank me for helping them. I listened, stunned speechless,

as they defended me, making it sound like I did them a favor by messing with their dynamic.

I still wasn't sure I fully believed them when Hendrix dragged me out of the bar. I wanted to, I'd never had that kind of support before, but Zion's words rang through my head. I wasn't part of the band. I was only around because I was with Hendrix.

"You're thinking really loud over there," Hendrix murmured, nudging my shoulder with his. I'd taken a rideshare since I still didn't like driving at night. Hendrix didn't head for the parking lot, so I assumed he flew or teleported or something. We walked along the sidewalk, a slight chill in the air from the late night breeze. I didn't know where Hendrix planned for us to go, so I just matched his pace, letting him lead the way.

He stopped, tugging my elbow until I looked at him. "What's it gonna take to get you to believe it's not your fault?"

I shrugged helplessly. "It feels like my fault. I should've waited, said something after the show, or—"

"There's no telling if the asshole would've been pushy and tried to get us to sign before. He seemed like he wanted a decision right away," Hendrix interjected.

"But you had to stop to come rescue me. I should've left after pissing that guy off. I shouldn't have argued with him."

"Hey," he murmured, forcing me to look at him with his hand cupping my neck. "You were sticking up for us. It's not your fault he's a jackass who attacks people who don't agree with him. And it doesn't matter what I'm doing or how big the crowd is. If you're in trouble, I'm gonna show up for you."

My heart tripped over itself in my chest, my breathing shaky as I stared into his eyes.  
“Why?”

“What kind of shitty date would I be if I left you to fend for yourself?” he smirked.

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, and I deflated a little. I wasn't really sure what I expected, we hadn't been dating that long, but I was disappointed all the same. Hendrix dipped his head, silencing my turbulent thoughts with his lips on mine. I sank into it, wrapping my arms around his waist to keep him close as our lips parted and his tongue teased mine. I couldn't take back what happened. I was glad they weren't conned by that jerk, so I let it go, using Hendrix's kiss as a distraction.

We separated before things got too steamy, but I was reluctant to pull away. Hendrix didn't seem to be in a hurry either, plucking at my lips like he couldn't get enough. We were supposed to be going on a date, but if he kept this up, I would be begging him to take me home instead. I hadn't stopped thinking about what happened the last time we were alone together, and I wanted a repeat more than I wanted to be out amongst the late night crowds.

“Hendrix...” I murmured against his lips.

He shivered in response, a grin blooming across his face. “You're really good at distracting me.” He straightened, taking his addictive lips with him. “Come on. I had a plan for tonight and if we don't stop, you're gonna end up naked in that alley.”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought. I was horny, but I wasn't that desperate. My reaction made Hendrix laugh, and he tossed his arm over my shoulder as we started walking down the block again.

“Not into it? Good to know.”

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“Is anyone actually into that? You could get caught.”

“You’d be surprised,” he replied, his eyes straight ahead as he led us through the crowded sidewalk. This entire block was filled with bars and clubs, so even though it was late, it was still busy with people out drinking and letting loose for the night. “My friend Felix and his boyfriend have gotten caught a few times already. Those two have no shame. They’ve been lucky that they were only caught by human cops and could teleport away before they got into any real trouble. In the Other Realm, they can block teleportation to capture bad guys.”

“And you?” I queried, curious and a little nervous about his response. I didn’t think I’d ever be into that. The chance of getting caught would be distracting, and I’d be too nervous to really enjoy it.

Hendrix shook his head, his lips quirked up at the sides. “I’m good with keeping that between us. I don’t think I’ll ever get signed with a label if I do shit like that. It’d be a PR nightmare.”

I released a breath of relief that was probably a little too exuberant. Hendrix caught it and he burst out laughing, his head thrown back. I felt my cheeks burn, but he didn’t let me stay embarrassed for long. He pulled me closer, kissing the side of my head, and gestured to a shop on the corner.

“Let’s grab a few sandwiches. I wanna take you somewhere and to get there we need to fly. I was thinking pizza, but that’d be a pain in the ass.”

My stomach twisted at the thought of flying with him. I was curious, but also a little

nervous. If it were anyone else, I probably would've refused. It didn't seem safe. But I trusted Hendrix. He wouldn't drop me. Still, while we waited for our order to be made, I bounced on my toes, biting my lip as I stared out the window.

Hendrix chuckled, grabbing our food and leading me outside with his arm around my shoulders again. "Relax. I've got you. Hold the food for me, yeah?"

I clutched the bag against my chest to hide the tremor in my hands. Hendrix dipped and scooped me off my feet, hugging me to his chest, and launched himself into the air without any warning. I yelped, nearly dropping the food in my haste to throw my arms around his neck for a better hold. I clung to him, my grip almost choking him, until he leveled off and the noise of the wind stopped hiding his laugh.

"Relax, babe. If you make me pass out, it won't be good for either of us."

I jerked back, loosening my grip by a significant amount, but stupidly glanced around when I did. The city was below us, close enough that I could pick out details, but far enough that my stomach flipped over. I tightened my grip again, my breathing sharp and disjointed, and Hendrix laughed again.

"Are you afraid of heights?"

Before now, I didn't think I was. But I was seriously questioning that now. Hendrix tightened his grip on me, which helped a little, and he pressed his cheek against mine, murmuring in my ear.

"I've got you, Art."

He didn't laugh at me again, keeping me tight against him until we landed. My knees were weak when he set me on my feet, but I managed to stay upright, if not a little unsteady.

“Maybe flying isn’t your thing,” Hendrix teased. It didn’t feel cruel, more like he was trying to get me to relax, and I let out a slow breath before responding to him.

“Maybe. I honestly didn’t think I was afraid of heights until I looked down. I don’t know how you do that.”

He shrugged, leading me over to an old bench. “I guess it helps that my wings are actually attached to me.”

True. I opened my mouth to agree, but I stalled out before I could. I hadn’t really paid attention to where Hendrix had brought me before now. We were high on a hill overlooking the city, the lights stretched out below us. It was a gorgeous view, like nothing I’d ever seen before, and I stood transfixed for a while until Hendrix chuckled and pulled me into the seat beside him.

“Where are we?”

“A hiking trail. I found this place one day when I was looking for inspiration. It can get pretty busy during the day, but I realized no one was willing to traverse through the forest at night, so it’s usually empty after dark. I like coming up here to think and play out some of the song ideas in my head. Do you like it?”

I could hear the hopeful tone of his voice, but I still couldn’t drag my gaze away from the view in front of me.

“It’s beautiful.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### HENDRIX

Watching Art take in the view was just as good as seeing it for myself the first time. He looked so enthralled, his eyes wide and wonder struck. I was a little jealous he didn't look at me that way. I snagged his attention, waving the sandwich in his face, and grinned when he finally pulled his eyes away from the view and back to me.

“Finally remembered you're not here alone?” I snickered.

He ducked his head, a sheepish look on his face. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that if there was an actual light up here instead of just the glow from the city, I'd see the blush staining his cheeks. Art blushed at the drop of a hat. It was cute, and I loved how easy it was to read his emotions when they were written on his face like that. He shoved his glasses up his nose, focused on unwrapping his sandwich to hide his embarrassment. I followed suit, always hungry after a show.

“Do you think... Will it be hard to find another guitarist?”

I took a big bite of my sandwich, tipping my head side to side as I chewed. “Yes, and no. I'm sure there will be people who will want to give it a go, but it's not easy finding someone who will mesh well with the whole group. Zion is a good example of what happens when we're too focused on filling a slot instead of finding someone who fits. He's a talented guitar player, but not really a team player.”

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Art nodded slowly, nibbling at his own sandwich. I put my hand on his knee, squeezing gently.

“I promise, him leaving was inevitable. You’re not at fault here. He is. He was already on our last nerve. If it were Ruby or one of the other guys who got upset about us refusing that contract, I would’ve tried harder to explain it and gotten them to understand where we were coming from. Zion wasn’t worth the fight.”

Letting out a breath, he nodded. “Okay. But if I overstep, you should tell me. I was just trying to help, but Zion was right. I’m not part of the band.”

I didn't fully agree with that, not after everything he'd done to help us, but I got the feeling we'd go in circles all night if we didn't move on from the conversation. I nodded to appease him and let it go, relaxing in my seat as I turned toward the view. We ate in silence for a while, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Art looked more at ease than he did when we first arrived, and after he finished eating, he fished his phone out of his pocket and started snapping pictures. I watched him with a smile on my face, just enjoying his excitement. He stood to get a better angle, snapping a few more, before tipping his head.

“You know, this would be a really good place for an album cover.”

Pursing my lips, I looked around. None of us had ever thought about album covers before. We just assumed the label would think up most of that stuff. I raised my eyebrows at Art.

“What’d you have in mind?”



It turned into a mini photo session, him adjusting my posture on the bench and moving behind me to get the view in the background. He made little comments, like how he wished I had my guitar, or how it'd look better with the whole band, but he seemed to be having fun and I liked being his model.

“If the bench didn’t have a back, then laying down with your guitar would look nice too,” he murmured. Some of his comments I felt were more for himself than for me, and he never seemed like he needed me to reply. I smiled to myself, letting him nudge me into lying across the bench with my head resting on the arm as he tried something new. “No... The back ruins it. I can’t see enough of you.”

“Then why not come over here and join me? You can see me better up close.”

He huffed out a laugh, moving to stand behind the bench, and looked down at me. “Not what I meant. I was mostly thinking out loud.”

Grinning, I grabbed his hand and tugged, leading him around the bench so he was standing in front of me. “I know. But I’ve got a different idea for the cover.”

His brows furrowed, but before he could ask for an explanation, I pulled him down until he was lying on top of me. He looked surprised, his body stiff like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

“See, with the back covering us, people will wonder what we’re doing,” I murmured, sliding my hands down his back. “Where I’m touching you and how.” My hands moved over his ass, squeezing the tight globes. His breath caught in his throat, encouraging me to keep going. “All they’ll see is you on top of me, your lips on mine, and teasing them with what if.”

His eyes dropped to my mouth, and I could see the want there. The orange glow from the city barely lit up his face, but I could see just fine in the dark. His pupils were

blown and his glasses only made his eyes seem bigger, emphasizing the needy look. I was curious if he'd make a move, but the longer I waited, the more tense and nervous he got. He wasn't ready to take charge yet, not without a little encouragement. I cupped the back of his head, drawing him closer, and whispered against his lips.

"Kiss me, Art. Give the audience what they want."

"There is no audience," he whispered back, his breath intermixing with mine, he was so damn close. "I didn't even set up my camera."

I hummed, lifting my head enough to barely brush my lips against his. "I guess we'll just pretend then."

He closed what was left of the distance between us, pressing his lips to mine. It started off soft, hesitant, but with enough coaxing, he came out of his shell little by little. Shifting himself into a better position moved his body perfectly over mine, chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis. His kisses turned needy and frantic when I lifted my hips to grind against his. We made out like teenagers, tongues tangled, hands everywhere, until I had to pull away or risk coming in my jeans. The bench wasn't big enough for any real action, so I sat up, dragging Art with me, and nipped at his bottom lip to get his attention.

"Time for your next lesson. I'm gonna introduce you to the joys of sucking cock."

He shivered, his eyes heavy lidded and lust fogged. It was his turn to be the model, and I arranged him how I wanted, legs spread to make room for me, pants undone, arms on the back of the bench, head thrown back as I stroked him. A quick wardrobe change and he'd look like a prince waiting to be devoured by the devil.

"Now this would be one hell of an album cover."

His strained laugh broke the quiet, his head dropping forward to look at me. “I think producers might have an issue with it.”

I shrugged, shooting him a wicked grin. “Not as long as they can’t see the goods. It’s a tease, remember? The bench is short enough that they can see I’m here, but not what I’m doing. I think that cover would be hot.”

Art swallowed hard, staring at me, his glasses slightly askew. “I... I’ve never done this before.”

I’d been about to lick him, to taste the precum already seeping from his cock, but I froze at his words, looking up at him.

“With another guy, you mean?”

He shook his head, his breath uneven. “No. Val never– She said it was gross, so we never–”

He looked embarrassed, and I didn’t want to ruin the mood, so I picked up where I left off, stroking his cock just enough to give him friction without actually getting him off. I leaned over, lapping at the head, and earned a shout from Art, his hips bucking automatically. I drew back, teasing him with a few more light strokes.

“Well, she was missing out because you’re fucking delicious.”

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I didn't give him time to argue with me, drawing his cock into my mouth. I wasn't lying to him. He really was delicious. I always enjoyed giving head, making my partners feel good. I wasn't a selfish lover. But damn, Art made it so much better. With just a few sucks, he was falling apart at the seams, his moans loud and unfiltered. His arms on the back of the bench were straining, like it took effort to keep them there, and when I took him to the back of my throat, his hands moved to my hair automatically.

“Hen—”

His words cut off when I suckled on his tip, wringing a strangled moan from him. His fingers dug into my hair and it seemed like it was impossible for him to sit still, his hips jerking and his body writhing from the assault. When I sucked one of his balls into my mouth, he stopped breathing for a second, his face twisted in ecstasy. I felt his cock twitch, warning me of how close he was. I dove back onto his cock eagerly, sucking him down to the back of my throat. His dick pulsed a few times on my tongue, and Art babbled randomly, cutting off into a shout when he finally exploded. I pulled back a little, eager to taste him, and hummed at the salty sweetness that hit my tongue.

Art slumped, breathing heavily, and shivered when I finally let his cock slip from my lips.

“Damn. Watching you fall apart almost got me off,” I chuckled, helping him tuck himself back away since there was a chill in the air. My dick throbbed in my jeans, demanding attention, but I wasn't going to push Art too far. It took him a minute before he could look up at me, his face a cross between shock and desire.

“That was—” He shook his head like he was at a loss for words.

“I take it you liked this lesson?” I smirked.

His eyes snapped down to my lap and back up, his brow furrowing. “It’s not done yet. I haven’t gotten a turn.”

Well, I sure as hell wasn’t going to say no to that. We swapped places, Art a little wobbly as he sank to his knees in front of me. I wanted to feel smug about it, but I was too damn focused on the man in front of me, watching him slowly unbutton my jeans and free my erection.

Like the first time, I expected him to be more tentative and was taken off guard when he dove on my cock like a starving man at a buffet. He licked and stroked, running his tongue over every inch of me before attempting to suck me down. He kept shoving his glasses back up his nose, so I plucked them off his face, setting them next to us on the bench. My claws carded through his hair, encouraging him as he bobbed along my length. When he gagged, the sound sent a thrill up my spine and I was too mind-blown to explain that he didn’t need to go so hard. I kind of doubted he’d listen to me anyway. He was too enthusiastic, mimicking moves I used on him, licking my balls and sucking the tip.

“Art... You’re gonna get me there...”

I was trying to warn him. It was too good for me to last. A little sloppy and inexperienced, but he made up for it with raw enthusiasm and I was close to exploding. My hips moved in micro thrusts, the base of my spine tingled, and when Art moaned in response, the vibration drop kicked me over the edge. It actually felt like I was in a free fall, my stomach flipping and my heart thundering in my chest. He didn’t stop sucking until he got every last drop and I had to push him away because I was too sensitive.

“Holy... shit...” I breathed between pants.

“Did I get a good grade?” he teased, his voice gravelly. I shivered, my cock twitching at the sound.

“Babe, you passed with flying colors.” Seriously. I was just teasing with the lessons thing, but if this was what I had to look forward to, then I wanted to teach Art every damn thing I could.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### ARTHUR

The more time I spent with Hendrix, the more I realized how much I missed out on in my past relationship. Sex wasn't just a perfunctory act to have kids. It was passionate and playful and so good I couldn't think straight. It made me question everything I'd ever done with Val. Sex with her had been... awkward. I had no idea what I was doing, and I was anxious the entire time. Val had refused to have sex until after we were married, and then it was only every so often to try and have a baby. I never had a chance to explore or try new things with her. Maybe if I had, I would've eventually realized I was more into having sex with men than with women.

That little revelation hit me while I was on my lunch break at work. With Val, I never argued about trying different things during sex. Why bother when I knew she'd say no and it wasn't really enjoyable enough for me to push anyway? I thought maybe it was me. That I didn't have the sex drive that normal guys did, but the time I was spending with Hendrix was proving that very wrong.

I couldn't keep my hands off him. He couldn't come over every night, he had part-time jobs and finding a new guitarist to contend with, but he came over a few times a week. We hadn't gone all the way yet, but I was now very familiar with hand jobs,

frotting, and blowjobs. And when he was gone, I craved more. I was jerking off way more than I ever had in the past to deal with my raging libido, my mind almost constantly on Hendrix and sex.

And now I was getting hard at work. I was glad I was the only person in the breakroom because it was just embarrassing how often my mind strayed to the last time Hendrix came to visit. Which, again, never happened with Val. The most I thought about sex before was wondering if that time was enough to get her pregnant.

It was a little confusing. Surely I would've noticed I was into men before now. I was in my thirties. It wasn't like I was born under a rock. I knew about same-sex relationships when I was younger. I just never thought much about it. My parents didn't talk to me about relationships outside of one five minute safe sex talk in high school. Their opinions were more traditional from what I knew of them. I never really asked about their thoughts on same-sex relationships. Honestly, they never gave their opinion on any relationship. Not even my relationship with Val.

Staring off into space, trying to figure out how I could be into men after only ever looking at women, I wasn't aware that someone came to join me until they plopped into the seat next to me. I jumped, blinking rapidly, and Henry shot me a sheepish grin.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I hate eating lunch alone. Mind if I join you?"

It was a little late to ask, but I didn't say that. That seemed rude. I nodded instead, tipping my head at him. Henry was the one who set me up on the blind date. He never asked what my sexual orientation was, and he didn't blink at my acceptance of his offer. Maybe he would have more knowledge than I would. It felt awkward to ask at work, but I didn't know who else to ask.

"Um... Can I ask you a question?"

He popped open his lunch, spearing his fork into the pasta salad. “Sure? Unless it's work related. I prefer to separate work from break times. Helps keep me from burning out.”

That was fair. I did the same thing. I didn't bring work home with me either if I could help it. Once I was done for the day, I liked to clear my head and start fresh the next morning.

“No, this is more... personal.”

Henry looked surprised, which again, was fair, since I didn't really interact much with people at work. Mostly because I heard Val's voice in my head, demanding my next promotion or a bonus from work. She wouldn't appreciate me making friends when I could be working to better our lives together. The habit to overwork still stuck with me and I was only just starting to do things for me a year after our divorce.



“Sure, shoot. What’s up?”

“I, uh...” I wasn’t entirely sure how to frame my question and I considered taking it back, but I already started the conversation. “I was wondering if you thought it was possible for someone not to realize they were gay until they were in their thirties?”

My face flushed as his eyebrows quirked. This was a stupid idea. I could have just looked it up online. Though that lacked any genuine appeal, since I wasn’t sure what articles were real or made up. I wished I had friends I was more comfortable asking, but aside from Hendrix, there wasn’t anyone I felt I could talk to. And I didn’t want to ask him. It was embarrassing enough to admit I’d never been with anyone but Val.

To his credit, Henry didn’t look weirded out or judgmental. He pondered the question, his head tipped slightly and his eyes narrowed at the wall.

“I mean, it’s always possible. Some people are sheltered or uneducated with regards to different types or relationships. Then they become adults and realize there’s something more out there than what they’re used to and it can be a shock to the system. Really, sexuality isn’t black and white. It’s a spectrum, kind of like gender. You can be bisexual, with a heavy preference towards one gender but still interested in another. You can like both genders equally. You can be pansexual and open to all gender identities. It really just depends on you. And until a person explores their options, it wouldn’t really be surprising that they didn’t figure out their preferences until later.”

“A-Are you...?”

He lifted his shoulder. “I’d say I fall under 90% straight. I’ve got a preference for women, but I don’t think I’d ever fully discount men. I like to keep my options open.” He studied me, raising his eyebrows. “I take it you’re questioning your sexuality?”

Frowning, I looked down at my mostly finished lunch. He was being kind, and I was curious about exploring the whole spectrum idea, but I was still embarrassed that I didn't figure any of this out sooner.

Henry’s hand rested lightly on my forearm. “Hey. There’s no judgment from me. If you didn’t know before now, then there’s nothing wrong with that. There’s no age limit for knowing what you’re into.”

Clearing my throat, I nodded my head slightly. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

He gave my arm a squeeze before releasing me and turning back to his lunch. “No problem. I’m glad you felt comfortable talking to me about this. I try to portray myself as an ally, but I didn’t want to assume your sexuality either way. You let me set you up with Tyrese a few months back, but I didn’t know if you were just being polite or not. Kinda felt like you went along with it because I was whining and you didn’t want to make things awkward.”

The reminder of my one other date with a man made me wince. That date had been beyond awkward. I wouldn’t have said yes if I wasn’t curious, but it was mostly forced conversation and awkward tension. Nothing at all like what I experienced with Hendrix.

“Oh god, you were just being nice, weren’t you?” Henry whimpered.

I shook my head quickly. “No. Well, I mean kind of. I wasn’t really comfortable with the idea of a blind date, but I was also curious. I went because I wanted to see if I

could figure things out on my own. To say I failed miserably would be an understatement.”

“Yeah, Tyrese told me the date wasn’t great. He’s a nice guy, but if there were no sparks, then that probably didn’t help answer your questions, huh? What tipped the scales, if you don’t mind me asking?”

My face flushed as Hendrix on stage popped into my head. That first concert had been an eye opener. Instant attraction, full-blown crush in seconds, and my first time touching myself at the thought of a man when I got home later that night.

Henry’s eyes lit up, and he practically bounced in his seat. “Are you seeing someone? Is that what made you start questioning things?”

My cheeks burned hotter, and I considered lying and saying my lunch was over to escape. I couldn’t do that, though. Henry was being kind, and I didn’t want to offend him after he was nice enough to have an honest conversation with me.

“I, uh... Yes. I’m seeing someone.”

“And I’m guessing it’s going well?” he grinned, waggling his eyebrows.

Thankfully, before I had to answer that question, someone else pushed into the room. Henry lifted his chin in greeting before swinging back to me, his voice low.

“I wanna hear about it later. We should hang out sometime. It’s hard to make friends in this stuffy office and my work wife bailed for a better offer. I need a new work bestie.”

As awkward as the conversation had been, I appreciated his help, and I liked the idea of having a friend at work. We exchanged numbers, and I went back to my desk with

a smile on my face.

I couldn't help but think Hendrix had a lot to do with the changes in my life. I was making friends because of him, exploring the city on our dates, and truly enjoying myself for the first time in a long time. Usually, the only time I could say I was having fun was with Sophie. I liked the changes, and I contemplated a way to thank him for drawing me out of my shell a little. Even if we didn't last forever, I would appreciate the efforts he made. He deserved a little recognition for that.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### HENDRIX

We'd met with seven potential new guitarists already and still hadn't found one that fit yet. I worked hard in my free time to master guitar and vocals, but even I could admit I struggled. My guitar skills were more for keeping rhythm than all out leading. We needed someone new to round out the music better.

It was frustrating, to say the very least. I even considered for a minute asking my dad for help, but I squashed that down the minute it crossed my mind. Dad was a decent guitar player, but he wasn't serious. He was flaky and wouldn't want to play anything that didn't fit him completely. I wasn't going to even pretend that was an option.

"Thanks for coming. We'll let you know."

The guy who came to meet us, a quiet gargoyle named Aldrik, nodded his head politely and followed Laz out the door. After he was gone, we all let out heavy sighs, and I sank against the cushions of the couch.

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“That was a no, right?” Duncan murmured, his face pressed into the pillows of the couch.

“That was a no,” I agreed. “He’s alright, but too shy. And his guitar skills need some work.”

“He was better than that asshole from before,” Ruby growled. The last interview we had was a cocky vamp who thought he was better than all of us. It felt a little like he thought this was an interview for us instead of for him. And he wasn’t even that good.

Laz dropped onto the couch next to Ruby, sinking low into his seat. “Any chance Artie can play guitar? He seems to be our saving grace lately.”

A smile bloomed across my face before I could stop it. Art really was worth his weight in gold. Since we were so busy with interviews, Art was calling around to some studios for us to find an opening that wouldn’t cost us an entire month’s rent. He started meeting us before shows, bringing us drinks and snacks so we didn’t have to rush around, and he figured out our schedules so we had good times for interviews. I wanted to handcuff that man to me so he’d never get away.

“Not that I know of. I can ask tomorrow.”

When I met Art after the show the night before, he asked me if I wanted to come spend time with him and Sophie on the weekend. She’d been trying to make friends with a paranormal boy at school and she had questions Art didn’t know how to answer. It felt good that he was asking for my help and I looked forward to seeing Sophie again. It meant I had to pretend to just be friends with Art for a day, but I

could handle that. As long as I got to spend time with him, I was happy.

Ruby let out a frustrated groan and shoved to her feet. “Well, I’m gonna go shower and get ready. I’ve got a date tonight. Hopefully, it’ll turn out better than that interview.”

She stalked off, and Laz watched her go with a heartbroken look on his face. Duncan muttered something about seekingspells for a good guitarist and headed off for his room, leaving me and Laz alone. Laz sighed dejectedly.

“Hey, Hen? I think... I’m ready to go to the club.”

Relief flooded me, and I smiled at him. “Yeah? That’s great.”

His brows furrowed. He clearly didn’t agree with me, but I could see how run down he was. He needed this. I was a little worried he’d chicken out, and his eyes kept straying toward the loft where Ruby was grabbing her things for her shower.

“Want me to come with you? Wingman it up?”

When Ruby disappeared into the bathroom, he nodded. “Yeah. My cousin said I was always welcome. I’ll text him about bringing a guest. Are you staying the night at Artie’s tomorrow?”

“Nah. Sophie’s gonna be there, and we gotta play friends for the day. Art’s not ready to introduce me as something more yet.”

It took some work for me to convince him I wasn’t offended by that. I had to point out that I was a kid of divorced parents for him to get that I understood. No one was going to judge him for being cautious. Introducing me as his boyfriend would suggest to Sophie that we were a permanent thing and neither of us were there yet. I liked

dating him and I wanted to spend more time with him, but I didn't want to say forever when we'd only been dating a few weeks. Granted, the idea of not being with him made me want to break things, but we were still in the honeymoon phase. I'd seen what happened when couples went all in too fast. My parents were a prime example of that drama. I wasn't going to push Art for more right now.

“Think you'd be willing to meet me tomorrow? I'd wait longer but...”

But he was starving. Pushing to my feet, I moved to sit next to him and gripped his shoulder. “I get it. We'll go tomorrow. We could even go tonight if you wanted.”

“No, I need to let my cousin know you're coming first. Tomorrow is fine.” His eyes strayed towards the bathroom again. “I'm... I'm gonna go call him now. The reception in here sucks, so I'll be on the roof.”

That was a lie, the reception was fine. I got the feeling he didn't want to see Ruby dressed up for her date. He'd hide on the roof until she was gone and I'd spend the rest of the night comforting him. I really hoped this worked, because I was worried about him.

I showed up at Art's house bright and early Saturday morning. Art said Sophie rose with the sun and I wanted her to like me, so I brought donuts for everyone and coffee for me and Art. Sophie opened the door when I knocked, beaming at me when she saw the box in my hand.

“Daddy! He brought donuts!”

Art poked his head out of the kitchen, surprise written on his face. Both he and Sophie were still in their pjs, Art's hair adorably disheveled. He normally looked so put together, unless we were fooling around. I pushed the reminder out of my head before it could take and have embarrassing consequences in front of a little kid.

“Hey, I wasn’t expecting you so early,” Art said as he came to join us. He didn’t look upset about me being here, a teasing grin on his face when he added, “I thought rock stars slept until noon.”

Chuckling, I shrugged my shoulders. “Had some inspiration this morning, so I was up early.”

That was putting it lightly. I was pouring out music like no one’s business lately. The band was excited, it’d been a while since I was this inspired, and I left the notes I took this morning with them before I left to meet my muse. There was no question that the reason I was so inspired was because of Art. He brought back my excitement and joy and I looked forward to every moment I spent with him, knowing it’d inspire something later that night.

Art smiled brightly, nudging Sophie out of the way so I could come inside. “Really? That’s exciting. When do I get to hear it?”

“It’s still too raw. I’ll show you later.”

Sophie scrunched her nose adorably. “Music can be raw? Like cooking?”

I snorted, following her and Art into the kitchen so I could put the food down. “Sort of. I call it raw because it’s unfinished. The entire song doesn’t just pop into my head the minute I think of it. I gotta work it out and make sure it sounds good. Sometimes it sounds good in my head, but when I sing it out loud, it’s not as great as I thought. It’s a process, kind of like cooking, I guess. And my bandmates help a lot.”



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We all sat at the little table in the kitchen, and I passed out donuts for each of us. When I put the pink one covered in sprinkles in front of Sophie, she beamed at me, and I felt like I just conquered the world. She really was the cutest kid on the planet.

“So, your dad told me there’s a new paranormal at your school?”

Sophie nodded, wiping the frosting off her nose with a napkin. “His name is Dante. He’s in the same grade as me.”

It was surprising that little kids were being integrated into human school systems. I thought it would take longer since humans didn’t always welcome us. Kids could be cruel sometimes, and I would’ve been worried about subjecting my kids to an uncertain environment like that. Not that I ever thought I’d have kids. I wasn’t against them, but I didn’t really have the lifestyle for them.

“What kind of paranormal?”

She frowned, setting her donut down. “He looks like you, but I don’t know if there are more that look alike. He’s the first paranormal in our school.”

Art shook his head. “No, he isn’t. He’s just the first one who can’t blend in. I got a letter from the school when the paranormal children started attending. There were five, I think, and they all started on different days to not overwhelm the students.”

“As for him looking like me, he’s probably a demon. There aren’t many other paranormals who look similar to us. Gargoyles, maybe, but their skin is gray and they are a little broader built. And not all of them have horns. The girls don’t. But all

demons have horns, boys and girls,” I added.

Sophie pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Do demons have bad tempers? He’s kind of grouchy and sometimes he says not nice things.”

That made Art straighten, worry in his expression. He wasn’t discriminatory against paranormals, but I could tell just by his face that he’d go to war for his daughter. I answered her question, hoping to put him a little more at ease.

“Sometimes, yeah. But that’s true for humans too. If I were him, I’d be defensive, being surrounded by so many people that weren’t like me. It’d be scary, for sure.”

“You don’t have to force a friendship, Sophie,” Art interjected. “If he’s not being nice, then don’t play with him.”

I winced internally. He was right that Sophie shouldn’t force herself around mean kids, but I didn’t want her to write this kid off just because he was defensive, either. It’d be terrifying to stand out like that in a new school. Isolating him wasn’t going to help.

Sophie seemed to agree with me because she shook her head. “He looks sad sometimes. I don’t want him to be lonely.” She turned back to me. “Is there a way demons make friends?”

“Uh... Nothing too different, I guess.” I paused, thinking about how I met my friends. My eyes lit up. “Oh! Demon children exchange trinkets to make friends. I forgot about that. I loved marbles when I was a kid and I gave one to each of my friends when we met. They each gave me back something they loved, too. My friend Mal liked cooking even as a kid, so he brought me a cupcake he made with his dad. I’m not sure if kids still do that now, but it’s worth a shot.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### ARTHUR

Listening to Sophie and Hendrix talk about ways to make friends with the demon boy at school was heartwarming. It made me nervous when Sophie said the boy wasn't very nice, but Hendrix made a good point when he said the boy was probably scared and lashing out. And I loved that Sophie cared enough to keep trying. She promised to be safe about it and I didn't see anything wrong with her giving him a little trinket to try and break the ice.

Since most of Sophie's time was spent studying, she didn't have a ton of toys. There were more here than at her mom's house. She pondered it for a while before picking out a little stuffed animal that she liked and was happy to share. I made sure she put it in the bottom of her backpack, knowing Val would take it away if she found it. After breakfast was through and Sophie had a plan to make a new friend, she and I got dressed for the day. We were going to go to the park with Hendrix, but the weather wasn't cooperating and it started to rain right as we were headed out the door. Instead, Sophie dragged me into the living room, asking if we could practice our dance together.

"You dance?" Hendrix asked from his spot on the couch.

My face flushed, and I grimaced. "Sophie wanted to learn some popular Kpop dances, but she didn't want to do it alone. I think it's better if we wait until tomorrow and—"

"Please, daddy! I can't practice at Mom's house and I really want to show some friends at school. Please please please!"

She gave me her biggest puppy dog eyes, her hands clasped together tightly. That

look could sway military generals. I wanted to give in, but it was too embarrassing with Hendrix in the room. I shot him a pleading look, hoping he'd distract her somehow, but Hendrix was on Sophie's side.

"I want to see the dance, Art. I promise, I won't laugh."

He said that, but his eyes were already dancing and he had to twist his mouth to hide his grin. The embarrassment was overwhelming, but when my eyes strayed to Sophie's backpack by the front door, a reminder that I only got to spend so much time with her, I gave in.

"Okay..."

"Yay!" She jumped and clapped her hands, bouncing around me like a puppy as I pulled up the song. I'd put on a button up to look nice for Hendrix, but I shed it to make my movement a little easier. I was wearing an undershirt, so it was fine. Hendrix raised his eyebrow at me, a smirk tugging at his lips. I did my best to ignore him, moving to stand next to Sophie. I shot her one last pleading look.

"Are you sure we can't just do something else? Anything else?"

"No! You're good at it, Daddy. Don't be shy."

Resigned to my fate, I pressed play and looked anywhere but at Hendrix as I danced with my daughter. When she first showed interest in dance, she was only five. Val adamantly refused, saying Sophie had better things to be focused on. She was already reading and doing math high above her grade level, but Val refused to listen. I'll admit, I was too much of a coward to argue with her about it. It wasn't until our divorce that I felt comfortable enough to let Sophie try dancing. She was seven and more easily embarrassed than she was at five, so I did it with her so she wouldn't be afraid. I was embarrassed too, the dances she picked weren't meant for adult males in

their thirties, but I pushed past that because of the joy on Sophie's face. Now we practiced together every weekend, and I loved having that connection with her.

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My face was on fire by the time we finished, and I avoided Hendrix's eyeline to hide my embarrassment. I didn't want Sophie to think I didn't love our little hobby together, but doing that kind of thing in front of the man I was dating was a little mortifying.

Hendrix clapped, and I finally peeked over at him, watching him beaming at Sophie as she hovered in front of him. She looked so proud of herself, which was exactly why I started doing this with her. I pushed past some of the embarrassment, scooping her up when she came to hug me.

"Good job, sweetheart. You've improved a lot. I think your friends will love it."

"You think so? I really want to dance with them."

I nodded solemnly. "Do what makes you happy. I'm sure your friends will have fun dancing with you."

"Can I use your computer? I want to see what it looks like with more people."

"For a little while," I agreed, setting her on her feet. She darted off to my home office, which was across the hall from my bedroom. It gave us a moment of privacy and Hendrix took advantage, wrapping himself around me from behind.

"That was the cutest thing I've ever seen. You're a good dancer, babe."

I blushed, staring at the wall in front of me to avoid his eyeline. "It's just for her. She was too embarrassed to do it alone, even though I could tell she really wanted to. I'd

never do that in public. I didn't think I'd ever do it in front of anyone but Sophie."

He hummed, pressing a kiss to the side of my neck. "There's lots of things that you didn't think you'd do before you met me. I love that you trust me enough to share your firsts."

There was no judgment, no teasing. His compliments seemed genuine, and when I finally turned to face him, his smile was soft and encouraging. And a little heated. Okay, a lot heated.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

A slow grin overtook his face, and his voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Can't help it. If you shake your ass in front of me, I'm gonna get ideas in my head. There are a few firsts you haven't done yet."

I sucked in a sharp breath, jerking my gaze to his. I was interested in trying more things with him, but I was too embarrassed to ask. I was waiting for him to take the lead. I didn't want to appear uninterested, though.

"I, uh... When—"

"Daddy! There's another dance I want to learn!"

I grimaced. Now was not the time to talk about sex. I stepped away from Hendrix right as she burst into the room, grabbing my hand to drag me to my office. Hendrix followed behind us, a low chuckle in his throat. I felt the tips of my ears burning and I was glad for the distraction when Sophie pushed me into my office chair and climbed into my lap to show me the video she found.

If I thought the dance we learned before was embarrassing, this one was even more

so. It was very cutesy and even had a move where they used their hands as bunny ears and hopped around. I could see why Sophie would like it, but I wanted to cringe at the thought of doing it myself.

“I don’t know, Sophie...”

She twisted around, an already heartbroken look on her face. “Why not? It looks like fun. Please?”

There were a few things that my ex wife wasn’t wrong about. She always said I didn’t have a backbone, especially when it came to Sophie. I hated telling her no. Luckily, Hendrix came to my rescue in the best way possible.

“Hey, can you and I learn it together? I think it looks like fun. And your dad probably has to make lunch soon, right?”

Tipping her head back, she looked curiously at Hendrix. “You know how to dance?”

He shrugged, not a hint of embarrassment on his face. “I mean, I enjoy dancing at a club, but I’ve never learned something like that before. It looks fun. And I know how to perform like I’m in front of an audience.”

Her eyes lit up, and Sophie beamed at him. “Okay! Daddy, can you put the video on the TV so we can practice?”

Shooting Hendrix a grateful smile, I nodded. “Yeah, sweetheart. I’ll do that.”

As she bounced out of the room, heading downstairs, Hendrix leaned over my seat and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’ve got you, babe. After years of being up on stage, I don’t get embarrassed easily.”



“Thank you. I don’t want her to get embarrassed either, but it’s hard...”

He hummed, taking my hand and pulling me out of my seat. “I get it. And it’s not like it’s a hardship for me to spend time with Sophie. You made a great kid. Just promise me you’ll reward me later.”

He winked at me to make his request clear and I nearly tripped over my feet, arousal zipping up my spine. Whatever he wanted as a reward, I’d give him. Because when it came to him, his rewards were rewards for me too.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#### HENDRIX

Dancing around with Sophie was hilariously fun. She was bossy, correcting me and making us do the same parts over and over, but she was also heavy-handed with the praise and very encouraging. She balanced both aspects really well.

Dropping heavily onto the couch, I let out a breath. “You are going to rule the world one day, kid.”

She giggled, tugging on my hands. “It’s not time to stop yet! We only learned the first half!”

Damn, this kid was gonna run me ragged. I’d be dead on my feet when I joined Laz at the club tonight if I didn’t catch a break. Luckily, Art was close by and when he saw how beat I was, he swept in to save me.

“Alright, break time. Sophie, let the poor musician breathe. Come join me in the kitchen and we’ll make a snack.”

“You’re a saint,” I breathed as he nudged Sophie out of the room. Art snorted.

“Me? You’ve been dancing with her for hours. I would’ve tapped out long before now.”

“That was an option?” I queried.

Art snickered, resting his hand on my shoulder. “Yes. She’s got nine-year-old energy. If I need to, I’ll distract her with a new game or take her out to the park or something. If I don’t, she won’t stop.” His smile softened. “You’re really great with her.”

I hummed, soaking in his praise. “It’s nothing. Dealing with Felix is more exhausting than dealing with Sophie.”

At least, it used to be. I wanted to buy Tyler a present for diverting Felix’s attention. He used to cause trouble with all of us. Now he saves it for his mate.

“Why don’t you take a rest? We’ll make some snacks and come join you. Are... Are you staying for dinner?”

“If you’ll have me. I can’t stay too late, though. I promised Laz I’d go to the club tonight. He needs to feed, but he’s been hooked on someone and needs a wingman.”

He hummed, patting me on the shoulder. “Ruby, right?”

Blinking a few times, I spun around to look at him, but he was already heading for the kitchen to help Sophie. I debated waiting until he got back, but curiosity got the better of me and I followed him into the kitchen.

“How’d you know that?”

“I see the way he looks at her,” he shrugged. “I’m also pretty sure she pretends she doesn’t notice because she doesn’t feel the same way. It must be hard for the both of them since they work together. You think a club will help?”

My gaze dropped to Sophie, who was pulling fruit out of the fridge. I couldn’t tell Art what kind of club it was with Sophie around, but I didn’t want to sneak around behind his back either. I tried to skirt it instead, being as vague as possible.

“He’s been neglecting his... self care. And this club is meant for people like him to get... self care. I’m worried about him, so I said I’d go with to make sure he took care of himself.”

Art knew what kind of paranormals the band had, so he knew what self care was referring to. His eyebrows drew tightly together, and I saw the worry cross his face.

“Is it just for people like him?”

I wasn’t about to lie to him, so I shook my head. “No. Some people go to... help with the self care. Some go just to watch. I want to make sure he... gets some help.”

Damn, this was difficult. I’d never had to censor myself before. And I didn’t think I was doing a good job about it. Sophie was watching us now, a confused look on her face. Hopefully, she didn’t catch my drift.

“What’s self care?”

Dammit.

Art answered swiftly before I could put my foot farther into my mouth. “It’s how it sounds, sweetheart. Taking care of yourself. Laz hasn’t been doing a good job taking care of his needs, so Hendrix is going to take him somewhere that he can do that.”

“What kind of needs?”

As smooth as silk, Art answered again without hesitation. “Whatever needs that he hasn’t dealt with. There are the basics, like taking the time to shower, eat, and sleep. Or caring for your mind, just like I tell you that you need breaks from working so your mind can rest. Self care for the body, like getting the exercise your body requires. All of that is important to live a healthy and balanced life.”

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Damn. Art had the parenting thing down pat. He gave Sophie the answers she needed without making things awkward like I had. She nodded her head, completely appeased by his answer, and joined him at the counter to carefully slice fruit with him. When I looked at Art, he smiled softly at me.

“I’m glad Laz has a friend like you to help him. Is he going to be okay?”

I nodded. “Should be. It’s been a while since he’s done anything to take care of himself, but he realized he couldn’t put it off anymore and asked me to wingman for him.”

“And will you be taking part?” There was a hint of unease in the question, and I could tell he was worried about my response. I couldn’t do a lot to comfort him with Sophie standing right there, so I placed my hand on his forearm instead of holding him like I wanted to.

“No. I’m just going to support him. I’ve got no complaints about my self care right now,” I winked subtly. That made Art blush, and he ducked his head, focusing instead on making the snacks.

I wasn’t lying to him. Between hanging out with the band and spending time with him, I got everything I needed. Yeah, lately sleep has been elusive, but I was never going to complain about being inspired. Art and the joy he brought into my life covered everything else. Hopefully soon I’d finish the song we were working on and be able to tell him exactly what he meant to me.

After dinner with Art and Sophie, I headed home to meet Laz. He looked like he had

a date with the gallows instead of a night of fun ahead of him, but at least he put effort into his outfit.

“You look good, man. Gimme a minute to change and we’ll head out.”

He nodded, forcing a smile that was more of a grimace. I jogged upstairs to change, not really paying attention to my outfit. I wasn’t going to participate after all. I just wanted to be there for my friend.

I came downstairs right as Ruby and Duncan got home, and they looked at us curiously.

“You two going out?”

Laz looked like he wanted to swallow tacks before he’d admit where he was going, so I answered for him.

“Yep. Heading to Laz’s cousin’s club to check it out. Don’t wait up.”

Duncan whined about not being invited, but I ignored him, steering Laz towards the door. When he passed by Ruby, she offered him a smile, patting his shoulder.

“You look good. Have fun.”

I saw the flicker of hope cross Laz’s face, and I kind of wished I could tell Ruby not to be so nice to him, but I wasn’t going to do that. I wanted them to be friends. We were in this for the long run, but I didn’t want to encourage Laz’s crush, either.

“You staying in tonight?” I queried.

Ruby shook her head. “Got another date. Last one went really well. Duncan and I

grabbed some food first, but I'm heading out soon. Just gotta get ready."

There. That was a nicely drawn line. Laz looked dejected, but I got the feeling Art was right when he said Ruby was aware of his crush and purposefully ignoring it. She didn't want to make things awkward, but she was putting up all the signs to tell him she wasn't interested. It would hurt him now, but eventually he'd get over it.

Leading him outside, I headed for his car. Since I'd never been to the place before, I couldn't teleport us. Laz was too upset to drive, so I shoved him into the passenger seat and climbed behind the wheel. The drive was quiet and tense, and I knew he'd never do anything about getting his needs met if he was this dejected. I nudged his arm, reminding him I was there for him.

"I know it sucks, man, but this is for the best. Who knows? You might meet someone tonight who will crank your engine."

He grimaced, finally giving me his attention. "Who the hell taught you to say shit like that?"

I barked out a laugh, shrugging my shoulders. "I'll let you guess, but you won't have to try that hard."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't quote your dad. He's not the person anyone should be quoting."

True. My dad wasn't a bad guy, but maybe my mom should've thought twice about having a kid with that one. He wasn't exactly a good influence.

"Okay, well, how about Art then? He said in order to live healthy, you needed to practice self care. Which includes meeting your body's needs. You need this, Laz. You're starving yourself for a woman who isn't interested."

He sighed, nodding slowly. “I know. You told him you were coming?”

“Yeah. I didn't want him to think I was sneaking around on him.”

“That’s good,” Laz agreed. “He’s a good guy. I’m glad things are going well with you two.”

I fought back a laugh. “Man, could you say that with a little less dejection in your voice? You’re making me feel bad.”



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A smile flickered across his face, and when he shook his head, his tone was teasing. “Nah. I never thought I’d be single longer than you. It’s depressing. Next thing I know, Duncan will be getting married and I’ll still be going to places like this.”

He gestured out the window as we pulled into the parking lot of the club. It was a nondescript building, with no real indication on the outside about what was going on inside. Unlike most clubs, this one didn't have a long line in front of it. If you weren't invited by a member and cleared by the management, you weren't allowed in. Not just anyone could walk into this place. It discouraged paranormal chasers and people just looking to gawk. This place was legit, and hopefully Laz would find someone who pulled his attention off of Ruby.

“None of that forever alone shit. We’re gonna go inside, say hello to your cousin, and feel the place out. And you’re going to be open-minded. If you get even the slightest urge to join someone, I want you to take it and run with it. Alright?”

I could see the hesitation on his face, but I wasn't going to let this go. He needed to get over Ruby. I didn't want our band breaking up because he couldn't let her go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### HENDRIX

When you first entered the club, there was a little reception area with a lone receptionist and a bouncer in front of the door. Laz's cousin put our names on the list, and once our IDs were checked, the bouncer let us pass with a polite nod. I put my hands on Laz's shoulders, leading him down the short hallway that spit us out in the

club proper. The lighting was dimmed, which I'd expected, and the place smelled like sweat and sex. A few weeks back, I would've been damn curious about a place like this. Now, though, all I could think about was Art. Would he want to come to a place like this? He said he didn't get to explore much with his ex. Maybe he had a few kinks he hadn't discovered yet. At least this place was legit enough that I probably wouldn't end up in the tabloids if I made it big one day. You couldn't even bring your phone into the place. And unless you offered up that information, your name and who you were was kept anonymous to everyone but management.

There wasn't much action in the main room, which was situated like a lounge where people could meet and see if they were compatible to go explore the other rooms. Laz's cousin was seated at the bar, and when I led Laz over to him, he smiled. That smile disappeared when Laz got close, though.

"Holy shit."

I nodded in agreement. "I know. It took a hell of a lot of work to get him here."

Laz's cousin wasn't a large man, more lean and toned. He had Laz's black hair and violet eyes, but that's where the similarities ended. Laz looked like a rocker with his leather jacket and piercings. Laz's cousin was more polished, in a nice suit and tie. He studied his cousin, worry and determination clear on his face, before turning to me and offering me his hand.

"I'm Atherton. Thanks for bringing him. If I'd known it was that bad, I would've dragged him here myself. Let me show you guys around and then we'll find somewhere for him to join in."

Laz opened his mouth to protest, he'd only wanted to watch and glean the sexual energy from the people nearby, but Atherton shot him a dark look that shut him up pretty quick.

“You can either find someone to give you what you need, or I can contact the family. Your choice.”

Laz looked horrified at the thought, and my shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

“That’s some freaking leverage,” I murmured, trying and failing to hide my grin. Atherton didn’t look the least bit ashamed about it, and he winked at me when he noticed me trying not to laugh.

“What about you? Will you be joining in tonight?”

There was definite interest in the way he studied me, and while flattering, I wasn’t the kind of guy to sneak around while I was dating. I liked to focus on my partner and give them all the attention.

“Nah. I’m taken. I’m just here for Laz.”

“Well, I appreciate that. And if you change your mind, I’m around. Next time, bring your partner. We cater to all types here.”

That probably wouldn’t happen for a while. Art was still exploring the basics, and we had a lot to cover before I introduced kink. Still, it was fun to think about as Atherton showed us the different rooms. The one that was almost pitch black caught Laz’s interest, and I shot Atherton a look when he failed to notice. He eyed his cousin and dipped his chin once, taking the lead and dragging him into the room while I waited outside. Observers stayed outside the rooms and watched through the windows. If you went inside, there was the general idea that you wanted to join. I wasn’t going to watch my friend have sex, though. I was a good wingman, but not that good. Instead, I headed back to the lounge and stopped at the bar for a drink.

“Well, well, well... Trouble in paradise already?”

Of fucking course. Of all the places to run into our angry ex-lead guitar, it just had to be here. The bartender shot me a questioning look as they put my drink down in front of me, and I rolled my eyes in response. They were being kind by checking in, but I didn't need protection from Zion.

Turning around and leaning against the bar, I gave Zion a flat look. “Didn't expect to find you here, man.”

He had his arms tossed around two humans, his posture cocky and smug. “Just enjoying a night out before I meet with my new bandmates. We've got a record deal with the new label, and we start working tomorrow.”

I knew he wanted me to feel jealous, but I only really felt pity for him. Art warned him about that contract. He was going to be stuck with his poor decisions now. And I didn't feel an ounce of regret for letting him walk away.

“Good for you. I wish you luck and all that.”

His smile faltered. He didn't like that I wasn't taking the bait and giving him the reaction he wanted. He pushed, jerking his chin at me.

“What about you? Find a label your boy toy is happy with yet? Or is he still holding you back? Is that why you're here tonight?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What's it to you?”

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One of the girls looked at me curiously, her interest piquing the longer she studied me. “Are you in a band, too?”

“Sure am, sweetheart. Zion here left our band a few weeks back.”

She seemed interested in me, and I was going to tell her I wasn’t available, but Zion didn’t take too kindly to her attention being off him. His grip tightened on her and he growled.

“Left for better options. Hen was too busy screwing the roadies to see a good deal when it was right in front of him. You don’t want to be slumming it with a guy like him.”

The woman didn’t look happy about him getting all possessive. She tried to shrug him off, scowling up at him.

“Maybe I do. You don’t get to—”

Zion snarled, some of the werewolf coming out to play as he glared down at her. “You’re with me tonight. You wanna give him my sloppy seconds, you can find him at Club Envy on Thursdays with all the other shit bands.”

“Let go,” she demanded, struggling against him.

I was going to step in, but before I could, the bartender let out a shrill whistle. Two bouncers, dressed exactly like the one at the door, appeared out of nowhere, turning to face Zion when the bartender indicated to him.

“He’s breaking the rules. He needs to leave.”

Zion looked incredulous, immediately releasing the women. “The hell I am! We had a deal!”

The bartender shook his head. “That’s not how things work here. They can withdraw consent at any time. If you can’t respect that, then you need to leave.”

Zion still looked pissed, but facing down two gargoyles, a pissed off bartender, and me, he knew he didn’t stand a chance. He shot me a scathing look and spun on his heel, marching towards the exit with the gargoyles following behind him. The women gave the bartender grateful smiles.

“Thank you.”

He dipped his chin, his dark expression lightening to a soft smile. “All good. If you ever have trouble like that again, just let me know. We take the safety of our patrons very seriously here.”

They both nodded. Luckily, I didn’t have to fight off any advances from them. Probably still shaken up from their interaction with Zion, they both decided to head home for the night. The bartender got a bouncer to follow them out, making sure they got to their car safely, before turning back to me.

“You good?”

I snorted. “Yeah. He’s just pissed because I wouldn’t let the band sign the world’s worst contract. He dropped us to sign himself up. He’ll regret that later.”

The man nodded, leaning across the bar to shake my hand. “Finn.”

“Hendrix.”

He pursed his lips, raising his eyebrows slowly. “Your name is Hendrix... and you play in a band... Really?”

A grin overtook my face, and I nodded. “Yeah, my dad was big on human bands when I was born. He’s a musician himself and he failed to mention to my mom where he got the name from.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Man, you really only had one career path with a name like that.”

Probably true. I didn’t hate it. Humans got a kick out of it, and it made it easy to remember my name. I sat with the bartender, chatting for a while, until Atherton came to join us. He looked a little disheveled, but he had a smile on his face.

“Where’s Laz?”

“Where he needs to be,” he replied. “He’s good now. He was reluctant, but with a little encouragement, he found some people to play with. He might be a while.”

“He needs it,” I agreed. I didn’t need to stick around and wait for him now that he was being taken care of. I handed Atherton his keys. “Thanks for helping out. I was worried he wouldn’t do anything other than watch.”

Atherton made a face. “What made him wait so long? It’s unlike him.”

I sighed heavily. “He’s in love with our drummer. She’s shown no interest in him and she’s got an intense no fraternizing rule, but he wouldn’t let go. She started seeing someone recently, and I think that was the kick in the pants he needed to finally come here.”

Atherton shook his head in exasperation. “Incubi aren’t meant for relationships. I’ve always told him this. Most of the family has.” I caught the longing on the bartender’s face when looking at Atherton, but he covered it up when Atherton spoke again. “Hopefully, he’ll have learned his lesson. Are you heading out?”



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“Yeah, I gotta keep searching for our new guitarist. Tell Laz I’ll see him at home?”

Atherton waved me off. “Enjoy your night. And feel free to contact me if you want to bring your partner next time. I’ll add them to the list.”

Waving at him, I stopped at the reception area long enough to grab my phone before I teleported home. Hopefully, with Lazon the mend, things would only get better from here. We've had enough bad news lately. We deserved a break.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

#### ARTHUR

My mind was on Hendrix and what he was up to at the club with Laz when I was tucking Sophie in. I trusted him when he said he was only going to help Laz, but it still felt weird that the guy I was seeing was at a sex club right now. He couldn’t outright say that’s where he was going in front of Sophie, but I got his point from context. Laz was an incubus. If he wasn’t taking care of himself, I had to assume that meant he wasn’t getting the energy he needed through sex. Laz was friendly with me when I was backstage with them, but I did agree that he looked tired lately. I brought him an energy drink before the last show and he looked like he hadn’t slept in a week.

“Daddy? Are you and Hendrix boyfriends?”

Surprised, I jerked my gaze up to Sophie. She was cuddled in her bed, surrounded by her stuffed animals, and watching me curiously.

“I-I, uh... W-Why do you ask, sweetheart?”

She shrugged. “Because you talk about him a lot. Mom talked about Lee a lot before he came to visit too, and he told me he’s her boyfriend.”

That was news to me. I didn’t realize Val was dating. Not that I had any say or any problem with it. It would be unfair of me to say she couldn’t while I was. I couldn’t even complain about the fact that I hadn’t met the man because she hadn’t met Hendrix, either. I’d need to fix that soon. I wanted to be open and honest with Val. If I kept things from her, she’d lash out later. I didn’t want her to take away my daughter just because I didn’t tell her I was seeing someone. I was a little uncertain about how she’d take me dating a man, though.

Sophie looked at me expectantly, and I knew I wasn’t going to get out of the conversation without answering her.

“Yes... We’ve gone on a few dates. Does that bother you?”

Like my parents, I never talked to Sophie about the different kinds of relationships in the world. Maybe that was wrong of me, but I thought she was too little to have that conversation before now. Luckily, she didn’t look bothered by it. She shook her head.

“No. Does that mean you and Hendrix are gonna get married?”

“It’s a little early to know that,” I confessed. It felt awkward talking to her about this, but I didn’t want to ignore the conversation completely like my parents had. “For most adults, they date for a while before they discuss marriage. To see if they’re compatible.”

“What’s that?”

Pursing my lips, I thought about how to explain it in a way she'd understand. "Well, when you first meet someone, you don't know everything about them, right?" I waited for her to nod before continuing. "Dating gives you a chance to get to know them to see if your personalities and interests match. You go out together, spend time together, and when you and that person are comfortable with each other, then you start talking about getting married. There's no rush to get married."

She frowned. "But Mom and Lee are already planning to get married."

Stunned, my eyebrows flew up. "She told you this?"

Sophie shook her head. "No. I heard them in the kitchen. Lee doesn't like it when I do that, but I didn't mean to. I was going to ask for a snack and I overheard them."

Val never mentioned seeing anyone, much less getting serious. I made a mental note to talk to her about it.

"Well, if your mom and Lee feel they're compatible, then that's probably why they're discussing it. Don't get ahead of yourself, though. Your mom and I talked about marriage pretty early in our relationship to make sure we were on the same page, but she and I dated a few years before getting married." But if I knew Val, if she was discussing it, she meant business. The only reason we postponed marriage was because we were both still in college at the time. If she'd had her way, we wouldn't have waited that long. "How about you wait for them to talk to you about it instead of listening to conversations you weren't invited into, okay? It's not polite to eavesdrop."

"Okay, daddy." She snuggled down into her bed, smiling when I dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Sleep tight, sweetheart."

After tucking her in, I headed to my office for a little while. I debated calling Val to ask her about her new boyfriend, but I didn't want Sophie to get in trouble for eavesdropping. I decided to wait, and bring up the fact that I was dating Val sometime soon. Maybe if I started the conversation, she'd tell me about her own boyfriend.

I thought it'd bother me, the idea of my ex wife with someone else. We weren't very compatible, but she was still my wife once. I probably should've been less surprised that my only issue with it was not knowing the man who would be spending time around my daughter. Maybe it had to do with the fact that Val and I were both seeing someone, so it didn't sting as much. But I also wondered if it was because I wasn't as invested in the marriage as I first thought. I loved Val, but I wasn't in love with her. I thought that came with time. But now that I had Hendrix, I realized Val and I were both just going through the motions. We dated a respectable amount of time, had a long, but not too long, engagement, got pregnant right away and followed the order that we both were supposed to follow. There was no passion, no excitement.

I wished I would've realized it sooner. Maybe I could've spared myself a little pain down the line. But if I had, I wouldn't have Sophie. I couldn't regret my marriage, not when I had her. And hopefully, one day far in the future, Sophie would find someone who made her as happy as Hendrix made me.

Thinking of him put a smile on my face, and I shot him a text before I remembered where he was headed tonight. I immediately assumed he would get back to me later and hoped I didn't come off as clingy or suspicious by texting him while I knew he was out. I was stressing about it when he replied to my text a few minutes later.

My heart jumped as I saw his reply, letting me know all was well. He didn't seem bothered by me texting him and he let me know he wouldn't have access to his phone once he was there, but that he'd text me right after. It was all very reassuring, and I felt myself relax. If I texted Val when she was out when we were married, she'd

always get furious with me and yell at me to leave her alone. I don't know why I expected the same thing to happen with Hendrix. He was nothing like Val, but I was glad that he didn't seem to have a problem reassuring me.

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Once that was over, I popped online to check on those searches I'd been doing earlier in the week. After talking to Henry, I felt better about accepting my sexuality, but I still did some research to confirm his theory. There was a lot out there about the sexuality spectrum, and stories to back it up. I was more receptive to people's accounts online now that I had confirmation that it was real. I scrolled through some pages, mostly out of curiosity, since I'd already answered most of my questions earlier in the week. I was about to shut down my computer and get ready for bed when I noticed an email in my inbox that I hadn't checked yet. I pulled it up, a smile overtaking my face when I realized what it was. My hand went to my phone automatically, wanting to talk to Hendrix, but then I remembered his phone was off.

This was big news, though, and he'd definitely want to hear it. I made a note to call him and share the good news with him and the band. Maybe I'd get a reward this time for pulling this off.

I wasn't willing to tell him over the phone and Hendrix was busy on Sunday with another interview, so we made plans to meet up Monday night. He and the band were going to practice together a bit, but he said he wanted me to join him and I thought it'd be fun to see them practice like that.

Hendrix didn't want me to have to drive at night, so he said he'd meet me at my office after work and we'd teleport back to his place. I still wasn't comfortable with flying, but Hendrix didn't take any offense. He did tease me for it, but I didn't mind so much. I liked that he was playful with me.

My eyes darted to the clock over and over and I launched out of my seat when it struck five. I had my own office after getting a promotion last year, but I had to pass

Henry's desk to leave, and he shot me a bewildered look as I darted past.

"Woah, Artie, where's the fire?"

"Can't talk, got a date. See you tomorrow!"

I heard him laugh, but I didn't stop to chat. I was too eager to see Hendrix. It felt nice that I had a friend who was interested in my life, though. I bounced on my toes while waiting for the elevator, willing the numbers to go faster when I rode it down. Hendrix was waiting for me out front, leaning against the wall beside the door. I actually almost ran past him before he called out to me with a laugh. Spinning around, I beamed at him. I had only seen him a few days ago, but I missed hearing him laugh.

"Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," he chuckled. "Got a date or something?"

He was teasing, so I went along with it, shrugging casually. "I mean, there was this really hot demon who's been hanging around. Might go see him."

Grabbing my tie, he dragged me closer, a grin on his face. "So you think I'm hot, huh?"

"The hottest," I murmured, my eyes dropping to his mouth. Aside from near the club, we'd never kissed in public before. Especially not this close to my office and people who knew me. I could see Hendrix hesitate, maybe worried I would want to hide him, but I wasn't going to pretend we weren't real just because people at the office didn't know I was gay. I crowded closer, soaking in the smell of his shampoo, and pressed my lips against his.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### HENDRIX

Art was just full of surprises. Every time I thought he'd hold back, or hesitate, he proved me wrong. When he put his mind to something, there was no stopping him. Including his relationship with me. I loved that about him. He didn't hide or pretend we were just friends in front of anyone but his daughter. And I knew he'd tell her when he felt like it was time. I latched onto him, keeping him against me, and showed him without words what it meant to me. The demon thing, the male thing, nothing fazed this guy. He deserved to know how awesome that made him.

Since it was still bright daylight and not the time to make out on the streets, Art reluctantly drew away before things could get too steamy. He hummed, leaning his forehead against mine for a second before straightening and readjusting his glasses.

"I've been thinking about doing that all day."

This guy was good for my ego. I tossed my arm around his shoulder, tucking him against my side.

"Then let's go somewhere we won't have an audience. I'm not done with you yet."

I figured Art would want to change before hanging out with the band, so I teleported us to his place first. At least, that was the excuse I was going with. Really, I wanted to get him alone. It'd been too many days since I touched him, and it was driving me nuts. I teleported us right into his living room, dragging his mouth back to mine the second he opened his eyes again.

"Wait. I've got news," Art murmured between kisses. I sighed, nipping his bottom lip in punishment before jerking my chin at him.



“Make it quick, I’m dying here.”

Man, the smile he gave me was something. So damn happy and eager. There wasn’t a hint of the nervous guy I’d first met standing in front of me. I almost wanted to pull out my phone and take a picture. I was considering it when his words finally filtered through my head.

“I got you guys some studio time. You’ll finally be able to record some of your songs.”

My stomach flipped, and I jerked my gaze back to his, eyes wide. “Holy shit. You’re joking?”

He shook his head, beaming at me. “Nope. It’s a good studio, too. I was holding out for the more legit ones because I wanted it to be worth it. I wanted to tell you in person, so I’ve been dying to tell you since Saturday night.”

Elation exploded through me, and I yanked Art off his feet, crowing loudly. “No fucking way! That’s awesome!”

He laughed, easily letting me tote him around in my excitement. “I figured we can celebrate with the band. Two weeks from now, you’ll get to hear your songs on something other than a crappy recording on my phone.”

Damn, I liked the sound of that. And as excited as I was to tell the band, there was no way I could just let it go until everyone got home in a few hours. I spun on my heel, marching towards the stairs. Art’s eyebrows shot up in question.

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs. There’s not a chance I’m waiting until later. I need you inside me. We’re celebrating now.”

He looked stunned, but he didn’t argue with me when I toted him upstairs. His breathing picked up, his fingers tightening on my shoulders, and his legs wrapped around my waist. I could go either way on taking or being taken, but I didn't want Art’s first time exploring if he was into bottoming to be a quickie. And with the excitement burning through me, this was probably going to be fast.

I almost tripped up the stairs when Art slammed his lips against mine. I had to really focus on getting us up the stairs when he was attacking me like that. Our tongues tangled, breaths mingled, keeping my mind distracted. I had to use a hand on the wall to find my way down the short hallway, because I wasn’t going to pull away if I didn't have some sort of guide.

Once I stumbled into Art’s room, I set him on his feet, my mouth still latched to his as I wrestled with his clothes. He seemed just as eager as I was, helping me unbutton his work shirt while I tore open his pants. With both of us working together, I got him naked in record time and finally there was something interesting enough to pull my attention off Art’s mouth.

Most of our fooling around was late at night, in the dark, and partly clothed. We didn’t need to get fully naked for a blowjob and I was worried if we did, it’d tempt me into something I wasn’t sure Art was ready for. My eyes trailed over him, taking in his creamy skin. There were freckles dusted along his shoulders, a light dusting of

hair on his chest, and down below his belly button. He had a swimmer's build, lean muscle and zero bodyfat to speak of. I ran my hands over him, admiring him, until his patience wore out and he tugged at my t-shirt.

“Your turn.”

With one hand over my shoulder, I pulled my t-shirt off in one smooth move. It made Art smirk, his eyes trailing over each inch of skin exposed as I wrestled with my jeans. He helped me, but him kneeling in front of me to get me out of them was a little cruel. At least until he wrapped his fist around me and ran his tongue along the underside of my cock.

“Fuck,” I murmured, my hand automatically fisting Art's hair. He'd learned a lot in the past few weeks of us fooling around. He took me deeper, teased the spots he knew drove me nuts, until I was a panting mess.

“Damn, you're a fast learner. Get your ass up here. I'm not coming until you're inside me.”

Art shivered as he pushed to his feet, an eager look on his face. It would've made me laugh if I wasn't so turned on right now. I crowded against him, walking him backwards towards the bed, but before he could fall back on it, I flipped us, dragging him down on top of me.

The skin to skin contact made me groan, Art straddling me as he devoured my mouth. It'd be so easy to just let things happen like this, grinding together until we both finished. But that wasn't what I wanted right now. I gripped Art's thighs to stop him, dragging my mouth down his neck.

“Lube. I need you to touch me.”

Another shiver rolled through him, and he paused, taking a few deep breaths. I worried for a second that it was too much, but the look he gave me when he finally sat up wiped away every ounce of worry I had. He looked lust drunk, his eyes hooded and his glasses askew. There wasn't an ounce of trepidation in his face, and when he tossed his glasses onto the nightstand and came back with the lube, he eagerly nudged me farther onto the bed so he could comfortably sit between my legs. Only once I was settled did he hesitate, his brows furrowing a little.

"I'm not sure how to do this."

Chuckling, I took the bottle from him, coating his fingers with the slippery liquid. Tossing the bottle aside, I guided his hand lower to my ass, sucking in a breath when he brushed against my hole.

"It's been a minute since I've been fucked. Take it slow. Massage your fingers until—" A groan cut me off, and I shuddered. Damn, he had amazing hands. "Yeah, just like that."

Art kept up his ministrations, rubbing circles over my hole and driving me nuts. I was a little tongue tied with what he was doing, so when I was ready, I reached between my legs and urged him to push inside, breathing out a low groan as those long fingers breached me. It was hard to concentrate on him, my focus split by the drag of his fingers, but when I looked down, Art was flushed and fascinated. His eyes were locked on what he was doing, and when he brushed against my prostate and made me shout, I saw the strain in his face.

"God, that's hot," he murmured. He pressed there again, tormenting me with slow drags against my prostate, until I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm good, I'm good."

He paused, confused, but I really couldn't explain it right now. I was a terrible teacher. But I'd challenge anyone to have their hot lover fingering their ass and continue to think properly. I'd bet no one could actually do it.

Too eager for more, I flipped us, snatching the lube and dribbling some on Art's cock. He sucked in a sharp breath from the cool temperature, but I was quick to follow with my hand, coating him completely. His eyes slipped shut, just enjoying my touch, and he didn't notice me straddling him until I started sinking down onto his cock.

His jaw dropped and his eyes flew open, a strangled groan ripping from him. "Oh... Oh god... Hendrix!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### ARTHUR

Two thoughts passed through my head as Hendrix sank down onto my length. The first was that I was definitely gay. Nothing I'd ever experienced before now came close to this. My mind was blown, and we'd barely started. The second thought was that I was going to come. I wasn't prepared for the tight velvety heat that wrapped around me, the massaging muscles that seemed to want to pull me deeper. I gasped for breath, desperately trying to hold back my release, until Hendrix leaned over me and captured my lips. It was quick, soothing, and when he spoke, his voice was soft.

"Breathe."

I did as he asked, dragging in a few breaths until the urge to come wasn't so overwhelming. Hendrix cupped my face, sipping at my lips, giving me a chance to calm down a little.

“S-Sorry. That was— I almost—” Embarrassment flooded me as I tried to admit just how close I got. I was sure as a musician, Hendrix had plenty of experience. I didn't want to be a complete disappointment by coming before we even really started.

“Relax. There's nothing wrong with that. Kinda want to take it as a compliment that my ass was just that good,” he teased, putting me more at ease. He always knew just what to say to bring me out of my head and help me relax.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:46 am*

Desperate to hide my blush, I slid my hand into his hair, dragging him closer for another kiss. He leaned into it, taking his time, until I finally felt like we could continue without me embarrassing myself. Dragging my hands down his back to his ass, I cupped his cheeks and lifted my hips a little, testing the water. Hendrix stiffened, a muffled groan vibrating against my lips. Encouraged by the sound, I planted my feet, slowly thrusting into his hot, welcoming body. It felt good. More than good. Too good. I distracted myself from the pleasure by watching Hendrix, hoping if I focused on him, I wouldn't come too fast.

Hendrix's mouth hung open, quiet groans spilling from his lips every time I thrust inside him. He looked just as shocked as I was, his body crowding mine and his face so close we breathed the same air as he panted and groaned. I wanted to drag it out, to watch that look on his face all night, but the overwhelming need to come returned and desperation set in. I bucked upwards, picking up the pace, and Hendrix got louder with every thrust.

“Oh fuck! How— Holy shit! How are you so good at this?”

I couldn't answer him, even if I had an answer. I lost myself in the tight squeeze of his body, and a tingle gathered at the base of my spine, warning me of what was coming.

“Hendrix...”

It was as much of a warning as I could give him. He seemed to understand me because he leveraged himself up enough to reach between us, wrapping his fist around his cock. That was enough of a distraction to keep me from losing it

completely, watching him writhing as he took stimulation from both sides. He was beautiful like this, rocking to meet my thrusts while he stroked his erection. Complete wild abandon written all over his face. I reached for him, cupping his face, and I couldn't stop myself from saying it out loud.

“You're beautiful.”

His eyes rolled back into his head, and I watched as he exploded with a shout. I wanted to keep my eyes on him the whole time, but his ass clenched around me like a vice and I went blind from the pleasure, a hoarse cry ripping from my throat.

It was like a high I never wanted to come down from. Never in my life had I experienced that kind of pleasure. I wanted more, but I also wanted to wrap myself around Hendrix and never let go. Since my recovery period wasn't what it used to be and we still had to go meet the band, I couldn't have either. I settled for enjoying the soft kisses Hendrix peppered over my face, smirking when he kept pulling away whenever I tried to kiss him back.

“Tease.”

He chuckled low, continuing his sweet assault. “You just gave me the most intense orgasm of my life. I'm trying to reward you. If you kiss me, I'm gonna want to go again and the band will get pissed.”

Joy swelled in my chest and I caught his face in my hands, stealing a short but intense kiss. “It was for me, too. Intense, I mean. Intense and amazing and better than anything I'd ever experienced.” I frowned, dropping my gaze a little. “I never realized how wrong I had it before. My marriage was a mistake. I never should've ended up with a woman. No wonder it fell apart.”

Shifting to his side, Hendrix pulled me with him, drawing me into his arms so he



could hold me. “Maybe. Maybe not. But you got Sophie from it. Sometimes the best things come from the hardest situations.”

“You?” I murmured.

He hummed, resting his cheek on my head. “Yeah. My parents’ divorce was messy. I got caught in the middle a lot. Mostly because of my dad. He didn’t see the problem with their marriage and wasn’t ready to let go. He used me a lot to pass messages to my mom or get her to be somewhere so he could see her. It was awkward and rough. But my dad taught me guitar and how to sing because he wanted me to play his songs for my mom. My entire career came from that. I wish it was different, but I also recognize I wouldn’t have the talent I do now without that whole situation. So I learned to accept it and let it go.”

I’d never thought of it that way. It was true, I couldn’t regret my marriage because Sophie came from that. “I just wish I would’ve realized sooner I wasn’t straight. I wouldn’t have been trapped in an unhappy marriage for ten years.”

“Things end when they’re supposed to, Art. It sucks, but it’s the truth. And you and me might not have gotten together if your marriage didn’t end at the right time.”

That was also a good point. Maybe if I had more time, I would’ve gotten the confidence on my own to date men. But if I had, I wouldn’t have ended up in that bar, drinking away my sorrows when the most perfect demon on the planet stepped onto the stage. Hendrix was right. It was useless to regret the past because I got so much happiness in the future. And if I knew I’d get Sophie and Hendrix out of the deal, I’d do it all over again.

## HENDRIX

We were late to meet the band, and it wasn’t hard to figure out why. Art changed into

something more casual, including the world's softest sweater and some slacks, but he still looked disheveled and blissed out. The blush on his face was almost permanent. I wasn't much better. My body was loose and relaxed and I had a shit-eating grin on my face as we teleported into the entryway and joined the group. Duncan took one look at us and snorted, shaking his head.

“Well, we know why you two are late. Now all we're waiting on is Ruby.”

Art's blushed deepened, but I ignored Duncan's comment, leading Art to the couch and dropping down beside him. That experience had been so wild, I almost didn't have the energy to play tonight, but we still had the news to share with the band and everyone was going to want to plan out what songs we'd record once they heard the news. Though I was planning on a repeat once I brought Art home for the night. The man's cock was made for me, pegging my prostate without any real skill from him. I'd been on top so I could work out what angle worked best for me and show him how to make me moan, but he didn't need any instruction. I wondered if there was ever going to be a time where that man didn't surprise me.

I didn't know when I stopped thinking about us as temporary. I liked spending time with him, but I never thought about the long haul until recently. The idea of walking away from him was abhorrent and I couldn't stop thinking about us in the future, what that'd be like and how much more confident he'd be in his own skin. I wanted to see him come out of his shell more, wanted to be there as he explored his interests and did things he'd always wanted to. He held back from being truly himself for way too long. It was his turn to shine.

I leaned in to whisper, teasing Art's ear with my lips. “You better prepare yourself for a long night. I might feel like celebrating again when I take you home.”

He shivered, shooting me a heated look, but before he could respond, Ruby burst into the apartment. She dragged someone behind her, laughing as they protested. I thought

maybe it was her feeder, but when she pulled the reluctant figure into the apartment, I frowned. Why did she look familiar?

Ruby finally turned to face us, a bright smile on her face. “Good, everyone’s here. Gentleman, I found our lead guitar. I’m sure you’ve seen her around Club Envy. Say hello to Aliyah. My girlfriend.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### ARTHUR

While Ruby continued to gush, talking up her new girlfriend to the band, my eyes darted to Laz. He had been lounging on the couch next to Duncan, plucking at the cords of his guitar lazily, but the minute Ruby showed up, he went rigid. His teasing smile was gone and the heartbroken look that overtook his features was almost painful to look at. Poor Laz. I knew he was into Ruby. Even a blind man could figure that out. Hearing that she was dating, and she wanted her new girlfriend in the band, must be like getting a knife to the heart.

Hendrix was stiff too. He knew the pain Laz was in. He was polite enough not to draw attention to it, but I could feel the unease coming off him. I had to wonder if it would sway his judgment on letting Aliyah join their band.

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“Hen, can we borrow your amp? I swear it blew my mind when she played for me at her place. She’s got more skill than all the other applicants combined.”

Ruby was either unaware or purposefully ignoring the tension in the air. She looked at Hendrix expectantly and grinned when he dipped his chin once to acknowledge her. Ruby dragged Aliyah to where their instruments all sat by the big window, forcing her onto a stool while she set things up. Aliyah, though, must’ve been able to sense the tension because she looked uncomfortable.

“Ruby, I don’t think—”

“It’s fine,” Laz interrupted. “We were just surprised. Ruby doesn’t bring dates home. Go ahead, let’s hear it.”

My eyebrows flew up at his interjection, but I kept my mouth shut about it. So did Duncan and Hendrix. They both snuck glances at Laz while plastering smiles on their faces and encouraging Aliyah. And Ruby was right, she was a great player. She played a song of theirs while Ruby told us she’d only listened to it once, and her fingers danced along the strings like some kind of art form. I almost wished she wasn’t that good, because the longer she played, the more pained Laz looked.

The band clapped as she finished and when I glanced over my shoulder, I could see the interest on Hendrix’s and Duncan’s faces. There was no telling if they’d find another player that good. Would they shove her aside to spare Laz’s feelings?

“Well? Didn’t I tell you?” Ruby gushed, beaming at Aliyah before turning to the band. “She’s not cocky, you know I don’t date people like that, and she’s loyal. Stuck

with her last band until the day they broke up. She couldn't be more perfect. Right?"

The room went quiet. The response of the band was less than what Ruby had hoped. The awkward tension was still there, and no one wanted to speak up first. Ruby's eyes narrowed.

"Band meeting. Hallway. Now."

No one argued with that. Hendrix kissed the top of my head before heading into the hall. They'd talk this out amongst themselves and decide together.

"Why do I feel like I stepped into a minefield?" Aliyah asked. She was still staring in the direction the band went, looking severely uncomfortable. To spare her a little, I tossed out a little white lie.

"They don't like to deliberate in front of potential applicants. It's not about you." That last part was only half true. It was about her, but not because of her skill. Only because of who she was dating. "You're really good. How long have you been playing?"

She still looked uneasy, but she accepted my diversion tactic, slowly putting away her guitar as she spoke. "Since I was a teenager. My mom told me to pick an instrument or a sport because I was getting on her nerves. I chose guitar. Never quit. What about you? Do you play any instruments?"

"Does two years of piano in elementary school count?"

She snickered, biting her lip as she shook her head. I liked Aliyah when I first met her. She was kind and playful, and she never made me feel awkward or uncomfortable for being a mid thirties man following a band around. If I'd known sooner that she could play, I might've suggested her to the band. If it wasn't for the

whole Ruby issue, they probably would've accepted her right away. She'd fit with this group easily.

Moving to sit beside me, she leaned her elbow on the back of the couch and propped her head on her hand. "Give it to me straight. There was some serious tension when we showed up. Kinda feel like it had something to do with me. What's going on?"

Pressing my lips together, I debated how much to tell her. I didn't want to tell Laz's secrets, but if they did invite her to join, I wanted her to be comfortable with them. Their reception had been less than welcoming.

"Well... I don't know much. I'm not actually part of the band. I'm dating Hendrix. That's why I'm here. But I do know Ruby has a strict rule against dating band members. It's a little surprising that she'd offer her girlfriend to join and basically go against that rule."

"Huh. I didn't know that. I mean, I could see that being awkward if things don't go right with a couple. But we're still really early into our relationship. I don't see it being a problem. It's not like we're making promises of forever or anything."

True. I said the same thing about Hendrix when we first started seeing each other. Now, though, I couldn't imagine a future without him. I hadn't told him yet, but I was falling for him. There was no telling what would happen to Ruby and Aliyah's relationship in the future. If they fell in love and then had a bad break up, it could be trouble for the band.

The band trooped back in before I could reply and Hendrix took the lead, offering his hand to Aliyah. "When can you start?"

She sucked in a breath, taking his hand and shooting a wide eyed look at Ruby. "Wait. Really?"

Hendrix chuckled. “We took it to a vote. It was unanimous. Welcome to the band.”

Discreetly, I looked over my shoulder at Laz. He stood at the back of the group, his face blank. I wanted to know what was going through his head, but it didn’t really feel like my place. Hendrix said the vote was unanimous, which meant Laz agreed to let Aliyah join too. Maybe he was finally letting Ruby go. Hopefully anyway.

“This is great timing,” Hendrix added, lacing his fingers behind his head with a shit-eating grin on his face. “Art here has some good news for us.”

All eyes swung my way, and my attention was successfully diverted. I raised an eyebrow at Hendrix, having thought he’d want to be the one to tell them, but he just winked at me and waited.

“What news?” Ruby demanded.

Pushing to my feet so I could see everyone better, I cleared my throat. “I, uh... I don’t know if Hendrix told you, but I’ve been making some calls and sending out emails to find a good studio for you guys to record some of your songs. I think you’d get a lot of interest from labels if you have something to show them aside from shaky videos on people’s phones. This weekend I got an email from a great studio. They had an opening in their normally full schedule and are willing to let you record a few songs. Their set up is really nice and—”

Before I could blink, the band swamped me. I let out a surprised squeak, which was embarrassing, but no one mentioned it. They were too busy thanking me and hugging me. I didn’t really feel like I did something all that amazing, it was just a few phone calls and emails. I just wanted them to succeed with the best options available.

They finally let up when Hendrix nudged them aside, pulling me against his chest. He looked proud, grinning at me, and he pressed a chaste kiss to my lips before looking

back at the band.



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“New guitarist, studio time. Let’s add one more, shall we? All in favor of Art as our new manager?”

Everyone’s hands shot up and my mouth fell open. “Wait, I didn’t—”

“Stop. You’re going to tell everyone you didn’t do much, which we all know is a lie. You’ve been supporting us since the day you showed up. You watch our backs, get us what we need, and you do it all without asking for anything in return,” Hendrix argued.

“We need you, Art,” Laz agreed, finally speaking up. “All your suggestions have done great things for us. Our social media is exploding, the crowd at the club now cheers for us, and once we do our recordings, we’ve got a real chance at getting a record deal. None of that would’ve happened without you.”

They all agreed with bobs of their heads. Aliyah stood next to Ruby and gave me a thumbs up, a smile on her face. And Hendrix was pressed up against my back, conviction steady on his face. I’d never felt so wanted in my life. Not just for money or stability, like Val wanted. Not because it was my job to take care of them like Sophie. The band didn’t have to keep me around. They wanted me anyway.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes, and my voice shook when I spoke. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Hendrix urged, tipping my chin to look at him.

Blinking back a few tears, I lifted my shoulders helplessly.

“Yes.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### ARTHUR

Since they now considered me the band manager, I got to go with them for their recording session. I still didn't know about that title, but I tried my best to live up to it. The recording session with the whole band was on a weekday, so I had to take some time off, but it was amazing to watch them thrive. Aliyah spent the time before the recording session learning the music, and she fit really well with the band once they played together. Ruby was ecstatic, and even though I could tell it was hard on Laz to watch, he said nothing. He was a little quieter than before, but friendly with Aliyah and Hendrix said he was working on helping Laz get over Ruby.

The recording studio emailed me a small demo of the recording a few days later, just as a preview of what the music would sound like once it was finished. I didn't tell Hendrix how expensive it was to go to this place. I was pretty sure, based on the fact that they all lived together, that they wouldn't have been able to afford it. It was a gift from me, since I had more than enough in savings to cover it. He hadn't asked yet, but if he and the band ever did, I'd already made up a little white lie about it being severely discounted because it was their first time.

I was supposed to wait until I got home to listen to the recording, but I was too excited. I waited until the office had gone to lunch before pulling it up and turning my speakers up. My heart fluttered wildly in my chest as I heard Hendrix's voice croon out the opening lines. I'd seen them play on stage, relaxing at home, in the studio, and now on an actual track. I felt privileged to be part of their journey and for the first time in a long time, I was really excited about my life outside of the time I spent with Sophie. This was as much for me as it was for the band and I almost cried hearing it coming out of my computer speakers.

“Hey, that song is great. Who’s it by?”

I nearly jumped out of my own skin, spinning around to face Henry. He cracked up at my reaction, patting my shoulder apologetically.

“My bad. I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I was just listening to your music. I’ve never heard this song before.”

Willing my heart back into normal rhythm, I sucked in a breath. “Unless you go to club Envy Thursday nights, you wouldn’t. The band is called Children of Myth. They’re amazing. They’ve been playing in small clubs around the city for a while, but I helped them get some studio time recently and got the demo this morning.”

Propping his hip on the edge of my desk, he tipped his head to listen. When the demo ended, I restarted it for him, letting him get the full effect. Watching my friend bob his head along with the music, knowing it was Hendrix’s band that he was enjoying, filled my chest with pride. But I wasn’t expecting what he said next.

“Are they with a label yet?”

I frowned. “No. Not yet. Why?”

“My older brother works for Envision Records. We’ve got a little thing where if I find a band that isn’t represented and he likes them, he buys me dinner. And I’m talking about a nice dinner. Lobster, filet mignon, that kind of thing. I’ve only ever found two, but damn, it was worth it. If he signs them and they make it big, he promised to buy me a car. If these guys are looking for representation, then I can send the demo to him. Maybe even get him to invite you to dinner, too.”

He said it so nonchalantly, like Envision Records wasn’t one of the biggest labels in the country. I gaped at him, my mouth opening and closing like a fish because I

seriously didn't know what to say.

“I-I-”

“I mean, you don’t have to. If they prefer to produce on their own then—”

“No! I mean– Yes! Absolutely! How many songs does he want to hear? Should he go to a show instead? Should I wait for the studio to be finished?”

Henry’s head tossed back when he laughed and he put his hands up to slow down my babbling. “Hold on, hold on. Easy tiger. Just what you’ve got now will be enough. Usually I send him a clip from whatever fair or whatever I see the band at, so this is a huge step up from that. Can you put it on a thumb drive for me? I’ve got a family dinner this weekend. I can show it to him then.”

“Oh, my god. That would be amazing. Thank you!”

He snickered, tipping his head towards my computer. I rushed to do as he asked, moving the file onto a blank thumb drive for him. My hands shook as I handed it to him, which he found entertaining, but I couldn’t help it. I knew, deep in my soul, that Children of Myth was worth signing. They were amazing, and I wanted more than anything to have them get the record deal they deserved.

“Let me know if you need anything else. Or if he wants to see them live. They’ve got a regular slot at Club Envy, but they play a few other places during the week as well. I owe you for this, Henry. Honestly.”

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He tipped his head at me. “Letting me meet the band would be nice. I never get to meet them in person. I’m just the label fairy sneaking around in the background.”

“Done. I can even get you backstage if you want.”

He snorted, shaking his head. “Damn, man. You’re excited.” His eyes narrowed for a second. “Is the guy you’re seeing in the band?”

My face flushed, and Henry started laughing again, squeezing my shoulder. “Well, hell, Arthur! When you decide to date men, you go right for the good stuff. A musician? Especially one that good? I’m a little jealous.”

“It wasn’t planned. I went to a bar to drown my sorrows, and they got up on stage. Hendrix only had to sing one line before I was hooked. I never thought he’d look my way twice, but...” I shrugged.

Henry gripped my shoulder, shaking me a little. “Of course he’d look your way. You’re a catch. Now when do I get to meet the band? You said they play every Thursday?”

My excitement was brimming by the time I got home, but I hesitated to tell Hendrix. I didn’t want to get his hopes up. Henry said he’d show his brother, but that didn’t mean his brother would like them or that he’d want to sign them. I decided to wait to tell him until I knew more. Keeping that kind of secret was harder than I thought, though. Every time he called me, I felt it sitting on the tip of my tongue. It was almost painful to keep it in. When Henry met me at the club on Thursday to hear the band, I was almost crawling out of my skin from the anticipation. He didn’t see his brother

until the weekend, though, so I couldn't even ask if there was an update.

I'd already checked on the band by the time he arrived, so I took my normal seat at the bar, chatting with Henry as the band took the stage. I still got butterflies watching Hendrix on stage. From the first time I saw him, I was doomed. There was no way someone could look at him and not fall for him. His voice wrapped around me like silk, giving me goosebumps no matter how many times I listened to the same songs.

"You look smitten," Henry called over the music.

I wrinkled my nose to hide my blush. "Shut up. Pay attention. They're about to play my favorite song."

He stopped teasing after that and we just enjoyed the music together. I liked having someone to sit with, and when the band came out after the show, I was happy to introduce Henry as my friend. Hendrix tossed his arm over my shoulders as he shook Henry's hands, still sweaty and gross from being under those lights. When I made a face at him, he dropped his weight on me, rubbing his sweaty body all over me.

"Hendrix!" I complained. Sort of. I couldn't stop laughing and I didn't hate him all over me. I could do without the sweat, of course, but still.

Henry watched us with a smirk, raising his eyebrow at me when I shot him a questioning look. "So when I said you went for the top shelf, I got it on the nose, didn't I?"

I blushed, but he wasn't wrong. I really did get lucky with Hendrix. He was beautiful, artistic, kind, playful, and he was even good with kids. He was the whole package, and when I tipped my head back to look at him and he smiled at me, I admitted to myself that it was more than a crush. I was in love with him. Probably had been since the first time I saw him onstage. Everything was perfect, thanks to him. I was more

social, I had friends, I got out of the house several times a week. I wasn't that quiet accountant, trudging through life with no genuine happiness anymore. I was living. And it was all thanks to him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### HENDRIX

Art stayed at the club longer than usual. I knew he was being polite, he invited his friend along and he didn't want to ditch him the second I was through, but we rarely stuck around long after the show. More often than not, Art would hang out for a bit to say hello to the band and then we'd head back to his place for some fun time alone. It took work to keep the irritation off my face. I wanted to get out of here with Art. My blood was buzzing after that show and I wanted Art to fuck me into the mattress until I was too exhausted to stay awake.

Laz snorted, nudging Art's arm. "You might want to consider heading out. Looks like our man here is about to lose his cool."

Art frowned, looking over his shoulder at me. I shot Laz a dirty look, but it only made him snicker. And when Art's eyes widened and a grin spread across his face, I maybe probably owed Laz one for pointing it out. He smirked at me when Art launched to his feet, giving his friend a quick goodbye. I'd thank him later. Right now, I had a man to devour.

We teleported right into his living room and got about as far as the couch before I attacked. Art went willingly, tumbling onto the cushions with me on top of him. We were all grabbing hands and passionate kisses. I had my shirt off in record time and Art's was halfway down his arms. It somehow managed to trap his arms behind him and I refused to let him loose, using the position to my advantage and dragging my mouth along his chest.

I was so into what we were doing, I didn't clue in to the noises outside the house until the doorknob rattled. The door flew open and a woman who looked a lot like Sophie strode inside, Sophie right behind her. She came to a halt when Sophie flicked on the lights, her eyes wide.

"Val?" Art's confusion was in his voice, and it took him a second to remember what we were doing. He scrambled out from underneath me, pulling his shirt closed and running his fingers through his hair. "What— What are you doing here? It's late."

Val's eyes flicked between me and Art, and a very familiar look overtook her face. It was the same look a lot of humans gave us when we first arrived. Disgust, fear, distrust, anger. She took a step back, snagging Sophie and shoving her behind her when she tried to come closer.

"What is this, Arthur?"

Art looked at a loss for words. He swallowed hard, staring at his ex-wife, flinching when she shrieked at him.

"What is this? You are sleeping with men now? You are going to corrupt our daughter with that lifestyle?"

That wasn't what I was expecting. She latched onto the gay thing first before coming around to the demon thing. I knew it was coming, but it was hard to watch as Art took a verbal beating and said nothing.

"How long? How long have you been bringing our child around monsters? I always knew you were a terrible parent! I should have gone for full custody right away!"

That made Art's head snap up. He went pale, his eyes locked on Sophie as Val shoved her farther behind her and towards the door.



“Val, wait—”

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“No! I won’t allow my child to be around people like him. Like you. You’ll be hearing from my attorney.”

He followed her as she dragged Sophie to the car. I stayed glued to my seat, choking on my own breath as I watched Art beg Val not to take Sophie away. Sophie started sobbing, tugging on her arm to escape the grip her mother held, pleading to go with Art. It was a familiar scene. The same thing happened to me when my mom found out my dad was sneaking me into the human realm when I was a kid. She lost it and told him he would never see me again. As a kid, I’d been downright horrified and heartbroken. I couldn’t let that happen to Sophie.

Grabbing my clothes from where they’d been tossed onto the floor, I rushed outside, putting my hands up. Val flinched and screamed, blocking Sophie from me, but I stayed a respectful distance away from her.

“Wait! Please wait! This was my fault. Don’t blame Art. I came on to him. I’ll go. I’ll leave him alone. Just don’t take away his daughter. He loves her.”

“It’s too late for that,” she seethed. “He’ll just crawl into bed with another monster when I’m not watching. You’re sick, Art. I can’t believe I was ever married to you. Sophie, let’s go. Now.”

“No, mom! Please! I want to stay with daddy!”

Val wasn’t listening. She forced her daughter into the car and dropped into the seat with her, blocking her with her body. There was a man in the front seat who watched everything with wide eyes. He looked uncertain when looking at Art’s tear-stained

face, but Val barked at him from the back seat and he pulled out of the driveway without a word.

The car disappeared around the block and once they were out of sight, Art dropped to his knees. I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to comfort him, but this felt like my fault. But I also couldn't walk away. Not now. Not when he looked so heartbroken.

“Art—”

“Go.”

I froze, my hand reaching out for him. My stomach twisted tightly and dread filled my veins.

“Art, I—”

“Just go, Hendrix. I can't—” His voice cut out as he choked on a sob. He shook his head slowly, dropping forward onto his hands and knees with tears streaming down his face. The image ripped my heart out, but when I touched his shoulder, he jerked away from me. “Go! You said you'd go, so go! Please...”

I meant what I said in the moment. I would've left if it meant Art could keep Sophie. But now that he actually wanted me to do it, it hurt more than I thought. It felt like I was tearing my heart out of my chest and putting it through a shredder. I couldn't breathe around the lump in my throat and I couldn't move to save my life. All I could do was watch as Art fell apart on the front lawn, his entire world turned upside down because of me.

It took what felt like hours before Art finally moved. He didn't look at me as he pushed to his feet, his footsteps staggered like he didn't have the energy to walk. I held my breath, pleading internally for him to come to me and let me hold him. But

that didn't happen. He walked past me, stumbling once over his own feet, and disappeared inside, shutting the door quietly behind him. I stared at the door, fighting with myself on whether I should follow him or not. But when the lock clicked, I knew I'd missed my chance. I always said Art would do anything for his daughter. Including ending our relationship, apparently.

I couldn't stomach facing the band. Not after that. I'd have to explain what happened, and I couldn't get the words out even if I wanted to. Instead, I let my feet, wings, and magic guide me. And somehow ended up in my dad's front yard. The lights were on, he was home for once, and when I stepped inside, he took one look at me and jerked his chin towards the stairs. No words were exchanged. He knew what I needed. I headed upstairs to my childhood bedroom, collapsed on the bed, and cried.

I wasn't sure when exactly I passed out. I'd never been that beat up about a break up before. Even my longest relationship didn't rip me apart like that. It was sad, sure, but nothing a few drinks with the guys or the band consoling me wouldn't cure. With Art, it felt like something had ripped my soul from my chest and I was empty inside. I couldn't get myself to leave that bed. My dad came in every once in a while, tried to get me to eat, but mostly he just left me alone.

I was going on three days without moving when he finally stepped in. "Gotta get up, boy. You need to eat."

Hugging the pillow tighter against my chest, I tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't stop prodding me. "Can't wallow forever."

"You did," I mumbled, glaring at the wall. I wanted to be pissed at him so he'd leave me the hell alone, but all I felt was heartache and pain. I couldn't muster the energy to be mad.

"I did. And look where it got me. An old demon livin' with his brother, wasting away

on booze and wishin' I could change the past. But wishin' doesn't do shit, and you know that. So get up, eat somethin', and get moving."

"To do what?" I snapped, shoving myself up to sit with my back against the wall. "None of it is worth it anymore. What's the point?"

He was sitting on a chair by my bed, his expression actually clear for once. He looked sad for me, but he also looked determined. Like he wasn't going to let me get away with giving up. I shook my head helplessly.

"I can't— I can't breathe without him."

"So, go get him back, then."

"Can't. His ex-wife won't let him near his kid because of me. I don't know what she's more disgusted by. The fact that I'm a male, or that I'm a demon. It seemed like a toss up for her."

He made a tick sound behind his teeth, crossing his arms over his chest. "Well, that ain't right. But I'm sure there's a solution. She can't just take away his kid."

I wasn't sure what the human laws were about kids with divorced parents. The look on Art's face said it was hopeless. And it wasn't like I had any power to stop his ex from taking Sophie away. I was a musician in a band that didn't even have a label yet. I worked several jobs to make ends meet and—

"Stop. Nothin' you're thinkin' right now is gonna help. Come on. Let's go get some food. It'll help."

He didn't let up until I begrudgingly followed him. Dad always preferred the human restaurants over the ones in the Other Realm, so he marched me through the transport

tunnel with a hand on the back of my neck to get to his favorite restaurant. He nudged me into the booth, smiling at the older waitress who stopped by our table.

“Hey there gorgeous.”

She rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of affection there. Cheryl had been working here as long as we’d been coming, at the very least. She knew me since I was a kid and when she saw the defeated look on my face, she frowned.

“Everything alright?”

“He’s goin’ through somethin’. He’ll be alright. He could probably use some of your famous pancakes, though. Somethin’ to up his spirits a little. Hasn’t eaten much in the last few days.”

I barely listened to them talking to each other, resting my head in my hands, elbows on the table. I didn’t want to be here. I wanted Art. The longer I spent away from him, the more painful it was. He settled so easily into my life and now that he was gone, I couldn’t handle it.

My phone rang, interrupting my spiral. I wanted to ignore it, but my dad gave me a pointed look and I sighed heavily, pulling it out of my pocket. I didn’t recognize the number and when I answered, it shocked the hell out of me who was speaking on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Hendrix? Can you come get me? I’m scared.”

## HENDRIX

I'd never moved so fast in my life. Sophie sounded terrified and I could barely breathe, knowing she was alone somewhere. Dad went with me, his hand locked on my shoulder, and we teleported as close as possible to where Sophie told me she was. I had a lot of questions, like why she was calling me out of everyone, and what the hell she was doing, but my immediate concern was getting to her. We took off into the air, heading straight for the park where Sophie was hiding. She was waiting for me on the top of the jungle gym, a backpack sitting next to her and a pillow in her arms. She tossed it aside and launched to her feet when I landed, throwing herself at me the minute my feet touched the ground. I hauled her into my arms, hugging her tightly.

"What happened? What are you doing out here? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, her face buried against my shoulder. I shot my dad a confused look. I wasn't sure what to do. He studied Sophie, letting out a soft sigh.

"You ran away, didn't ya?"

Sniffling, Sophie lifted her head to look for the voice. Her cheeks were tear stained, her eyes red rimmed, and she wore the same heartbroken look I'd seen on Art's face a few days ago. She took in my dad standing next to us, but she didn't disagree with him.

"Oh, Sophie..."

Her chin trembled, and she burst into sobs again. I hugged her tightly, rubbing her back, my chest aching. We moved to the bench nearby, and I let Sophie cry it out before lifting her chin to get her to look at me.



“How’d you get ahold of me?”

“I... I got your number out of Daddy’s phone after you came to visit. I wanted to call you and ask you when we could dance again. I hid it in my backpack when Daddy called me down for dinner, and I forgot about it until now.”

“And how’d you call?” Dad asked. Sophie was still a little kid. I wasn’t sure if she had a phone yet.

Sophie grimaced, her eyes dropping to her lap. “I... I stole Lee’s phone. Him and my mom were arguing. I was gonna take hers, but she was holding onto it, waiting for my uncle to call. She wanted him to make it so I couldn’t see my daddy anymore. I was scared. I saw Lee’s phone on the charger and I took it and ran away. I thought I could get to my daddy’s on my own, but I got lost and...”

And she called for help. I didn’t agree with what she’d done, but at least she was prepared for the worst. She was smart, I’d give her that. But also heartbroken and just a little kid. I couldn’t be mad at her for reacting like that, not when she thought she wouldn’t get to see her dad again.

“I need to see that phone, Sophie.”

Her brow furrowed and her eyes searched mine. “Why?”

“Because I gotta call your mom.”

She protested, her eyes filling with tears again, but I shook my head. “I know you’re upset, and this is really scary, but you can’t just run away. Your mom is probably terrified right now, wondering where you are. Give me the phone. I’ll call her and your dad, and I’ll stay here with you until they show up. Okay?”

She looked so defeated, it hurt me to make her do it. But I stayed firm, keeping my expression calm but serious until she went to her backpack and pulled out the phone. She was reluctant to hand it to me, but I put out my arm and she cuddled against my side once she handed it over. Luckily, there wasn't a lock on the thing and I found Val's number in the contacts. It rang a few times before she answered, her voice wobbly and scared.

"Lee? Did you find her?"

"Uh, it's not Lee. I'm Hendrix, Art's—" I hesitated. She lost her mind when she found out about me and Art. Probably better not to bring that up right now. "Anyway. I found Sophie. She's okay, just upset and a little lost. Can you come get her or should I bring her to you?"

Val sounded flustered, stuttering as she tried to figure out what to say.

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“I– What– Where–”

“We’re at the park on Magnolia and Hudson, by the playground. Do you know it?”

“Yes. I’ll be right there.”

After she hung up, I pulled out my phone and dialed Art. It didn’t surprise me that he didn’t answer, so I left him a message letting him know what happened. Hopefully, he’d check it at the very least. I didn’t want him to be left unaware of what happened.

We were quiet while waiting for Val to show up. I recognized the area, we were close to Art’s house, but I didn’t know where Val lived or how long it would take for her to get here. Sophieshivered next to me, so I pulled off my leather jacket, wrapping her in it to keep her warm.

“Hey, Sophie. Why’d you call me?”

It was driving me nuts. Sophie and I had only spent a few days together, and I liked it, but I never really thought we were that close. Not close enough that she’d feel comfortable calling me in an emergency. I wasn’t unhappy about it, but I still had to ask.

“I tried calling Daddy first. He didn’t answer. And... I was hoping you wouldn’t call my mom.”

Ouch. I could see why she thought that, but it never crossed my mind to keep Val out of this. She was Sophie’s mom. She deserved to know where her daughter was and if

she was safe.

“You can’t ask him to do that, sugar. If you want Henny to be part of your life, he can’t dismiss your mama. It’ll only make her double down on not lettin’ him near you,” Dad pointed out.

When Sophie looked up at me for confirmation, I nodded. “He’s right. I love that you called me and I’ll always come when you need me, but I’ll never hide what happened from your parents. Either of them. They love you so much, Sophie. They deserve to know you’re okay.”

“But... My mom is gonna take me away from my dad...”

I sighed. “I can’t say much about that. I don’t know how human laws work with that. But you should talk to your mom. She loves you. She only wants what’s best for you.”

I could tell she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t argue anymore. And when Val showed up in a panic a few minutes later, she handed me my jacket back and went willingly into her mother’s arms.

“You did the same thing when you were little,” Dad murmured.

Glancing at him, I frowned. I didn’t remember that. “When?”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “About a year after the divorce? I was still gettin’ my feet back under me. Drinkin’ too much to take care of a little kid. Me and your mom agreed to give us some time apart so I could get a grip. You didn’t like that. You ran away from her and flapped your wings home to me. It elated me that you loved me that much, but also pissed me off that you ran away. Couldn’t really blame you for that, though. I just called your mom and told you I’d see you soon. I thought you’d

hate me for that, but you came around eventually.”

Looking over at Sophie, my chest ached. It wasn't the same situation. Art was a good dad. He didn't drink or put Sophie in unsafe situations. He loved his daughter. It wasn't fair that Val was taking her away.

After a minute, Val came uneasily closer. She still looked terrified of me, and her eyes moved between my dad and me like she was waiting for us to pounce. I purposely stayed where I sat, keeping all my movements to a minimum so I didn't freak her out.

“Why are you here? Did you tell her to come to you?”

“No. She called me because she couldn't get ahold of Art. I wasn't even aware she had my phone number.”

Val's eyes narrowed, studying me like she was looking for a lie. I wanted to be annoyed that she immediately saw me as a monster, but I couldn't begrudge a mother being protective over her kid.

“Why did she call you?”

Shifting my gaze to Sophie, I raised my eyebrows at her. “You wanna tell her, or should I?”

Sophie winced, ducking her head, her voice trembling. “I thought...” She swallowed hard. “I thought if I called Hendrix, he wouldn't tell you. I just want my daddy.”

Val's fierce scowl wavered and hurt flashed across her face. I got the feeling there was a lot left unsaid about Val's thoughts on Sophie and her dad. I hoped one day that she'd be able to talk to Sophie about it because I worried about their relationship

otherwise.

Val stared down at her daughter for a minute before giving her attention back to me. Her expression was less angry now, more resigned and hurt.

“Why did you call me? You could have done what she wanted. Art always does.”

“You’re her mother. It would be wrong to not let you know.”

“And if your mama ever found out you’d kept something like that from the lady, she’d tan your hide,” Dad added.

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True, but probably not helpful right now. I shot him a look that said he needed to keep quiet and turned back to Val. I offered her the phone Sophie took.

“Sophie borrowed this. Don’t be too mad at her. It was a smart move to have some way to contact people. Even if running away wasn’t so smart.”

Val huffed, shaking her head as she took the phone. “More than not smart. But thank you. For coming and for calling me. I was scared...”

“I would’ve been surprised if you weren’t. I called Art after we hung up. He didn’t answer, but I left a message. If you could update him—”

Her brows drew together tightly. “Why can’t you?”

Pushing to my feet, I tucked my hands into my pockets. “I told you. If it got Art his kid back, I’d stay away. I’d do anything for those two.” There wasn’t much left to be said, so I gave Sophie a small smile. “Be good, kiddo. No more running away. I expect to see you doing something great in a few years.”

Her lip trembled and her eyes were full of tears, but I stepped away from the duo. Dad stood to follow me and I was about to leave when Art called out, his voice tearing at the now familiar pain in my chest.

“Sophie!”

Sophie spun around, wrenching herself away from her mother and taking off towards her dad. He scooped her up the second she was close enough, hugging her tightly. It

was heartwarming to watch and also unbelievably painful. I couldn't stand around here anymore. Not when the future I wanted but couldn't have was so close. Art looked towards me and our eyes locked for a second, but I didn't linger. I dipped my chin, forcing myself to smile, and launched into the air without a word, my dad right behind me.

For Sophie's sake, I hoped they'd work it out. At least make the sacrifice worth it. Because I knew deep down, I'd never recover.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### ARTHUR

I had to take time off work on Friday because I was too torn apart to function. I managed to force myself into the office on Monday, but I wasn't truly there. I barely remembered the work I did and I would need to check over it later because I probably made a lot of mistakes. I was staring off into space, not even looking at my lunch, when Henry found me. He sat down next to me, chatty and happy like usual, but the look on my face must have tipped him off that something was wrong.

"Hey... You okay?"

I couldn't answer that. I mean, I could, the answer was no, but I couldn't say it out loud. In less than ten minutes, my life had fallen apart spectacularly, and I still hadn't recovered enough to even talk about it. This was my first weekend ever without Sophie. I still didn't know why Val had shown up so late on a Thursday night, but it wasn't like it mattered. She still took away my daughter without an ounce of remorse.

"Come with me."

Henry urged me out of my seat, guiding me with a hand on my shoulder out of the



office. I followed blindly, too heartbroken to really care where we were going. When he pushed on my shoulder to force me onto a bench, I barely blinked, folding in on myself.

“Artie, talk to me. You look like someone died. What’s wrong?”

It felt a little like someone had. Or that I had. I knew Henry was just trying to be my friend, and I didn’t want to push him away, but I didn’t want to admit out loud that I lost everything. It hurt too much.

He waited a little while, trying to give me a chance to work up the nerve to speak. That never happened and he let it go, letting out a long breath.

“I suppose this isn’t a good time to tell you that my brother loved the demo you gave me. He’s going to introduce himself at a show they have this week.”

Blinking a few times, I looked over at him. I’d forgotten about that entirely. The news was bittersweet, but I offered Henry a small smile.

“That’s great. Thank you for doing that.”

Henry’s brows drew in tighter. “I thought you’d be more excited. You were practically vibrating last week when I offered. Did something happen with you and your boyfriend?”

The question wasn’t meant to hurt me, but it did more than I could readily admit. I actually grimaced and curled in on myself, the pain in my chest burning like fire. I missed him. I missed him so damn much. My divorce wasn’t this painful, and I’d been with Val for ten years. But three days without Hendrix was buckling me. I regretted sending him away. I thought it’d make Val change her mind. Instead, I lost Sophie and Hendrix both. And I wasn’t ever going to get them back.

Henry didn't ask about it again. He sat beside me, rubbing my back and offering me comfort, until it was time to go back to work. I made it through the rest of the day in a daze and barely remembered the drive home.

When I got the call from Hendrix, I ignored it. It hurt too much to answer him. I wanted to take back sending him away the minute I did, but I knew there wasn't a chance that Val would give Sophie back if he was still around. It felt like I was being torn in two between my daughter and the man I loved. A notification came up that he left me a message and for at least ten minutes, I tried to ignore it. I knew it'd only hurt me if I listened to it. And yet I couldn't stop myself. I put my phone to my ear, listening to his voice, and it hurt so much, I almost missed the message.

"Sophie ran away. I'm with her now at the park and we're waiting for her mom to come get her. I thought maybe you'd want to be here to talk to her."

My stomach dropped to my feet, and I stood frozen for a second before I burst into motion. Hendrix let me know in the message where Sophie was and I headed straight there, my heart thundering in my chest. She ran away. I never thought she'd do something like that. I knew this divorce was hard, and she was upset about what was happening, but I didn't realize she'd reached that level of upset. I rolled through stop signs, barely glancing around for traffic to get to Sophie faster.

I saw them when I parked. Hendrix and another demon were standing, talking to Val, who looked uncomfortable being near them. But my focus was on Sophie. She was standing by Val's side, her eyes on the ground and a backpack at her feet. She looked so upset and it tore at my insides.

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Jerking the car into the nearest parking spot, I barely managed to park it properly and shut it off before I was racing to join them.

“Sophie!”

Her head whipped around and she shoved away from Val, tearing across the playground and throwing herself into my arms.

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She sobbed against my chest, clinging to me in a death grip. I took a second just to hold her, breathing in her strawberry shampoo. One weekend away from her was too hard. I couldn’t handle another.

I’d never once fought Val’s demands. I was so worried she’d take away Sophie completely that I gave in to whatever she wanted, just to make sure I had my time. But she was going to take Sophie away anyway. I needed to stand up for myself or I’d never see my daughter again.

My eyes opened, my gaze sweeping to where I last saw them. Val was headed our way, but I took a second to look at Hendrix. He looked just as broken as I felt, but he forced a small smile and dipped his chin before flying off with the other demon close behind him. I watched him go, my chest aching, until Val stood in front of me.

“What happened?” I demanded.

Her face hardened, objecting to my tone, but I deserved answers. I didn’t miss the

fact that Hendrix was the one to call me. Val never told me Sophie was missing or that they had found her. I knew without a shadow of a doubt, if she'd had her way, she would never have told me. That much was obvious from the look on her face.

"She ran away. She's fine now. I—"

"No, Val. She isn't." I hugged my crying girl tighter, glaring at my ex-wife. "What part of this is fine? How is her being so upset about what happened that she'd run away fine?"

Val crossed her arms over her chest, her chin lifted defiantly. I didn't understand where this had come from. This wasn't the woman I knew in college. Over time, she'd gotten worse and worse until she was hardly recognizable. This wasn't the same woman who refused to let our little girl sleep in a crib because she was too far from her.

"This doesn't change anything, Arthur. You—"

"Don't start," I snapped. "You want to bring me to court, then fine. I'll be more than happy to provide ample evidence that I'm a good father to our little girl. And I'll make sure to share with them that she is running away on your watch and that you refused to share that information with me. I'm done letting you push me around, Valeria. She's my daughter too. I'm not giving her up without a fight."

Val seethed, glaring at me, but a voice spoke behind her before she could reply. "We're not taking her from you. Right, Valeria?"

I didn't recognize the man behind her. He'd been waiting in the car, but came to join us now that we were talking. He was dressed in a smart suit and his black hair was combed back in Val's favorite style. I had to assume that was her boyfriend. She made me dress and look the same way when we'd been together. But unlike me, this

guy screamed money and power. It made me a little nervous, my grip tightening on Sophie ever so slightly.

Val spun around to glare at the man, but he shot her a look and she stayed silent. Giving me his full attention, he offered me his hand. “I’m Lee. I’m sorry I haven’t introduced myself sooner. I had an important client at work and I’ve been busy.”

Shaking his hand, I kept my tight grip on Sophie. “You’re the boyfriend. Sophie told me.”

He nodded. “That’s right. Though, I had been preparing to propose this weekend. I’ve put that on hold for now. I can’t in good conscience marry a woman who would tear a little girl away from her father just because she didn’t like the race or gender of who he was dating. It doesn’t bode well for the future should we have any children ourselves.”

Val looked both hurt and angry. I held little sympathy for her, not after what she’d done, but I cared about her once. I didn’t want her to be unhappy.

“While I appreciate that, you shouldn’t go into a relationship expecting it to fail. Val and I never would’ve worked out in the long run. That could be different for the two of you.”

Val looked up, surprised. “You’re... You’re standing up for me? Why?”

Rubbing my hand slowly over Sophie’s back, I fought with my emotions. I wanted to keep yelling, to tell her off for everything she’d done. But it wouldn’t help the situation. I had to stay calm.

“I’ve always wanted you to be happy, Val. I spent ten years trying to make that happen. It didn’t work out with us, but that doesn’t mean I want things to go poorly

for you now. I just want my daughter back.”

Sophie’s arms tightened around my neck at the mention of her being taken away. I leaned my head against hers, reminding her I was right there with her.

“Val and I have spent the weekend discussing this,” Lee interjected. “I don’t think it’s right what she’s been doing. And because I’m a lawyer, I warned her I’d take her cousin on if she continued. I love her, but I won’t let her ruin your relationship with your daughter. If she wants to continue our relationship, she’ll need to reevaluate how she treats her daughter’s father.”

I was stunned that this man was standing up for me. Especially against Val. She didn’t look happy about it, but I also noticed that whenever he mentioned ending their relationship, she looked really hurt. She didn’t want to lose her relationship with him. I guess she really did prefer a man with a backbone.

Lee looked at her expectantly, and Val sighed. “I won’t sue for full custody.” She shot Lee a frown before turning to me. “I was going to. I don’t like the idea of Sophie around—”

Lee cleared his throat and Val backtracked a little.

“Well, anyway. I’m willing to discuss rearranging the visitation schedule. With planning the wedding and a future family, I’ll be busy. I’m sure Sophie would like more one-on-one time with you.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### ARTHUR

Relief slammed into me hard, and I cuddled Sophie close, tears pricking behind my eyes. “I’d really appreciate that.”

She rolled her eyes. She never liked it when I cried. “Well, she shouldn’t be rewarded for running away, so I think we should discuss it later. Sophie?”

I didn’t want to let her go, but Val had a point. I didn’t want Sophie to think she could do dangerous things like this just to get her way. I set her on her feet, squatting down in front of her so we were eye to eye. Squeezing her hands, I lifted my eyebrows at her.

“Your mom is right. Running away was not okay. I understand being upset and I promise we’ll be together soon. But for now, you need to go home with your mom and Lee.”

“But—”

“You are the light of my life, Sofía Grace. If something had happened to you, I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself. You gave me and your mom a heart attack. So go home and cuddle your mom. Let her see that you’re safe and sound. She loves you just as much as I do, sweetheart. You need to give her time to settle.”

Sophie’s frown was deep and uncertain, but when she glanced back at Val and saw

the hurt on her face, she nodded. “Okay, daddy. But you’ll get me after school on Friday, right?”

I held up my pinky, linking it with hers. “I promise. And you can call me whenever you want if you’re unsure.”

“Just no more stealing my phone,” Lee added, though his voice held no actual anger to it. He mostly looked amused. “If you asked, I would’ve let you call him anyway.”

When I frowned, he shook his head. “It’s nothing. Come on, Sophie. Let’s get your stuff. I’m sure your mom and dad want to talk for a minute.”

He held out his hand to her with calm patience. She gripped me in one last soul squeezing hug, and after an encouraging nod from me, she took Lee’s hand and went to gather her things from the playground.

Pushing to my feet, I watched her go before turning back to Val. She was watching too, her lips pressed into a flat line.

“I was always jealous of you. She loves you so much more than me. How long until she refuses to come back home?”

“She doesn’t love me more, Val. She loves you just as much. But you need to let up a little. She’s just a kid and you hound her too much about studying. Of course she wants to come with me more. I let her play and breathe for a few days. If you want to be closer with her, then play with her. Hug her. You used to all the time when she was little.”

Her face tightened as she watched Lee help Sophie into the car. “I know. But then I noticed how smart she is. I want her to succeed. She’s going to do something great. Everyone sees that. Even your friend said so.”



She wrinkled her nose at the word friend, ignoring who he actually was to me, but didn't mention her feelings on the matter again. I was glad for that. I had some serious apologies to make to Hendrix. He offered to leave to help me. When in truth, I needed to help myself. I shouldn't have let him walk away. Even after I hurt him, he showed up for Sophie. And he kept me in the loop, even though we hadn't spoken in a few days. He was a good man. I shouldn't have to give him up just to appease Val.

"He's... not a bad man. Your... friend." She grimaced again before continuing. "He didn't have to call me. He could've brought her to you and let me suffer for chasing her away. But he said he'd never do that. And he said..." She frowned at me. "He said he was staying away from you just so you could have Sophie back."

Crossing my arms, I glared at her. "He was. I intend to change that. You don't get to dictate who I spend time with anymore. Hendrix is a good man. He makes me happy. And he's good with Sophie. You should get to know him before judging him."

With the way she wrinkled her nose, I could tell she had no interest in doing that. But she didn't argue about it anymore.

"I'm good. As long as Sophie's grades stay up and she's not in any danger, you can be with who you want. I just... I just want her to be happy."

There was a tinge of sadness in her tone and I could tell she regretted letting it get this far. For Sophie's sake, I put my anger aside, putting my hand on Val's arm.

"I know that. And so does she. You should spend time with her this week. No studying. Just being together. I'm sure she misses the way things used to be."

Val sighed and nodded. She looked like she was going to walk away without another word, but she turned back to me, a deep frown on her face.

“Were you always...”

She gestured to me, but didn't finish her sentence. I wanted to roll my eyes at her refusal to say the words, but I pushed past that and answered her honestly.

“Probably. I was curious for a long time. But then I married you and I was content with what we had. I wouldn't take back our relationship. It got us Sophie.”

Her expression softened a little, and she nodded, walking away without another word. I didn't feel like Val was going to accept my sexuality any time soon, but at least she was willing to talk openly about it. I had to take baby steps with her.

Letting out a long breath, I watched them drive away. The past few days had been a roller coaster, and I still felt the strain on my system. Things were on the mend with Val and I would see Sophie soon. But there was one person I hurt that I still had to apologize to.

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It didn't feel right to talk to him over the phone, and since we'd only ever teleported to his place, I wasn't entirely sure where he lived. I asked Henry at work the following day, but he was just as stumped as I was. He thought I should invite him out over the phone, but it still felt wrong. I figured the best time to approach him would be after his show. It sucked to wait, but I wanted to look him in the eye when I apologized to him.

It was the night before their regular show and I was trying to figure out the best way to apologize when I got a phone call from a number I didn't recognize. I answered it hesitantly, trying to hear the speaker over the noise on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Artie, thank god. We need you."

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. "Laz? What's wrong?"

"It's Hen. I'm not sure what happened to him, but he's wrecked. We've got an important gig tomorrow, and he's fucking hammered. He's saying he doesn't want to sing anymore. He's not normally like this. I don't know what the fuck to do!"

"Okay, okay. Calm down. Where are you?"

"Envy. He's been glued to the barstool since they opened. Not even his friends can get him to move."

"I'm on my way. I'll be there soon."

Guilt slammed into me in every direction as I raced out of the house. This was my fault. I broke his heart because I was terrified of losing my daughter. I shouldn't have waited so long to apologize. No time was going to be perfect. I should've just sucked it up and called him.

Worried he'd keep drinking if I didn't call him, I plugged the phone into my car and dialed his number while pulling out of my driveway. It went to voicemail the first time, but I kept trying, and he finally answered the third time around.

"Hold on, Artie. Callum is wrestling a beer from him right now," Maya ground out. "Hendrix! It's Artie. Don't you want to talk to him?"

"Huh?"

"Come on, give up the bottle. Talk to Artie instead."

There was some noise, and Hendrix sounded suspicious as his voice got closer. "You're lying. He doesn't want to talk to me. I ruined his life."

I thumped my head against the headrest, pain coursing through me like lightning. Gripping the steering wheel tightly, I tried to yell loud enough for him to hear me. "No! Hendrix, no, you didn't!"

He sucked in a breath, his voice getting clearer, like he'd finally put the phone to his ear. "Art?"

"You didn't ruin anything. I promise. Please don't say that."

"But your ex—"

"Admitted she was wrong. Or at least her boyfriend did. You didn't ruin my life."

His words were slurred, and he'd obviously been drinking for a while. I wasn't sure if he was actually hearing what I was saying or not. The noise on the phone muffled a little and Hendrix got louder, whispering into the phone.

"I miss the heck outta you. You're my mate. Did you know that? I figured it out after you left. Feels like you took my soul with you. I'll never find someone better. I wish I didn't have to stay away."

"You don't! You don't, Hendrix! I— Shit, I really didn't want to do this over the phone."

"That's fine. I get it. I'm gonna go now. I didn't finish my drink. I hope you get Sophie back. I want you to be happy."

"Hendrix, wait—"

He hung up before I could get through to him. He was really too drunk to be having this conversation. I sped through a yellow light, wishing I could teleport like he could so this wouldn't take so long. I wasn't really sure what he meant by mate, but I had the same painful hole in my chest that he did. I couldn't stomach the thought of him feeling that way.

I got caught in my seatbelt trying to get out of the car in a hurry, and bypassed the line without an ounce of guilt to get to the front. Laz was waiting for me by the door and he gripped the back of my neck, shouting over the noise of the club.

"What the hell happened?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. I'm going to fix it. Where is he?"

"In your seat. He's a mess, Artie."

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I couldn't see him at first. There were too many bodies in the club. It was crowded for a Wednesday night, but there were signs about some kind of party on the walls. I didn't pay any attention to it, weaving my way through the crowd to my favorite spot on the other side of the bar. The band and Hendrix's friends from the wedding all stood around him, watching him as he argued with Maya about having another drink. He looked wrecked, and I wasn't sure what I could say to get through to him in that state. Didn't mean I wasn't going to try.

"Hendrix."

His brow furrowed, and he looked confused, spinning around in his seat. He nearly toppled and his friend Callum had to right him on the stool again. A slow smile spread across Hendrix's face and he leaned back against his friend, looking up at him.

"Maybe you're right. I've had a lot. Does alcohol make you hallucinate? I thought only drugs did that."

"Not a hallucination, my friend," Felix called from close by. He looked worried, which was unusual for him. "Your mate is right there. So put down the bottle and let us take you home."

Hendrix snorted, showing no interest in leaving right now. I stepped closer, between his knees, and when my hands cupped his face, he frowned at me.

"Really realistic hallucination," he murmured.

"I'm right here, Hendrix. I'm sorry for what happened. I shouldn't have let you take

the fall. I promise, it's gonna be okay."

He leaned heavily into my hands, humming softly. "Mm. 'm tired, Art. Can't sleep without you anymore."

"Then come home with me. I won't leave your side."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### HENDRIX

My head was throbbing when I woke up. I didn't normally go that hard. I had a clear example of what too much alcohol could do to a person throughout childhood. I didn't have more than a beer if I was out with friends. But it numbed the pain a little, and I just kept wanting more so I wouldn't have to feel it. I was feeling it now, and I regretted every damn drink.

"Here. Drink this."

My eyes flew open when the familiar voice spoke and I winced automatically as the sunlight assaulted my eyes.

"Shit."

Holding the bottle to my lips, Art urged me to drink. The smell was familiar, though it was the first time I'd ever needed a hangover potion before. Usually I was feeding them to my friends. The magic washed through me like cool water, dulling the ache in my head and settling my stomach. I sighed with relief, cracking my eyes open again.

"Art? What... Where am I?"

“My place. Laz called me last night. You were really drunk, and they were worried about you.”

Damn. They called my ex because I was too drunk to function and too stupid to tell them beforehand that we broke up. This was awkward. I shoved myself up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, scrubbing roughly at my face.

“I’m sorry. They shouldn’t have called you. I—”

“I fixed things with Val. Well, her boyfriend did a lot of the work, but she’s agreed not to touch the custody arrangement. And she’s going to revisit my visitation schedule and give me more time with Sophie.”

As much as it hurt to be this close to him when I couldn’t have him, I was happy it worked. Leaving got him what he needed. The pain was worth it.

“That’s great. I’m happy for you. I’m gonna head out before she figures out I’m here. Wouldn’t want you to get into trouble again.”

“Hendrix, wait. Please.”

I kept my eyes on the floor, seriously debating teleporting to escape. I was happy for Art, but I couldn’t be here. It hurt too much.

His hands cupped my face, forcing me to look at him. I couldn’t hold back the whine, the pain in my chest compounding as I took him in. He looked exhausted, heartbroken, and worried. I did that. I’d need to tell my friends to leave him alone, because it was killing me to continue to hurt him like this.

“I’m sorry.”



Frowning, I searched his face. “For what?”

“For letting you walk away. For not having enough backbone to stand up for our relationship. I regret every second of that interaction. I shouldn’t have let you take the fall. I love you, Hendrix.”

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It was painful to hear him say that and I tried to push his hands away, but he tightened his grip, leaning to rest his forehead against mine.

“I love you and I won’t let Val dictate who I spend my life with. I’m not willing to give you up.”

Hope surged in my chest, battered and bruised from the week of pain and turmoil. I didn’t know if I could trust it, but I desperately wanted to.

“What about Sophie?”

“I told you, that’s not going to be a problem anymore. We figured it out. I’ll pick her up again on Friday, just like normal. And I’ll call Val over the weekend to discuss a new schedule. I shouldn’t have let her dictate that time in the first place. If I want to be a good father to Sophie, I need to stand up for myself.”

Resting my hands on his wrists, I shook my head. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if you take me back, I’ll get to have both. You and my daughter. I love you, Hendrix. I don’t want to lose you.”

A lump in my throat choked back any words I wanted to get out and tears burned in my eyes. I wanted him back more than I wanted my next breath, but I couldn’t get past the lump to tell him that. Instead, I pulled him closer, sealing my lips against his. It was every bit as perfect as I remembered. I kissed him frantically, desperately, until we fell back onto the mattress and he laid on top of me. The feel of his body against mine was like coming home, and I hugged him tightly against my chest, my face

buried against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Don’t. I get it. I love you. I love you so damn much.”

We stayed that way, wrapped around each other, going back and forth on apologies and I love you's, until it got to be too much and we both had to laugh. Kissing me softly, Art leaned back to look me in the eye.

“Tell me what a mate is.”

My breath caught in my chest and my mouth fell open. “How—”

A slow smile took over his face. “You don’t remember? You told me when I called you last night. You said I was your mate. What does that mean?”

Aw damn. I didn’t remember any of last night, but apparently in my drunken stupor I told Art what he was to me.

“It’s uh... sort of like soul mates, I guess. A deep connection linking two people who love each other. Demons only ever get one. You’re it for me.”

His smile was soft and warm and so damn happy. I loved that smile. It was the smile that made me fall in love with him. It was hard to believe that I could keep him, that our relationship wasn’t going to tear apart his life. But Art didn’t lie to me. He was good, down to his core. And he loved me. I could see it in his eyes.

“Laz said you had an important gig tonight. Are you gonna be up for it?”

It took me a second to remember what gig he was talking about, but I sucked in a

breath, giving Art a wide eyed look when I remember. “Oh shit. Yeah. I wanted to tell you about that. Someone from Envision Records contacted us. They heard our music and want to meet us. We might get a deal with them.”

Art smiled brightly, but his lack of surprise confused me. I studied his face, my eyes narrowing slightly.

“Did someone already tell you?”

He lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. “I heard a rumor.”

He was being too damn casual about it. I knew him. He was fighting for us to get a contract with a label and Envision was the best of the best. He wouldn’t be this calm unless—

“You called them.”

He scrunched up his nose, shifting his glasses a little. “Sort of? My coworker’s older brother works for them. I gave him the demo from the studio. He told me earlier this week that they were interested.”

“Holy shit. It was you! You got us a fucking record deal!” Yanking him against me, I rolled us over, caging him with my body as I peppered his face with kisses. He laughed, looping his arms around my neck to keep me close. I knew Art wanted us to succeed. He went above and beyond to help us. I never thought he’d go so far as to put us on Envision’s radar. That was the dream. And he went out and got it for us.

I stared at him, wide eyed and gaping, until he chuckled and drew me closer, kissing the side of my mouth.

“I’m proud of you, Hendrix. I might’ve sent over the file, but it was your music that

caught their attention. I told you, you're gonna make it big someday. And I'm going to be there to see you do it."

My chest tightened, and I almost started sobbing like a baby. This man was beyond perfect, and he was all mine. I kissed him softly, trying to memorize the feeling of his lips on mine, until he drew away enough to whisper against my lips.

"You know, I think this calls for a celebration. I think it's your turn, isn't it?"

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All my blood rushed south in an instant and I jerked back to look at him. “Really? You want to—”

He flushed, shrugging his shoulders, a shy smile on his face. “I mean, if you’re up for it.”

“Babe, if I’m ever not up for it, I’ll have one foot in the grave.”

He chuckled, dragging me down for another kiss. We moved slower this time, savoring it. It was Art’s first time, and I wasn’t willing to rush it. I peeled him out of his clothes, brushing kisses along every inch I exposed, but I kept going back to his mouth for more. I couldn’t get enough of him. One week apart almost killed me.

I was less patient with my own clothes, but I stopped rushing once we were skin to skin, touching every inch of him. And I wasn’t the only one. Art’s hands moved over me, down my chest and over my arms. When he ran his fingers over the length of my horns, I shuddered and groaned into his mouth, snagging his hands and pinning them to the bed. I liked the touch, but I didn’t want to get anywhere near losing control right now. I needed to be careful with my mate, for his first time at least.

Damn, that word sounded good. I smiled against Art’s mouth, dragging my lips down his throat to suck on his neck. I wanted to brand him, to let the entire world know he was mine. He moaned, shifting restlessly beneath me as I teased him.

“Hendrix... please...”

“Anything you want is yours, Art. You have all of me.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### ARTHUR

We were supposed to be talking. I'd wanted to reassure him again that I wasn't going anywhere. But I needed the connection. Needed to feel him against me. I struggled against his hold on my wrists, writhing as each suck on my neck sent lightning down my spine. My body pulsed with need and I could feel my cock leaking onto my belly.

"Hendrix... please..."

"Anything you want is yours, Art. You have all of me."

My heart skipped a beat at his soft promise, love expanding throughout my body so intensely I was surprised it wasn't spilling out of my eyes. I tugged on my wrists again and when he finally released me, I slid my arms around his neck.

"Take me, Hendrix. I want to feel you."

He groaned loudly, squeezing me tightly for a moment before he reached for my nightstand and the lube I had stashed inside. I shot him a questioning look when he spread it on his tail, but he shook his head, a smile pulling at his lips.

"Trust me."

"I do. Always."

A tender look crossed his face before he slid his arm under my leg, pulling it up close to my chest. A beat of nerves danced over my skin, but Hendrix kept me distracted with his lips, first against my mouth and then down my neck when I ripped away on a groan as his tail teased my hole. It felt... strange, but with each pass, the need for him

to be inside me grew. I wiggled closer, silently begging, and he gave me what I wanted, pressing his tail slowly inside. My mouth fell open, my eyes on the ceiling as I surrendered to the feel of him inside me. It was thin enough at first that I felt no pain. It was when he started to twist and fill me more that I felt the stretch.

“Oh god that feels good.”

He shuddered above me, letting out a sharp breath. I could feel the tension in his arms, the fight in his body to keep himself under control. I loved that he was taking his time, introducing me to everything slowly. He always knew what to do to make me feel loved and cherished. I nudged his temple with my chin, asking for another kiss, but right as he pressed his lips against mine, he did something that sent pleasure cascading through my body.

“Oh!”

He chuckled, watching me as I writhed from the assault. “Now you know how I feel. Your dick is so damn perfect, it pegged that spot the whole time you were inside me. I nearly came in under a minute.”

“D-Definitely... potential... for that,” I ground out, squeezing my eyes shut as I tried to focus on anything other than how close I was.

When he pulled his tail free, I whimpered, my body still pulsing and needy. Hendrix shook his head.

“Nuh uh. I want to be inside you when you come. Hold tight for a second.”

He paused long enough to slick up his cock, hooking my leg over his shoulder as he lined himself up. I thought I’d be nervous or freaked out if I ever got this far, but I didn’t feel any of that. I just felt needy. I dragged him closer, sucking in a breath as he



pushed enough for the head of his cock to slip inside.

I waited for the pain. I'd read it hurt the first time, but other than a small sting at first, I didn't feel anything but pressure. Pressure and pleasure. Just the knowledge that he was inside me made my cock twitch and I gripped his hips, tugging him in closer. He slid in farther, groaning as I urged him on.

"Damn, Art. You're such a beautiful surprise."

I hummed, too focused on the feel of him inside me to speak. He pressed forward until his hips were against my ass and I was full beyond measure. Hendrix paused, taking a few breaths, but my usual level of patience was obliterated.

“More. Please, Hendrix.”

His breath stuttered, and his hips snapped once like a reflex. Pleasure slammed into me, making me gasp, and my hands tightened on his hips.

“Again. Again, again, please.”

“Ah, shit... I—” He bucked against me, each movement sending waves of pleasure throughout my whole body. I kept begging, kept urging him on, until it felt so good that I couldn’t breathe, much less speak. His cock brushed against my prostate with every thrust, his body surrounding mine as he leaned over me. My release was barreling towards me too soon, and yet not soon enough. I wanted it to last forever, to prolong the pleasure, but I also wanted to explode, my body demanding it as tingles started at the base of my spine.

“I love you. I love you so damn much, Art. Fuck, I—”

I felt it before I heard it, Hendrix’s release flooding my body as he came with a shout. The look on his face, combined with the feeling, sent me flying after him, completely untouched. I’d never experienced that before and it was overwhelming, to say the very least. The amount of pleasure coursing through my body was intense, and the edges of my vision went black. I may have even passed out for a second because when I blinked again, Hendrix was collapsed on top of me and we were both fighting for breath.

Cupping his face, I lifted his head so I could kiss him gently. “I love you too. Mate.”

As much as I wanted to spend the entire day in bed with Hendrix, there wasn't a chance he was missing the gig tonight. Hendrix worked too hard to blow it all away for sex. Besides, I fully planned on dragging him home with me once the night was through. I wouldn't be getting any more surprise visits. Val showed up last week because there was a school holiday she didn't know about and she needed me to take Sophie because she had an early meeting. Since I wouldn't answer my phone, she figured I was asleep, and she was going to wake me to let me know she needed Sophie to stay early. It honestly wouldn't have bothered me if she did, but because I didn't hear my phone during the concert and I was busy once I got home, things just went sideways. This week was a normal week at school, though, and I promised Sophie I'd pick her up tomorrow. Tonight, Hendrix was all mine.

Hendrix dragged me backstage, and the room went silent as they all studied him carefully. He sighed.

"Shut up. We all have bad days. I'm fine now."

"Uh huh. Art? Is he good?" Ruby queried, ignoring Hendrix's incredulous gape. I snickered and shrugged.

"As good as a rock star before a show."

That made them cackle and Hendrix grinned, kissing me soundly before setting himself up to get ready. I stuck around to make sure everyone was hydrated and ready and snuck back out to find my spot by the bar. The club was crowded, and I heard the excited murmurs as people waited for Children of Myth to take the stage. It was so different from when I first met them, when the crowd was mostly leftovers for other bands. Their popularity was on the rise and soon they'd be playing in bigger and better places, making way for the next undiscovered talent to shine.

Maya saved me my favorite spot, tipping her head towards the other end of the bar.

Henry stood by an older version of him, waving at me when he noticed me watching. He pointed at his brother and gave a thumbs up, making me grin. This was it. This was their big break. I wasn't even on the stage and I felt almost giddy with nerves and excitement.

The band came out and Hendrix beamed at the screams of the crowd, lifting his hand in greeting. He introduced the band and himself, giving everyone their turn in the spotlight. Then he strummed a familiar note, starting them off on my favorite song. I couldn't hold a tune, so I didn't sing along, but I swayed with the crowd and hummed it to myself. I knew their entire set, familiar and yet so exciting every time, so I knew what was coming before they started.

Except, when they were supposed to be finishing out with one of their older songs, when Ruby started the beat, it wasn't a song I was familiar with. Excitement built slowly, and I stared wide eyed as they introduced a new song.

"We've got a few songs in the works, but this one jumped out at us. As a special treat, we're gonna share it with you tonight."

Aliyah's guitar cut through the noise of the crowd. Her wild riff got the crowd going, and then Hendrix took over, his grin making my stomach flip. Even though I knew he couldn't seeme, it felt like he was looking at me. I was locked in his gaze, completely enraptured, as he belted a song that took my breath away.

I didn't know I needed you until I had you, and now I can't let go.

That line especially shook me. I didn't know when I got to my feet, but I was moving towards the stage before I even thought about it. My heart was pounding, almost drowning out the music, but Hendrix's voice was louder and I couldn't miss a word that he was saying.

You shook me up and brought me back to life. Darling, you're everything to me, so make me yours.

I didn't stop until I was standing in front of him. I thought he couldn't see me through the lights, but he tracked me through the crowd and when I stopped in front of him, his eyes stayed on me. This wasn't something he'd made up on the spot. It was too perfect for that. He was working on this for a while. Long before our break. My chest swelled with happiness and when Hendrix smiled down at me, I felt like I was flying.

You're everything to me, baby, so please don't let me go.

I mouthed the word 'never', hoping he could see me enough to get the message. I started listening to the Children of Myth because their music resonated with me. They sang what was going on inside my head and I finally felt a little less alone. Now, Hendrix sang just for me, and I felt like I was part of the music. Part of the band, part of the thousands of people just like me who would hear it and feel the same way I had. I'd never be alone again. And it was all thanks to him.

## EPILOGUE

### ARTHUR

"Daddy! Come on!"

I chuckled, tugging the band t-shirt over my button up. Mine was special and had the word manager stamped across the back. I still worked in finance, but as the band got more popular, I was transitioning more and more to managing them full time. The studio had someone who was with them when I wasn't, but they wouldn't sign unless I was in the paperwork as their official manager. I loved it, and I was making plans to join them permanently soon.

“I’m coming, Princess. Did you text Zach?” Malakai’s mate was nice enough to agree to watch Sophie during the concert. It wasn’t her first, she’d gone to some smaller shows when they were first gaining traction, but they were bigger now, and she wanted a front row view. With Hendrix’s friends watching out for her, I felt safe enough to let her stay up front. She was close enough that if there was any trouble, Hendrix could just grab her. He told me that when I mentioned how nervous I was. He always did everything in his power to make sure I was comfortable and happy.

“Yeah, they’re already on their way. So we should go!”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:47 am*

Jogging down the stairs, I leaned down to kiss her forehead. “You’re antsy today. You know we can’t go anywhere until Hendrix comes to get us.”

She waved her hand impatiently towards the living room and when I poked my head in, I couldn’t help but laugh. He was lounging on the couch like a big cat, completely at ease, like he didn’t have a huge concert to play in a little over an hour.

“So you’re the reason she’s losing it. Shouldn’t you be at practice right now?”

“Let out early,” he drawled. “Our manager said if we don’t relax before a show, we’ll overwork ourselves.” He followed up with a wink because I was the one who said that. I was mostly backing him up since his bandmates still complained about his meditating, but I waved that away. He was here, and I was always happy to see him. I leaned over the couch, smacking a quick kiss against his lips.

“Alright, handsome. Just let me grab my camera and I’ll be ready to go.”

He sat up, snagging Sophie around the waist to fix her headband that kept slipping off her head. It lit up and flashed, which would make her easier to find in the crowd once Hendrix was on stage. “Hey, did Francisco talk to you about the next cover?”

We did eventually get the band to Hendrix’s spot on the overlook. I was nervous if they’d like the picture, and we mostly just went up there for fun, but the band loved it, and Duncan went behind my back to show the management team above me so they could use it for a cover. Now, their next album was coming up, and the team kept asking me to take more photos for the next one. It made me proud and a little embarrassed.

“Yes, we’re working on some ideas. They want to do something artsy, but they want a bunch of candid shots for the booklet and the collector items. I’ll probably help with those.”

“You can do both, you know!” he called as I walked away to get my camera. I fought back a grin, grabbing the case and a few spare batteries. Last time I got overzealous on the pictures of the band in the dressing room, and my battery died halfway through the concert. When I came back out, Sophie was on Hendrix’s back, clinging to him like a koala. She was eleven now, and getting taller every day, but Hendrix and I had the same mindset. Until she asked us to stop, we’d keep picking her up when she wanted us to.

“Daddy!”

“Okay, okay. I’m here. Let’s get going.”

With one arm tucked behind him to support Sophie, Hendrix wrapped his free arm around me, drawing me in for a kiss. In a blink, we were at the venue for the concert, popping up right on stage. Sophie squealed and slid off Hendrix's back, waving at the staff who were finishing up. They would be letting people in soon, but for now, it was just us on that huge stage. Hendrix looked around, his eyes soft and a little misty.

“Still gets you every time, doesn’t it?”

He nodded, leaning his forehead against mine. “Couldn’t have gotten here without you.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

It was a common argument, and one we would probably never agree on. He thought the opportunities helped him get here, but I knew with time, they would’ve gotten here eventually. They were just that good.



Hendrix closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. I watched him with a smile, keeping my energy low and calm so he could get in the right mindset for the concert. When his eyes opened again, I raised my eyebrows and grinned.

“Ready?”

“With you here with me? Hell yes.”

## HENDRIX

Electricity buzzed under my skin as the band and I finished our last song. We did two encores, but they kept shouting for more. Part of me never wanted to stop. But my voice was raw, and I was covered in sweat, and Art would kill me if I didn’t take care of myself. I waved and bowed, grinning at Aliyah next to me. She was beaming and flushed from the heat of the lights over us. We made the right choice picking her. She was exactly who the band needed.

Instead of heading off the stage, I went straight for the crowd, putting my hands out for Sophie. She was sitting on Brandon’s shoulders, and her lit up headband made her easy to find throughout the concert. She laughed as she got passed along from my friends to security and up to me. I set her on her feet next to me and jerked my chin at the crowd.

“You keep dancing, and this is what you’ll see one day.”

She laughed, shaking her head. She loved dancing, and it was a good hobby to keep her healthy, but she hadn’t decided what she wanted to do yet. She really liked taking pictures with Art and helping him manage the band. She had a lot of options and she was smart enough to do all of it if she wanted to.

Art was waiting for us just off stage, and his smile always made me feel like I was on top of the world. It was better than the concert sometimes, because that smile was just

for me. He grabbed my shirt, dragging me closer to plant a kiss on my mouth. The crowd screamed, but we were used to it by now. I had a plan to claim him publicly by proposing on stage, but he beat me to the punch on our one-year anniversary. He came out right as I was singing our song, and I was completely unaware that he was behind me, down on one knee. The crowd's screams were deafening, and when I finally figured it out, I may have accidentally cursed straight into the microphone. I got yelled at by upper management for that, but they let it go after a while. What person wouldn't forget their surroundings when their mate was proposing to them? Now, a year later, neither of us was shy about showing how we felt about each other. And the fans loved it.

With a final wave, I left the stage with my family, Art's arm around my waist and Sophie's hand in mine. It wasn't the dream I ever thought I wanted, but now that I had it, I couldn't be happier.

The band cheered when Sophie darted into the room. She went straight for Aliyah, who was teaching her how to play guitar in her spare time. Those two were close, and Ruby always watched on with a fond smile as they interacted. They weren't ever going to have kids of their own, but they loved being aunts to Sophie and teaching her new instruments. Val was fine with it because at least she was learning when she was with them. She was still a hardass, but she was so busy with her new babies that she wasn't as harsh as before. Between that and a lot of long conversations with Art, she let up a little on Sophie so she could really enjoy her childhood.

"Alright. Where to next?" I asked, pulling Art into my lap as I dropped onto the couch. That got me a lot of stuff thrown at me, and I laughed, using Art as a shield to dodge balled up pieces of paper. Tonight was the last night of our tour and we were all looking forward to a break. We were taking a few months off to work on some new music and just chill. We definitely earned it.

"Actually, I had an idea for that," Art interrupted. The band listened in because, as our manager, he actually had a say in where we were going.

“I know you guys are taking some time off, which is perfect and exactly what I think you should do. But I’ve been discussing it with upper management and after your break, we were wondering how you’d all feel about an international tour?”

My mouth fell open, and I wasn’t alone. We all gaped at him. It almost felt like he wasn’t speaking English. Because no way would he have actually said what we think he said.

“Wait... What?” Aliyah asked.

“I told you once that you’re going to be big one day. Have I ever lied to you?” Art’s smile was proud, and he locked eyes with each of us before he said, “Children of Myth. You’re going international.”