



Saving a Demon

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Description: Aziel's family wants him dead. That's been true since he was a kid. To stay alive, he keeps his head down and follows orders, including becoming a guardian for his youngest cousin. He knew the job would be a pain in the ass. So when he gets a call from the school about a fight, it didn't really surprise him. He was determined not to let his cousin become like the rest of his family. Even if it meant making him apologize to a human.

Declan had pretty much one goal. To make sure his little brother got a better hand than he did. So when his brother's bully comes to apologize, he figures it was a step in the right direction. But the bully's cousin keeps hanging around. And he's acting really possessive. He had to wonder, was there something dangerous coming? Or was this guy hoping for more?

Aziel thought it couldn't get any worse, but when an oracle told him he had to submit to the human to earn his freedom, Aziel considered that fate really didn't like him. There was no way he was bringing a human into his mess. Even if it meant going against the vision meant to save his life.

Total Pages (Source): 53

CHAPTER ONE

AZIEL

“You are such a disappointment.”

I’d heard those words all my life. Someone might as well engrave them on my forehead at this point. I pressed my lips together to stop myself from saying something that could have me end up on a healer’s bed. Just because they were my family didn’t mean they wouldn’t hurt me.

“You knew when we came here what we expected of you. You have failed time and time again. You’re weak. Soft. Your sister has more balls than you.”

My sister was a grade-A psychopath, so they probably weren’t wrong. Compared to her, I was a fucking saint.

I stood unmoving as my uncle berated me, furious yet again that I’d made no effort in their war against humans. I didn’t believe the same things they did. I didn’t trust humans, but that didn’t mean they deserved to die. It also felt wrong, attacking things so much weaker than me. That excuse didn’t mean anything to my family. They wanted to rule over those weaker than them, and I put my life on the line every day that I refused to hurt random humans who’d done nothing to me and mine.

“Since you’re so determined to act like a woman, you’re beingreassigned. My son is crossing over this evening. You will be his guardian. Full time. Should anything happen to him, your life is over. Do you understand me?”

My jaw clenched in a fight to hold back my tongue. They didn't respect me in this family, but they expected me to raise the next generation? I knew why my uncle was giving him to me. He already had three older sons. The youngest was a surprise and his mother died in childbirth. My uncle had no interest in raising a little kid. That was my job, apparently.

"Answer me, you little shit!" he bellowed.

"I understand."

My uncle sneered at me, hatred and disgust clear in his features. That expression didn't phase me anymore. He could hate me all he wanted. I still wasn't going to hurt humans for him. Humans were like ants. Why go out of my way to hurt something so insignificant?

Okay, that was a little mean. My friends' mates weren't insignificant. Callum's mate, Brandon, was a good guy. He checked in with me a lot, made sure when we met up for poker that I was comfortable. And Felix's mate, Tyler, kept the little shit distracted and off my back. He had to have a strong constitution to put up with all of that. I'd heard Mal was spending time with a human now, too. That worried me a little. One or two I could explain if my family caught wind of my friends' mates. But if they all chose humans? I was worried about the consequences of that. I was considering stepping back from them for a while, so I didn't draw attention from my family to them. They were the only people who mattered to me. I had to keep them safe.

"Aziel!"

My attention snapped back onto my uncle just in time to see him lose his temper. He snapped his fingers at my cousin, who always stood by his father's side. Iluz was about the same size as me, but he lacked any sort of compassion or kindness. He

marched over to me and punched me hard in the gut, smirking when I doubled over. He was a sick fucker who got off on hurting people. He waited long enough for me to look up before punching me again, this time across the jaw. I preferred when they kept the punching to somewhere not on my face. I didn't want my friends asking questions.

It hurt, and I saw stars from the hit, but I didn't move from my spot. If I did, I'd only be asking for more pain. I straightened, masking the pain and staring at my uncle dead on.

"Go pick up my son. Fail me again and I won't be so kind. This is your final warning."

Dipping my chin once to acknowledge him, I teleported out of his office and back into the city. I never teleported directly into my apartment. I didn't want them to know where I lived and I didn't trust them not to try and track me. Instead, I teleported into an alley a few blocks away.

I was told to go to the Other Realm and pick up my cousin, but I needed a damn minute. Leaning heavily against the wall, I gripped my stomach, flexing my jaw. Not broken, luckily. Iluz had fists of stone, and I hated being his punching bag. I took a few deep breaths, waiting for the pain to pass, and ran my claws roughly through my hair.

I hated my family more than words could say. If I could walk away, I would. My friends were my true family, the ones I trusted with my life. But you didn't walk away from the Shadowwalker family. You lived by their rules or died by their hand. There was no escape, no life outside of their rule. My father tried to leave. He died for it.

Pushing away those morbid thoughts, I straightened and pulled out my phone. I was

supposed to meet my friends for poker tonight, but that wasn't going to happen now. I had to get my cousin, then go around the city to get whatever he needed. My uncle wasn't caring in the slightest and probably wouldn't send the kid with more than the clothes on his back. I texted Mal, since it was his day off and he always had his phone on him, and shoved my phone away before teleporting to the transportation tunnel.

There was a line, like usual, but I avoided it, heading a few blocks south to a lesser known tear between the realms. It wasn't as safe as the tunnel, but waiting around wasn't safe either. My uncle would know if I took too long to do his bidding, and I'd suffer for the insult. The tear was tucked between a couple of boulders and looked impossible to pass through, but once you slipped past the tight squeeze at the beginning, it was bigger on the inside. I appeared on the other side and launched into the air, heading for our family home. It wasn't far. My family had been using that tear for generations, and when I landed outside the gate, my cousin was already waiting for me.

"What took you so long?" he demanded.

Dante was still just a kid. Only turned nine a few months ago. He was surly and defiant, which was pretty much expected from a kid in our family, but I saw hints of decency in him. They hadn't managed to stamp that out yet. And I could tell by his tone that he was more upset than angry.

"You ready to go?"

A flicker of emotion swept across his face. Looked like unease. He didn't want to go. But if my uncle made the decision, he had no choice in the matter. Just like I didn't.

"Come on. We've got things to do."

He scowled at me, crossing his arms over his chest. "Like what?"

“Like pick up your bed. Figured you’d want to choose for yourself.”

He looked surprised. Not really a shocker, kindness was rare in our family. I wasn’t like them, though, and I didn’t need to punish a little kid just because my uncle demanded I care for him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Setting my hand on his shoulder, I teleported us to the transport tunnel. I could take us through the tear, but this was Dante's first time crossing over. I preferred to do it safely until he had more control of his magic. And luckily, there was no line on this side, so he didn't have any reason to complain about me to my uncle.

Once we arrived in the human realm, I teleported Dante into the city. I needed to pick up my truck to transport everything he needed. We arrived in the alley and I led him to the sidewalk. It only took a second to realize he wasn't following me. He was glued to the opening of the alley, his eyes wide as he took everything in. I forgot how different the human world was. It was night time, so at least the sunlight did not shock him, but I'd need to remember to get him sunglasses until he got used to the light.

"Dante."

He whipped his head around, his eyes as wide as saucers. "Where are we?"

"The city. Come on. I need to grab my truck."

He hurried after me, a little trepidation showing on his features. They were slowly integrating things from the human realm into the Other Realm, like cell phones and stuff like that, but it wasn't a quick process. Five years wasn't a lot of time to do that kind of thing. Things like cars were rare in the Other Realm because the tunnel wasn't big enough to transport them. They had to realm hop to move something that big, and it required a lot of magic to do it. In the city we were in now, cars were everywhere, and Dante's head kept whipping around to follow one after another as they sped past us.

“You don’t have to be scared. They stay on the road. It’s the law.”

I’d been trying to be supportive, but he took exception to my comment and spun around to glare at me. “I’m not scared! You’re the coward in the family! Everyone says so!”

Huffing out a sigh, I willed myself to have patience. I constantly reminded myself that he was just a kid, biting my tongue when he continued to talk trash. He was only parroting what he’d heard. And really, as my uncle’s son, I didn’t expect any different. I didn’t know how long this guardianship would last, but I hoped it’d be short. Which was stupid to even think about. When did I ever get what I wanted?

CHAPTER TWO

AZIEL

“No way!”

“I’m not arguing with you about this, Dante. You’re going to school.”

“So send me to a paranormal school! I’m not going to a school with stupid humans!”

That had been my plan at first. It surprised me when my uncle told me Dante would be going to a human school. There was a human school close to my apartment, and it would make it easier on me if Dante went there since he could walk home. He was too young to teleport. But I never brought it up because I thought for sure they’d never go for it. Apparently Kaiser, my uncle’s second son, pointed out that Dante could rule the school because he was superior and the humans would do his bidding. Fucking stupid if you asked me. But they didn’t ask, and I didn’t say anything because it was what I wanted. My uncle agreed on the caveat that Dante be trained to gather information for him. The school had some prestigious parents there, and my

uncle liked the idea of blackmailing them.

Things with Dante thus far had been... difficult. He was a pain in the ass, demanding and argumentative at every turn. Instead of being grateful for buying him everything he needed, he decided my act of kindness meant I was a pushover and I'd get him whatever he wanted. He was angry when that turned out not to be the case and he had been fighting me ever since.

"I'm not going. You can't make me. I'll call my dad and—"

A snarl ripped through me, and Dante flinched automatically. I'd never hit him before, but I knew other members of the family had. That was what happened when you didn't fall in line in our family. You got hurt, no matter your age. Dante didn't know I wouldn't do that to him. The snarl was enough to get him to shut up.

"Your dad made the decision. You're going. Get your bag. I'm going to walk you there so you know where to go. If you leave or cause any trouble, I'll hand you over to your dad without remorse. I wonder what he'll do if he finds out you disobeyed his order."

That got him moving. You didn't disobey my uncle. Not even his youngest son would do that. He grumbled about it, but he followed me out of my basement apartment and onto the street. We didn't talk much, but that had been true since the beginning. I didn't want to argue with him, so I didn't engage. It irritated him, but I didn't really care.

The school was about half a mile away. Far enough that I could probably get Dante on the school bus, but I didn't think that'd go over well. And it was good for him to walk and work off some of that irritating energy. He trailed behind me, kicking rocks, until the school came into view. A simple brick building, three stories high, with a line of teachers waiting out front. He wasn't the only paranormal starting this year,

but he was the only demon. I stopped just before we crossed the street in front of the school, kneeling in front of him to look him in the eye.

“Your dad wants you to listen and gather information. That means talking to students. If you chase them away, you won’t be able to report to him like you should. Don’t cause trouble.” I pulled a cell phone out of my pocket, handing it to him. “If you need me, call. I’ve got errands I need to run. Your dad wants to see you when you’re through. I’ll pick you up when school is over.”

He scowled at me, but I saw the fear underneath. He’d been with me all summer and he was still struggling to cope. My hope when sending him here was that he’d integrate better. Maybe even make some friends. Or at least have something to talk about other than how much he hated me. That conversation was getting old.

I followed him across the street and towards the school. One of the teachers broke off from the pack, coming to greet us with a smile on her face. She offered me her hand, and I appreciated the firm grip. She didn’t look afraid of me, which was a step up from normal conversations I had with humans.

“Mr. Nox. Nice to meet you. My name is Margaret Castillo, the principal here at Leighton Prep.”

Nox was the name I used when interacting with humans. Shadowwalker wasn’t well received and my uncle agreed he didn’t want Dante tied with the name while surrounded by so many ‘enemies’. He thought I used the name to go undercover, not just because I didn’t like being tied to a notoriously shitty family.

“Nice to meet you.”

Her attention dropped to Dante, and she offered him her hand as well. “You must be Dante. I heard you’ve got a knack for mathematics and an interest in astronomy. Is

that right?”

Instead of shaking her hand, Dante whipped around to glare at me. “What the hell?”

I lifted a shoulder. They asked when I signed him up about what his interests were. He spent a lot of time outside on the fire escape, staring up at the stars, and I saw him searching for information on my computer about what the lights in the sky were a few weeks in.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Mrs. Castillo didn't look bothered by the fact that Dante didn't shake her hand. She smiled politely, gesturing to the building. "I'm going to give you a tour and walk you to your classroom this morning. Your guardian can come with you, if you want."

He looked conflicted for a second, and if he were in any other family, I was sure he'd ask for me to go with. But he was a Shadowwalker, and we didn't show weakness. He shook off the discomfort, scowling with his arms crossed.

"I don't need him."

Mrs. Castillo raised an eyebrow at me. I shook my head in response. Dante hadn't really warmed up to me and I didn't expect him to any timesoon. He'd probably use the meeting with his dad to complain about me. Maybe they'd finally realize I wasn't guardian material.

My family didn't trust me to do important jobs for them. The last time he tried to get me to do something important, I let the human go with a warning to hide or they'd kill him. He disappeared, and I lied and said I never managed to find him. I took a beating for that one and had to be brought to a healer to survive the night. From then on, I was a watcher, gathering the information my uncle wanted and playing security at one of the many clubs he owned. And now a glorified babysitter. I told Dante I had errands, but truthfully, I sat at a park nearby for most of the day, waiting for him to be through. At least for the first few days, until they knew it was safe, my cousins demanded I stick close. And since I wasn't being asked to hurt anybody, I didn't complain.

I'd been avoiding my friends lately, hoping if I steered clear, Dante wouldn't see

them and report to my uncle about their mates. I argued against Mal's mate, knowing another human in the group meant I'd be forced to steer clear, but that wasn't an argument I could ever win. I got a text from Felix, demanding I show up to the next poker night, but I ignored it like I did every week. It was for his own good that I stayed away.

Still, I missed them. My friends were more family to me than my blood family ever was. I kept them out of the gritty details of what my family did, but they were aware of my connections. They didn't treat me like a criminal. They cared about me and it killed me to not be able to spend time with them as much. Being around them was the only time I ever felt normal.

My phone rang around lunch. I was considering teleporting home for a while to grab some food when it interrupted my train of thought. I answered it on the first ring and still my uncle sounded pissed on the other end.

"Took you long enough."

I rolled my eyes. "I apologize, Uncle. What can I do for you?"

"Where is the boy?"

"Still in school."

He made an irritated noise, and I heard paperwork shuffling in the background. "Do you have information for me?"

"Yes. The Woods guy you were looking for popped up again. I found him sneaking around his old apartment. I sent Kaiser the information for pick up. And Maganti has been following your orders without issue. I don't think he's the rat you're looking for."

“No one asked your opinion,” he snapped. “Just hurry up and bring the boy.”

“School ends at 2:30. I’ll bring him directly to you when it’s through.”

He hung up without response and I sighed, tucking the phone away. This was my life, and I hated every minute of it. But there was no escape in sight. I must’ve done something really messed up in my previous life to end up in this one.

CHAPTER THREE

DECLAN

“Dec!”

Drawing in a breath, I let it out slowly. It was a good thing I was used to my little brother showing up after school. If he startled me while I was in the middle of a tattoo, I could hurt someone. I didn’t look up, but he didn’t really expect me to. He bounced over to me like he had springs in his shoes, a bright smile on his face.

“First day of school today,” he chirped.

“I remember. How’d it go?”

He shrugged, standing on his tiptoes to see the tattoo I was working on properly. The man in the chair was a regular and knew my little brother, so when I pulled back for a second, he shifted so Oliver could get a better view.

“That’s awesome. Can we put that on my list?”

Ben, my apprentice, looked up from his tablet, frowning at my brother. “List for what?”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “Ollie’s got a whole folder of tats he wants once he’s old enough. You’re gonna run out of space before you can fit all of them, you know.”

“Not if I’m as big as dad, I won’t.”

True. Dad was a big dude. A football player in his youth, he fit the build of a defensive linebacker without even trying. I was built more like Mom. Tall and thin. I had muscle, but I wasn’t ever going to be built like Dad. I had a runner’s build and that never really bothered me. Ollie wanted to look like our dad, but he was only eight, so time would tell.

Ollie always came to my shop after school. Our parents didn’t get home for a few hours and they didn’t like leaving him on his own. He hung out with me, played with his devices, and it was rare that anyone complained about him. There were a few nasty clients who didn’t like kids around, but Ollie had always been popular. He was outgoing and friendly, but perfectly happy to play quietly if I needed him to. I liked him coming here. Our age gap didn’t make any difference to me. I’d already moved out and started my apprenticeship when my little brother was born, so to say he was a surprise was an understatement. I volunteered to help my parents when they went back to work and he’d been coming here after school since pre-school.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“Why not design your own?” Carl suggested. He pointed at his tattoo. “This art is something I requested from Declan. You’ll want something unique for your own tats.”

That made Ollie pause, and he tapped his chin thoughtfully. “But I’m not a good drawer.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t always either. I practiced a lot. You don’t just start good at something. Even famous athletes have to practice.”

“Ollie, c’mere. I’ll show you how I practice,” Ben said, waving him over. Ollie tore away, hovering at Ben’s side, and I shook my head with a grin.

“He’s a good kid,” Carl murmured, watching my brother with a fond smile. Carl had his own kids, but they were all grown now. I got the feeling he was missing the younger stages of his kids’ lives.

“Yeah. Super smart too. He told me he wants to be an astronaut.”

“I could see that happening. He good at science?”

Giving my attention back to the tattoo, I smirked to myself. “Like you wouldn’t believe. I bring him to the library every week and he devours every science book I put in front of him. My parents are talking about moving him up a grade because he’s leagues ahead of his classmates.”

“Damn. Smart is an understatement. Kinda hard to imagine an astronaut covered in

tattoos, though.”

I snorted. Pretty sure it was an occupational hazard that my little brother would be interested in tattoos since he spent time with me at work. He already made me promise to have my chair ready for him the day he turned eighteen. I’d be smart about it and make sure he wouldn’t get anything he’d regret, but I wasn’t going to tell him he couldn’t. I was his brother, not his parent.

I finished up Carl’s tattoo before heading upstairs to make Ollie a snack. It was a little cliché, the tattoo artist living above his shop, but I couldn’t afford rent on both the shop and an apartment and this place was a steal. It was a one bedroom, nothing too fancy, but it worked for me. And when I worked late, I didn’t have to go far to fall into bed. Ollie sometimes came up here to watch tv if he had a long day and wasn’t feeling sociable, but that was pretty rare. He liked being downstairs so he could talk to people.

Warming up some leftover mac and cheese, I opened a can of tuna while I waited. The kid ate like a pregnant woman sometimes. I didn’t understand the tuna mac and cheese mix, but he ate it with gusto every time I made it, so whatever. I brought it downstairs when I was finished, set him up behind the front desk, and hung his backpack on the hook while he ate.

“There’s a note in there,” he pointed out, his mouth full of food. “My teacher said to give it to my parents.”

Shoving his head gently, I made a face. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, squirt. I don’t need to see your food.”

Of course because I commented on it, he had to open his mouth wide to show me his half eaten food. Kids are gross. I chuckled, shaking my head as I pulled the folder out of his bag. My parents sometimes forgot to look for notes from the teacher, so I

always checked and updated them when they showed up to take Ollie home.

The note in question was a reminder about an email sent over the summer. I frowned at it as I read through it, turning to Ollie when I finished.

“Did Mom and Dad talk to you about this already?”

He shrugged. He probably didn’t even read it. From the way it was crumpled, he stuffed it into his folder the second they handed it to him and didn’t give it a second thought.

The note was about paranormals joining the school. There would be five of them this year, and the school planned for more going forward if things went well. To my knowledge, Ollie didn’t have a ton of experience around paranormals, so I made a mental note to remind my parents to talk to him about it. I didn’t need him offending and pissing off a paranormal. He already had issues with bullies. Paranormals could do some real damage.

I was a little biased on that front. My experience with paranormals wasn’t great. I had a few witches try to scam me by glamouring a tattoo I’d done and saying I fucked it up so I’d give them their money back. They weren’t very tech savvy and apparently missed me taking a picture of the damn thing. When I proved them wrong, they tried to jump me. I had some decent fighting experience under my belt, but it probably wouldn’t have ended well if my dad hadn’t come to visit me at the shop at the right time.

Still, I didn’t want to write off a bunch of kids for no good reason. I kept my opinions to myself and left it alone, getting another tattoo done before my parents showed up.

The front door opened right as I was cleaning up, my parents coming in together. They couldn’t afford two cars on a budget, so Mom dropped Dad off on the way to

work and picked him up before they came to get Ollie. My family was the definition of blue collar. We worked for a living. Dad worked maintenance at a big company downtown, and Mom was a librarian. It meant some lean Christmases when I was a kid, but with me helping out, Ollie had it a little better. I didn't mind helping now and then, especially knowing it made Ollie's life easier. I wanted his childhood to be easier than mine was.

My parents always looked a little uncomfortable when they came to my shop. I offered more than once to bring Ollie to them, but they knew it'd interrupt my work day and they didn't want to bother me. I met them at the front, lifting my chin at my dad in greeting.

"Hey."

Dad responded in kind, his eyes dragging to Ollie, who was still behind the front desk, drawing on his tablet.

"How'd the first day go?" Mom asked.

"Good. He seemed happy when he got here. Got a note from his teacher about paranormals joining the school?"

Dad grunted, a typical response from him, and Mom nodded her head. "We got the email about that. None in Ollie's grade, but if the tests go well and he skips, I think two are in the grade above him. I talked to the counselor about it when I brought him to the teacher meet-and-greet."

"Does he know?" I tipped my head towards Ollie, who was oblivious to the world around him.

Mom pursed her lips, nodding again. "We discussed it over the summer. He doesn't

seem to mind either way.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He wouldn't. Ollie was a friendly kid. If there was a potential for new friends, he'd leap at it. That wasn't why I was asking, though.

"And did they say what kind? Mention anything about topics to avoid? I don't want him accidentally saying something the kids might not like and getting himself into trouble."

Mom didn't look worried, but when I raised an eyebrow at Dad, he dipped his chin once. He was there when the paranormals attacked me. He knew to take my concerns seriously.

"I'll talk to 'im. Did he eat?"

"Snack about an hour ago. He's still hungry."

The conversation didn't last much longer before my parents were hustling Ollie out the door. He waved from the car, smiling brightly, and I gave him a thumbs up before heading back to my station.

Ben stood by, waiting for me, a deep frown on his face. "I've said it before, but the way they act around you is just weird. It's like you're strangers, not family."

I hummed to acknowledge him but didn't say anything. It wasn't worth repeating. My parents stopped being warm towards me the day I came out. They didn't disown me completely, but it obviously made them uncomfortable. They interacted with me as little as possible and I was pretty sure the only reason I got to see Ollie so much was because letting their gay son watch his brother was cheaper than after school care. I

couldn't help but wonder if Ollie was their do over. I came out when I was seventeen. They had my little brother a year later. Seems kind of convenient to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

AZIEL

The meeting with my uncle went about as I expected. He demanded information from Dante that the kid had no way of knowing, and got pissed when he couldn't answer. The same thing happened for the next few days until Dante finally got it in his head that there were worse things than living with me. He went quiet, his complaints stopped, and he spent more time in his room than doing anything else. At least at home, the situation had improved. At school was another issue. I'd gotten calls every day for the first week, telling me Dante was lashing out at students and staff, and if he couldn't control himself, they would need to consider transferring him to another school. Knowing what would happen if he got kicked out, I decided to talk to him, even though inviting that fight seemed foolish on my part.

Every day after school, Dante went straight to his room, and stayed there all weekend too. He'd already trashed it and I didn't let him have a tv in there, so I wasn't really sure what he was doing, but I didn't ask before. Letting out a heavy sigh, I pushed the door open and tried not to grimace. The place was a sty. I ignored it, grabbing his desk chair and spinning it around, straddling it as I faced him. He was lying on his bed, glaring at the ceiling, trying to ignore my presence. But he was also nine and didn't like it when I didn't immediately tell him my purpose for being there.

"What?" he finally demanded.

"Got a call from your school."

"Yeah, so?" he snarled.

“If you can’t get it together, they’re gonna transfer you to a paranormal school.”

A tinge of hope crossed his face, and I shook my head before he could get too excited. “That’s not a good thing. The closest paranormal school doesn’t have anyone important. You won’t be getting any information for your dad there. And he’s going to take issue with you getting removed from where he wants you to be.”

He huffed, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. “What does it matter? No one talks to me anyway.”

“Not with the way you’re acting, they won’t. Have you even tried to make friends?”

That got me a glare in response. “Why the hell would I make friends with humans?”

“Because you need information and they aren’t gonna tell you shit if they are too busy avoiding you.”

To my knowledge, no one ever sat down and taught Dante how to work for the family. He was raised by nannies in the Other Realm, went to a regular school there, and my uncle pretty much ignored his existence. I wasn’t sure why they were demanding he do this shit now, but it wasn’t really my business. My business currently was keeping this kid alive. And right now, based on the refusal on his face, he didn’t get how making friends was going to do that.

“Come on. We’re going out.”

He scowled at me, but I didn’t miss the flash of curiosity. “Going where?”

“To the park. You’re gonna learn to get information. I’m tired of going to the healer every day to fix you after you piss off your old man.”

He followed me out of the apartment, lunging at the cat who sometimes sat in the windowsill of the apartment above ours. I shook my head, leading the way to the park halfway between his school and home. I overheard plenty while I was out there, and I knew it was a popular place for the kids after school and on weekends. If Dante went there more often, he might be able to glean more than what he got in class.

The park was crowded when we got there, typical for a Saturday afternoon. Dante hesitated, hovering uneasily when he saw the crowd, so I stopped a block away and kneeled in front of him.

“Rule number one. Ears open. Even if you’re playing alone, you’ll overhear all sorts of shit in places like this. Kids don’t ever shut up. Parents too, when they’re talking amongst themselves. They think kids aren’t listening, so they’ll say whatever shit is going on without a filter.”

His brows drew together tightly, his eyes shifting over the park with more consideration. I knew it had to be scary, being the only outwardly paranormal kid around. If I gave him a purpose, he might not panic as much.

“Rule two. Follow the money. You don’t have to mean it, but you wanna at least pretend to make friends with the rich kids. Do something to get their attention. If you can’t make friends with them, then go for the adjacent ones. The ones whose parents work for the rich families. Those kids usually have information from their parents.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

His face turned more serious as he listened carefully. I gave him a few of the tricks I'd learned over the years, from working in the shadows to asking questions without really asking them. He seemed to get the gist of it, and when I sent him onto the playground, he looked determined. I sat at a bench nearby, close to a group of giggling women. If he couldn't get any information, I'd pass some on to him. My uncle didn't give a shit who heard it, as long as he got information.

It bothered me seeing kids actively avoiding him. I saw his hurt expression flash over his face more than once. He gave up trying after a while and sat under the slide, hiding his unhappiness with a scowl.

“... and I know her husband didn't get that kind of money legitimately.”

Pulling out my phone, I pretended to scroll, listening to the women. If someone was getting money illegitimately, that could bode well for my family. Either with information on how, or giving them territory to take over.

“How do you know?”

The queen bee scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Tara's husband works with him. She said she overheard him talking with his golf buddies about how Neil's numbers have been dropping so much that the managers have all taken notice. He's close to losing his job, if he hasn't already. He has to be getting it somewhere else.”

“But where, though?” another woman asked, bouncing a baby on her hip. They were all staring at this woman like her story was fascinating, enthralled by a bit of gossip.

“Rumor has it he’s been laundering money for a crime family. His secretary, Charlene, heard him bragging about his connections over the phone once.”

They all gasped, and I bit back the urge to roll my eyes.

“Which family?”

Finally, a decent question. There weren’t that many crime families around. The city wasn’t that big.

The woman’s voice dropped to a whisper. Good thing demons had excellent hearing because I didn’t miss a word.

“Have you guys heard about the Shadowwalker crime family? I heard they’re some kind of paranormal organization. Super dangerous. Apparently, Neil’s been working with them.”

My body stiffened, though I made sure not to let it show. I didn’t know all the humans my uncle had under his thumb, but if one of them was bragging about working with our family, then that was a problem. If you couldn’t be trusted to keep your mouth shut, you were a liability. This kind of information would keep Dante out of trouble for at least a few weeks.

I listened for a little while longer, but the women moved on to less interesting topics. Normally I’d send this information to my cousins right away to follow up, but I wanted to give it to Dante to report.

“Hey! Get away from him, you little freak!”

My head whipped up as a portly woman with blonde hair glared down at Dante. I was out of my seat and standing above him before either of them could blink, a snarl in

my throat.

“Back up.”

The woman startled hard, her eyes wide. She had a tight grip on a little boy's arm and she forced him behind her, taking a few steps back. She pointed an accusing finger at Dante, screaming at me.

“He doesn't belong here! There are parks meant for freaks like him! Keep him away from the normal children!”

I didn't normally listen to human dribble. Their opinions didn't matter. But Dante was just a fucking kid, and I wasn't going to let her get away with talking about him like that. My temper swelled, fire licking across my skin and focusing on my horns. The woman looked rightfully terrified, her face paling in the face of my wrath. I didn't hurt humans, but I had no problem making sure she never slept soundly again.

“Oh, shut up, Karen,” a voice snapped. “I saw them talking. He didn't do anything.”

The speaker was a man who stood a few feet away, his eyes locked on the bitch who was testing her luck with me. He was a little taller than the average human, not overly muscled or intimidating. It was the colorful designs all over his arms and neck that made him different. I'd heard of human tattoos, but I never really paid much attention to them. This one was covered in them. He wore a black cap, covering his hair, a loose fitted tank top, and ripped jeans. Not the typical kind of human I saw in this neighborhood. I saw more like him on the side of town that my uncle liked to work in. It made my hackles go up, even though this human was standing up for Dante.

The woman latched onto a conversation with another human, shooting the man a defiant look. “We as parents get a say on who our children interact with! I—”

“So leave,” the man demanded, his voice somehow rough and smooth at the same time. He didn’t look the least bit intimidated by the woman, even though she probably outweighed him by a lot. When she sputtered at him, he raised an eyebrow lazily.

“You’re the only person kicking up a fuss right now. The kid didn’t do anything wrong. If you’ve got a problem with him being here, then roll your ass right along and let the damn kids play.”

It took work not to snort at his comment. Dante didn’t even bother to hide his reaction, snickering behind me. He’d gotten to his feet at one point, but he knew better than to move away right now. He stood close enough that I knew where he was and watched as the humans argued with one another.

“You can’t seriously want children to play with that... that...”

“Say it. I dare you,” I snarled. I knew she was about to call him a monster. It was a common term with humans. The warning in my tone got through her thick skull, however, and she finally made a smart decision by keeping her mouth shut. She looked around wildly, like she was hoping for back up, but there was more than one parent glaring at her. Even the gaggle of women from before looked disgusted. It gave me hope, which I’d long since given up on. Hope that maybe, in the future, Dante would have an easier time than me. They might not care about how I was treated, but bullying a little kid wouldn’t happen on their watch.

CHAPTER FIVE

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

DECLAN

I didn't normally watch my brother on weekends, but my parents were doing some maintenance around the house and Ollie got bored. He called me asking to play and since I didn't have anything better to do, I took him to the park. My shop didn't open until late afternoon on weekends anyway. I didn't take days off, but I took half days on weekends to give myself a chance to rest.

I got a lot of funny looks in this neighborhood, so I was mostly just playing with my phone and staying out of the way when the demons showed up. My spine straightened automatically, worry for my little brother making me overcautious. I considered taking him home, but when I saw the kids ignoring the demon boy, it made me hesitate. He wasn't doing anything wrong, and he actually looked heartbroken that people weren't playing with him.

Since I'd been watching him, I saw the interaction between the demon boy and the human one. The kid looked curious and was asking the demon boy what he was doing under the slide when that Karen came out of nowhere, screeching like a banshee. I might be cautious around paranormals, but I didn't like her talking to the demon boy like that. Bullies were bullies, no matter their age.

When she realized she had no backup amongst the rest of the families at the park, she huffed and stomped off, dragging her poor kid behind her. He looked mortified, his ears bright red. I felt a little bad for him, but what can you do? You don't get to choose the family you're born into.

"Thank you."

Blinking, I turned back to the demon who'd come to the little one's rescue. His horns weren't on fire anymore, which notched down the intimidation a bit. He still looked like a criminal, but that had less to do with him being a demon and more because of the dark look on his face and the leather jacket, despite the warmer than normal fall weather.

"It's nothing. I just don't like bullies. I—"

"Dec! Dec! Those boys invited me to play basketball. Can I go?"

Ollie came flying in out of nowhere, his face flushed from all the running he'd been doing and a big grin on his face. He must've been too busy to see the interaction with the demons, and he barely gave them a second glance now. He was too excited to play.

"Sure, buddy." I knew better than to stand around, Ollie wasn't going to wait forever, so I gave an up nod to the demon as a goodbye. "Hope you have a better afternoon."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, though I didn't have any fucking clue as to why. I ignored it, following Ollie out of the playground and toward the basketball courts. That was the first interaction I'd ever had with a paranormal that didn't go to shit. I didn't want to stick around and give him a chance to get pissed at me or something.

We were at the basketball courts for a while before I saw the demon kid again. He was alone this time, no sight of the older demon behind him. It was getting close to lunchtime and parents were calling their kids to head back home, so it was only Ollie and one other boy on the court. They threw the ball, bouncing it off the rim, and it bounded away, smacking the demon boy in the back. He spun around with a snarl, baring his teeth at Ollie and the boy he was playing with. Tension settled in my shoulders as Ollie jogged closer, giving the demon boy a sheepish grin.

“Sorry. You okay?”

The demon boy didn't answer, just continued to glare at Ollie like he wanted to murder him for making a mistake. Ollie gestured to the ball that was closer to the demon than to himself.

“Can we have our ball back?”

The demon glanced behind him at the ball and took a few steps back. He picked it up, holding it in one hand to show it to Ollie. I saw what was going to happen before he made a move, but I couldn't get over there fast enough to do anything about it. The demon punted the damn ball so hard it cleared the building with the bathrooms. I was at Ollie's side in an instant, tucking my brother behind me. The demon boy lifted his lip in a sneer, waiting for me to say something to him. I chose to ignore him, turning and nudging Ollie towards the court.

“Come on. We'll ask for another ball inside.”

Ollie looked confused and upset, but he followed me easily as I led him away. I shot an irritated look over my shoulder at the demon boy, but he wasn't looking in my direction. He stormed off again, kicking rocks in front of him. Whatever his issue was, messing with my little brother didn't help his mood any.

“Why'd he do that?” Ollie questioned quietly.

“Because some kids don't know how to play nice. Did Mom and Dad say they wanted you home for lunch?”

He shrugged, his head down and his hands shoved into his pocket. The boy he'd been playing with ran off after the demon boy kicked the ball away. It left us alone and after checking in with my parents on when they wanted Ollie home, I played on the

court with him for a while before taking him home for lunch.

“I recognize that kid from school,” Ollie said randomly on the walk home. That made me uneasy, and I had to work to keep the grimace off my face.

“Oh yeah? Is he any nicer there?”

Ollie shook his head, which was pretty much what I’d expected. “He’s in a different grade than me, though. I’ve only ever seen him at recess. I asked him to play once, but he said he didn’t play with humans and told me to leave him alone.”

“Then I would listen to him. If he doesn’t want to make new friends, that’s on him. I don’t want you pushing it and getting hurt.” He was obviously unstable, but I didn’t say that part out loud. Kids were impressionable, and I didn’t want Ollie making decisions on paranormals based on my interactions with them.

“Hey, Declan? Do you have any paranormal friends?”

“Nope. But I don’t have many friends to begin with. I work too much.”

“You’ve got me,” he pointed out.

That made me smile, and I dropped my arm around his shoulders. “True. Who needs friends when I have the world’s best little brother?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He beamed at me, the hurt feelings from his interaction with the demon disappearing. One of the best things about Ollie was that he could bounce back from anything. He was the happiest kid I knew, and nothing kept him down for long. The kid could be stuck at home with the flu and still be chattering and smiling.

When we got back to my parents' place, Ollie darted inside before I could say bye. As far as I knew, he was unaware about the awkwardness between me and our parents. He didn't even know I was gay. Not that I hid it from him, I just hadn't dated in a while. It was too much work. I stood outside, debating going in to make sure my parents knew he was back, when the screen door cracked open and my dad poked his head outside.

"I, uh... I got as much energy out of him as I could. He's hungry now. If you need me to take him tomorrow—"

Dad shook his head. "We're going to my mom's for the day tomorrow."

"Ah. Okay. Well, I guess I'll see him on Monday then."

Dad dipped his chin to acknowledge me and disappeared back inside. It wasn't an invitation to follow. He shut the front door firmly behind him, which was as clear as he could get. I could come over to pick up Ollie, but I wasn't welcome inside. Not unless I was willing to stop dating men. Shaking my head, I shoved my hands into my pockets and headed home.

I got a call from the school two weeks later. They only ever called me if they couldn't get ahold of my folks. The second they said the word fight, I was out the door,

leaving Ben in charge while I raced to get to my brother. I drove a motorcycle, and I made sure to grab Ollie's stuff before heading over there. I probably looked like a mad man when I showed up, booking it to the office without a backwards glance towards the other teachers in the hallway. I almost fell when my feet slid, trying to come to a stop, and I had to grab onto the doorframe to the office to stop myself from eating it.

The secretary looked up, startled, at my arrival. She sighed when she saw it was me. "Mr. Gray. Didn't you learn when you went here not to run in the halls?"

Mrs. Robertson had been the secretary at this school when I went here. She was an institution. I'd had trouble the first year or so of Ollie going here getting them to let me pick him up, but she vouched for me until my parents finally put in the paperwork to let me without a note from them.

"They said Ollie had been in a fight?"

She pursed her lips, tipping her head to where Ollie sat in a chair against the wall. He had tissues pressed to his nose and what looked like a black eye forming. My heart thundered in my chest as I kneeled in front of him, gently pulling his hand away so I could see the damage.

"What happened, buddy?"

He shrugged, but refused to say any more. When I glanced over my shoulder at Mrs. Robertson, she shook her head with a sigh.

"He overheard one of the new transfers say some choice words to one of his friends and decided to confront him. Principal Castillo is still trying to get the whole account of it, but I don't think he swung first. He shouldn't have been involved in the first place, though. He should've gotten a teacher instead." She gave Ollie a pointed look,

like she'd already had this conversation with him in the past. I never heard anything from my parents about Ollie fighting, but I didn't trust them to keep me in the loop, either. Mrs. Robertson had no reason to lie to me.

"Alright. I'll talk to him and update my parents. Can I take him with me?"

She nodded. "He's good. Might have a black eye, but the nurse said some ice will do him fine. She's not worried about anything more severe."

Letting out a heavy breath, I guided Ollie out of the office with my hand on his shoulder. He didn't have many friends, but he was loyal to the few he had. He wouldn't say anything that he thought might get them into trouble until we were out of earshot of the teachers.

When we got outside, I stopped him with my hands on his shoulders, leveling him with a look.

"Alright, out with it. What happened?"

He scrunched his nose and winced for the effort. "Dante was being mean to Sophie. She was just asking him to play. He didn't have to call her names. I told him off and he punched me. You told me if someone hits me, I can hit them back."

True, I did say that. I got tired of him getting bullied. Ignoring them didn't work, so I taught him how to throw a decent punch to protect himself.

"That doesn't mean you can butt into other people's issues and start a fight. You and Sophie should've walked away. Or gotten a teacher if you had to. How many times have you done something like this before?"

His eyes dropped to the ground, which was all the information I needed. I didn't want

to be angry with him, especially not for sticking up for someone, but I didn't want to encourage him to stick his nose where it didn't belong either. That's what got him bullied in the first place.

"Come on. We'll get some frozen peas on that eye and I'll call Mom and Dad. I hope you at least got a good hit in. That shiner is gonna be there for days."

He smirked at me, and despite the severity of the situation, I felt a small amount of pride for what he did. He used to cower from bullies. At least now he had enough confidence to protect himself. I just hoped the paranormal he had picked a fight with wasn't that demon boy. That kid made me nervous.

CHAPTER SIX

AZIEL

I'd been picking up a few things for my uncle when I got a call from the school. It didn't really surprise me that Dante was getting into fights. He'd had a few good weeks after I gave him that info for his dad and he avoided an ass kicking, but I knew it wouldn't last. The school asked that I come in for a meeting, so I finished my shopping, dumped the bags into the backseat of my truck, and headed for the school.

When I stepped into the main office, the secretary looked up from her computer, her lips pressed into a thin line. She pointed to a chair opposite her desk and spoke to me directly, not even a hint of trepidation in her voice.

"Have a seat. I'll let Principal Castillo know you're here. She's speaking with Dante right now."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Resigned, I dropped into a seat. I'd done everything I could to get through to that kid, but nothing was working. If I didn't figure out a way to get him to listen, it'd be my ass on the line when they kicked him out of this school. I gritted my teeth, already mentally preparing myself for the pain.

I masked my irritation when the principal asked me to join her in her office. Dante sat in a chair in front of it, facing away from me, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He wouldn't look me in the eye, instead facing the wall when I sat in the chair next to his.

“What happened?”

Principal Castillo sat beside her desk, tipping her head at Dante. She waited for him to answer, but when he wouldn't reply, she answered for him.

“Near as I can tell, Dante said some not nice things to one of his classmates. A boy from another class intervened, and they used fists instead of words to solve their issues. Both boys are saying the other started it. Normally, I'd suspend them both, but the little girl who was involved told me it was her fault for bothering Dante in the first place. Though I think we both know she was just trying to be nice.”

Dante scowled at the comment, but still refused to look at either of us. I shook my head, resigned.

“Alright. Where do we go from here?”

“For now, I think I'm willing to let this go. Had Dante not had Sophie vouching for

him, I probably wouldn't have, but I understand making friends has been difficult. Mr. Nox, I have to warn you, if this continues, I don't see a future for Dante here at Leighton prep. This transition is new and difficult, so I'm giving him a lot of leeway, but we can only tolerate that behavior for so long. And we don't allow fighting."

I caught what she meant. If Dante had been a regular kid, she would've been a lot more harsh. This was the one and only time him being a demon was working in his favor.

"I understand. It won't happen again." I added a deep snarl to that to emphasize my point to Dante. I might not hit him, but his father wouldn't spare him if he found out about this. Only my good graces kept him out of trouble now.

Dante ducked his head as we left the school, his eyes on his feet. If it were anyone else, I'd think he was ashamed of himself. But he hadn't shown an ounce of remorse for any of his behavior since he started school.

"Let me guess. You're better than them, so you decided since he argued with you, you had to beat him into submission?"

He whipped his head up, growling at me. "He started it! If he would've just stayed out of it, none of this would've happened!"

I had a retort all primed and ready, but the mark on Dante's cheek froze my forward motion. The teacher said they fought, but I assumed the boy talked trash and Dante hit him for it. The kid actually hurt him, and that pissed me off.

"Who was he?"

"What's it matter?" he snapped, expression surly.

Kneeling beside him, I leveled him with a look. “Tell me who hurt you. Now, Dante.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, trying to be brave and act like he was tougher than he actually was. He was just a kid, though. And he was under my protection. Which meant the kid who hurt him would be scared shitless the rest of his life once I got ahold of him.

“Name!” I barked.

It made Dante jump, and he finally spit it out. “Oliver Gray!”

I couldn’t call the family, not if I wanted this kid to live through the night, so instead, I called an old friend.

“I’m busy. What?” she snapped.

“Athena. I need you to help me find someone. It’s important.”

Athena was an oracle who I’d known since I was a kid. She was the only person who was outwardly against my uncle who was still alive. She didn’t care about his power or how dangerous he was. My parents used to ask her to babysit me and my sister when they were forced to do things for the family. They wanted us as far from that life as possible for as long as they could manage it. It meant Athena and I were close, and she knew I wouldn’t ask without good reason. She also knew I wouldn’t hurt the person I was looking for.

She gave me an address and told me to come see her once I was through. Dante protested when I demanded he go home, so I dragged him with me on foot. It wasn’t that far, a few blocks north of my apartment, just on the edge of where the nicer neighborhoods ended. I’d never been in this area. I wasn’t aware of any of my uncle’s businesses nearby. The shop was small, squished between a smoke shop and an

empty business on the other side. There was a gigantic window in front, the word Ink'd stamped in the middle of it, and not much else. I didn't hesitate to go in, ripping the door open so hard, the hinges protested. When I stalked inside, a few faces looked at me apprehensively. A familiar one stood, moving to the center of the room to face me down. With the way he looked at me, I knew he was responsible for the little shit who hurt Dante.

“What do you want?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

He scoffed, not an ounce of fear in him as he glared at me. “I have my assumptions. What? You're here to beat up a little kid? Can't pick on someone your own size?”

Baring my teeth, I snarled at him. “You wanna take his place?”

He huffed out a laugh, like this was some kind of joke. “You know what? Sure. Bring it on, asshole. If you're so pathetic that you want to attack someone outside your weight class, then be my guest. I can see where the kid learns it from.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

That pissed me off, and flames tore through me, settling on my horns. The little shit didn't even flinch, his eyes narrowed and his stance ready. He wasn't afraid to fight me, even though I was taller and significantly more muscled. It made me wonder where he got his confidence from. Not that it mattered. He asked for a fight. He was going to get one.

At least, that was the plan. Until the boy I was looking for came out of the back of the shop, racing to stand in front of the tattooed man, his arms outstretched like he was going to protect him from me.

“Stop! Don't hurt my brother!”

I stiffened, wide eyed as I took him in. He was a tiny little thing, scrawny and short, without an ounce of muscle to him. And based on the black eye forming and the red stains on his shirt, he didn't come out of the fight the victor.

Spinning around, I gave Dante an incredulous look. “Seriously? He's half your size!”

Dante wasn't expecting my outburst, and he looked up at me with his mouth hanging open for a second before he remembered himself. He pointed at the little kid, screaming at me.

“He wouldn't fuck off! I told him to mind his business but—”

“But you're such a bigshot that you can't just walk away? Your dad must be really proud.”

It made Dante wince, but I'd gone into this expecting someone bigger to have messed with him. Not some tiny kid getting a lucky shot. Dante had inches on him and outweighed him by at least twenty pounds. And demon kids weren't weak. They built muscle young. He was a damn tank, and he didn't care about using that kind of strength on people so much smaller than him. He was just like his old man. I wanted nothing to do with him if this was his future.

Turning my glare to the tattooed man, who'd tucked his little brother behind him, I scowled. Technically, I owed him an apology, but that wasn't going to happen. I yelled at Dante in front of them. That should be enough. Grabbing my cousin by the arm, I teleported us home without a word.

"Pack your things."

Dante looked shell-shocked, his eyes wide as he gaped at me. "What? Why?"

"You've pointed out plenty of times that I'm not like our family. I don't pick on weaklings just to feel good about myself. You want to follow your old man so bad, you can go live with him. Or one of your older brothers. I'm done. I've tried with you, but I refuse to watch you go down that path."

I'd need an excuse to hand him off, but I'd figure that out later. Maybe it was time for me to leave. I'd contemplated it in the past, but after what happened to my parents, I couldn't pull the trigger. I also didn't want to leave my friends unguarded. But they had each other, and I was tired of living a half life under my uncle's thumb. I stalked to the bathroom, pulled out a healing potion, tossed it on Dante's bed, and teleported away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AZIEL

I couldn't handoff my cousin right away. My uncle was busy, and I knew Dante's brothers would just cause trouble for me without their father's direct orders. I already had a plan for what to say. Since they already saw me as weak, I'd point out that Dante needed a stronger hand or he'd get kicked out of school. I doubted I'd get much disagreement on that.

Aside from feeding him, I mostly stayed away from Dante. I was still too pissed to look at him. I dropped him off with Athena Saturday afternoon without a word to him and flew to where Maya and Isla's wedding was being held. I'd almost forgotten about it, but I figured I'd make an appearance and check in with my friends before heading to meet my uncle that night.

I'd expected someone to say something about my recent absence. I never normally went that long without seeing my friends. But with Dante at home, I was avoiding them to keep them safe. I thought for sure Felix would've said something at the very least. He always got pissed when people ditched out on our weekly poker game. But no one said a word about it. They acknowledged me, smiled and complimented the suit I was wearing, but no one said anything about me avoiding them. It was like they didn't even notice. Which was probably true. Everyone but Hendrix was mated now, and I saw his eyes locked on a red-haired human more than once as the night wore on.

Hendrix checked in with me, but the conversation was short and he seemed distracted with the human and his kid. They all had their people. It hurt more than I'd expected, watching them move on without me. We used to be close. I never used to go more than a few days without hanging out with one of them or all of them. But maybe this was a good sign. I'd held off escaping from my family because I didn't want to leave my friends. My absence wouldn't affect them in the slightest. Now seemed like the perfect time to leave.

I stayed until after the ceremony before teleporting back to Athena's place. I normally

met her at the farmer's market, but it was closed by now and I knew where she lived. I knocked on the door, opening it without waiting for a response. She was ancient and didn't want to have to come open the door every time I showed up.

She was sitting in her living room in front of her fireplace, her eyes glazed like she wasn't quite there. I knew better than to interrupt her, so I sat beside her and waited. I could see Dante sitting on the bed in the guest room, his head hung low, but I ignored him for now. I needed to tell Athena I was leaving and then I'd bring him to meet his dad. If I wanted to survive, I needed a bag packed and a plan in place.

After a moment, Athena blinked and turned toward me slowly. "You're making a mistake."

After this many years, it didn't surprise me anymore that she saw right through my plans. I sighed.

"I don't have any other choice. I can't keep doing this."

"What about—"

"It's handled. I have someone set to deal with it. It's better that I stop going there so often anyway. I don't want to draw attention."

"Aziel..." she trailed off, shaking her head slowly. "I've been in your life for years. You have trusted in my counsel before. If you would let me, I'd like to give you a reading. If the spirits agree with your plan, I won't argue with them."

I didn't want to, but I also didn't want to dismiss her. Currently, she was the only person who cared enough to argue with me. I dipped my chin to acknowledge her and followed her when she stood and headed down the hallway. When we passed the room Dante was in, he curled in on himself, ignoring me completely. Probably still

pissed I was bringing him to his dad.

We moved to a small greenhouse attached to the kitchen, surrounded by plants with the sky stretched out overhead through the windows. Close to nature but safe from the elements. There was a small table in the middle covered in multicolored cloth and an empty bowl in the center. I sat in front of it while Athena pattered around, grabbing random plants and objects from around the room. She sat across from me, dropping them into the bowl.

“If you would.”

I huffed out a breath, shaking my head as I tapped the bowl. The contents lit up like kindling and the room filled with smoke, blocking out everything around us. Athena’s eyes shifted back and forth, her brow furrowing slightly.

“You’re making a mistake.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re just saying that because you don’t want me to run.”

She made a tsk sound, slapping my hand roughly. “Silence yourself, Azzy. I am doing no such thing. Now, pay attention.”

Sometimes, how she interacted with me made me smile. She didn't have an ounce of fear of me or my family name. To her, I was still that little boy hiding under her table and stealing cookies when I thought she wasn't looking. It took years for me to realize she put the cookies there on purpose so I could get to them.

Her expression turned serious again, her eyes narrowed as she tried to decipher what she was seeing.

“Your path will split soon. In both, you will endure pain and suffering, but only one will grant you true freedom. You need to make the right choice.”

“Let me guess. The path that you want me to take says I need to stay here.”

Her expression flattened for a second, annoyed, before she continued. “Should you

wish to follow the right path, seek out the white tiger. Your destiny lies with them. You were not born to hurt people, Azriel. You were born to protect. Protect them with your life.”

She was being really convoluted. I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn’t know any white tiger shifters. I wasn’t even sure they existed. And she said they. Was she using gender-neutral terms, or was there more than one white tiger? And how exactly would protecting them help me? Either way, I was going to get hurt.

Irritated, I waved away the smoke in my face. “Anything else?”

She sighed, the smoke dissipating with her annoyance. “You have always been a stubborn child. Yes, there is something else. The boy you brought to me.”

“Dante.”

She nodded once. “Should you follow your plan to hand him back to his family, his path ends early.”

That made me stiffen. “You— No. They wouldn’t kill him. He’s just a kid. And he could be useful in the future.”

“There is more he isn’t telling you. As desperate as he is to prove himself, his path will never lead him where he wishes to go. They will not see him as their equal. He is much like you in that regard. Your protection is the only thing keeping him alive.”

A string of expletives escaped me, my hands clenching at my sides. I wanted her to be lying, saying I had to take him so I wouldn’t be able to leave. But Athena had never lied to me before. Even when she was unhappy with my plans, she told me the truth. And I wasn’t that heartless. If Dante died because I was too selfish to keep him with me, I’d never forgive myself.

Shoving to my feet, I roared out my frustration. The windows rattled in their frames, the lights flickered, and all the noise from the wildlife outside went silent. Athena approached me slowly, moving to stand beside me, her eyes focused out the window.

“I’m sorry. I can feel how badly you want to escape. But that wasn’t in your father’s future, and it’s not in yours. You’ll need to approach this differently. Take the boy to see what his future will be if he continues to fight his responsibilities. And keep your eyes open, Aziel. The choice of which path you’ll take will be upon you before you know it.”

With a heavy sigh, I let my shoulders slump. “Athena...”

She put her hand on my arm, her smile sad. “I know, Azzy. I wish I could let you do as you wish. But I love you, you know that. I only want what’s best for you.”

Defeated, I kissed her cheek and headed to where Dante was waiting. He sat unmoving on the edge of that bed, the same defeat I felt written clearly across his face. I sat beside him, taking a moment to breathe.

“I don’t... I don’t wanna go live with him. He hates me,” he murmured, his voice wobbly.

“If he finds out you got kicked out of the school he wants you in, you might not have a choice. He’ll say you’ll be controlled better with a firmer hand and take you from me. I’ve been trying to tell you, but—”

“I’ll do better. I promise. I just... Please don’t send me away.”

He sounded so heartbroken, and for the first time, he let an emotion other than anger fuel his words. Tears spilled down his cheeks, and he scrubbed at them roughly to hide them. Putting my arm around him, I pulled him against my side, hugging him

lightly. I waited for him to lash out like he normally would, but he surprised me when he threw his arms around my waist and hugged me tight. My resolve shattered completely, and I knew I'd be doing what Athena said. I'd stay to protect the broken little boy who wouldn't survive on his own. I'd do for him what Athena did for me, keeping him safe while showing him how to survive our family. I had no other choice.

“Okay. I'll let you stay with me. But there's something you need to see first. I've warned you about what will happen if you disobey your dad. What he's done so far is child's play to what he is capable of. I'm going to show you what will happen if you can't get it together. I'll do everything I can to protect you, but you need to know what will happen to both of us if I fail.”

He looked worried, and he should be. My uncle was twisted, and he didn't care about the consequences of his actions. I believed him when Dante said he wanted to stay with me, but I needed to make it clear what would happen if either of us failed. We followed orders to survive. To Dante, it was just a concept. A promise of pain was enough to get him to listen. But he needed to see the consequences of disobedience. I was going to show him my biggest secret. I could only hope it didn't bite me in the ass later.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DECLAN

I'd honestly been expecting a fight when that demon showed up. Would I win? Probably not. But ever since those witches showed up and tried to jump me, I spent my free time learning to protect myself. I'd have put up a fight, at the very least. But the older demon took one look at Ollie and turned his wrath onto the demon boy, shouting at him for picking on someone so much smaller than him. It was a little hypocritical, honestly, since he'd been planning to fight me. I mean, I wasn't Ollie small, but I wasn't as tall as the demon and nowhere near as wide. But I wasn't about to complain, since he took the demon boy and left without anything happening to either of us.

When my parents picked Ollie up and saw the bruise, I thought they'd be upset. They seemed more resigned than anything else, and when I asked him if this had happened before, they refused to answer me. It was Ollie who told me the truth. This was the first time he fought with the demon boy, Dante, but he'd been standing up for his friends since I taught him how to fight. This wasn't the first time he got in the middle of something he wasn't part of, and from the look on his face, it wouldn't be the last.

I spent the weekend trying to figure out where I went wrong. I thought, by teaching Ollie some self defense, he'd only have to stand up for himself once and people would leave him alone. That was my hope, anyway. I drilled it into him that fighting was only for self defense. Which meant someone else was teaching him to stick his nose where it didn't belong. The only question was who?

When the demon showed back up on Sunday, I wasn't expecting it. He stood outside my shop with Dante, frowning down at him, and nudged him when he didn't move to

come inside. Dante looked decidedly uncomfortable as he pushed the door open and stuck his head in. The older demon didn't follow him, but he watched through the window as Dante edged closer with a grimace.

“Can I help you?”

He shuffled his feet, his eyes on the floor as he held out an old-fashioned vial with swirling blue liquid inside. “I got this for Oliver. It'll make the bruises go away. And... I'm supposed to say sorry.”

Stunned, my eyebrows flew up and my gaze jerked to the demon in the window. He was watching with a blank expression, his arms crossed over his chest. The last thing I ever expected was for either of them to try and make amends for what happened. I was wary, our last interaction wasn't pleasant, but I didn't want to throw the kid's apology in his face. I moved around the front counter, kneeling in front of Dante. He glanced up and dropped his gaze again, wiggling the potion until I took it.

“Thank you,” I murmured, tipping my head to study him. “Ollie's not here right now. He only visits my shop after school on weekdays, but I'll be sure to give this to him. Are you okay? I saw before that he hurt you, too.”

His nose wrinkled and I could tell he wanted to spout off something about him being tough, but he must've felt the older demon's gaze burning in the back of his head, because he lifted his shoulders as he gritted out a reply.

“I'm fine. I, uh...” He looked around uncertainly, not sure what to do now that my brother wasn't around to apologize to. “I thought he'd be here,” he muttered under his breath.

“He comes here after school because our parents work late. If you're not comfortable apologizing at school with an audience, you can come here after class? He's always

here until about six.”

He frowned, glancing over his shoulder at the older demon again before swinging back to me. “I’ll have to ask my cousin.”

Nodding, I waited as he darted out the door. I didn’t think the older demon was his dad, they looked nothing alike, but I didn’t want to assume. Cousins made sense, though. The older demon didn’t look old enough to have a kid Dante’s age.

The older demon said something, and Dante bobbed his head before hustling back inside to talk to me.

“He said that should be okay. I can walk here after school. I usually wait for him at the park, but—”

“Would you prefer to meet us there? I don’t have any appointments that early tomorrow. I can bring Ollie to meet you.” Honestly, public might be better. I didn’t trust Ollie not to say something brash, and I didn’t want Dante messing up my shop if he got pissed.

Dante looked uncertain, and that’s when the older demon came to join us. He stayed by the door like he didn’t want to intimidate me. It was oddly thoughtful and confusing. The man was a conundrum.

“What is it?”

Dante spun around and jerked his thumb at me. “He said we can meet at the park. Which one is better?”

The older demon tipped his head, considering it. “The park. I have an errand tomorrow. I’m not sure when I’ll be done. You can hang out there until I come get

you.”

His voice was low and deep and sent a shiver up my spine just listening to it. Now that he wasn't pissed off and glaring, I could study his features better. He had long black hair, some of it framing his face while the rest was tucked behind his ears. His horns were curved back slightly before pointing upwards and looked sharp enough to cause some serious damage. His skin was deep red, but there was a white scar on his chin that looked older. Strong jaw, eyelashes most women would kill for, and green eyes. Not any color I'd ever seen on a human either. They were almost neon green. Honestly, if he wasn't such an asshole, I might have been willing to admit he was gorgeous. I brushed the thought away, glancing at Dante.

“The park works for us. It will be good to get some of Ollie's energy out before my clients get here, anyway. Meet at the basketball courts?”

He still looked wary, but hey, the feeling was mutual. He dipped his chin to acknowledge me and scrambled to follow his cousin outside. I moved without thinking, calling out to him as they walked away.

“Hey!”

They both paused and looked over their shoulders at me. The older demon murmured something to Dante and faced me, his long legs eating up the distance until he was right in front of me.

“What?”

“Thank you. For this.” I lifted the potion in reference. “And for not kicking my ass on Friday. I get being pissed that your cousin was hurt, but—”

“It's my job to protect him. I wasn't going to fight a little kid. I just wanted to scare

him into leaving Dante alone. He's had enough struggles fitting into a human school without other kids messing with him."

There was a hint of accusation there. Dante wasn't fully to blame here. Ollie had a part in it, and I'd talk to him about that when I went to see him after Ben showed up to watch the shop. And it was nice to know he wasn't some asshole who attacked little kids. Scaring the shit out of them wasn't much better, but at least Ollie wouldn't have ended up dead or in the hospital.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“I’ll talk to Ollie about minding his own business. I didn’t know he was doing shit like that. My parents conveniently didn’t mention it. He’s not a bully or anything. He’s loyal to a fault and nosy. He was just sticking up for his friend.”

The demon didn’t reply, though I saw the muscles flex in his jaw. He wanted to, but he kept whatever he wanted to say to himself. And I wasn’t about to piss him off more by pushing.

“Well, I gotta get back. I’ve got clients soon. Thanks again.”

He nodded once and spun around, his hand resting on Dante’s shoulder before they disappeared. I heard demons could teleport, but it was still a little shocking to see it in person, both times. They were just gone. No pop, no shimmer of magic, nothing. Just poof.

Shaking my head, I jogged back into the shop right as Ben came in through the back door. He tipped his head at me, looking between me and the front door.

“Did you just get here?”

“Nah, I was just talking to someone. I need you to watch the shop for me. I’m gonna go see Ollie for a minute. I won’t be long.”

He waved me off, dropping his stuff off behind the front desk. I already set up for our first clients and was going over email requests for appointments when the demons showed up, so there wasn’t a lot for him to do but wait for the clients to show up. I grabbed my helmet, taking my bike to my parents’ place since I wanted to get back

quickly. I didn't get off the bike, I wasn't welcome in that house anyway, but Ollie heard the engine and came racing out, beaming at me.

“Dec! I—”

The front door opened, and Dad stuck his head out, frowning at us. “He can't play. We got stuff to do.”

I waved him off, pulling the potion out of my pocket and handing it to Ollie. “This is supposed to help with the bruises. And we're going to the park after school tomorrow. You and Dante are going to apologize to each other.”

Ollie's face screwed up, and he whined at me. “But why? He hit me first!”

“You antagonized him. And got involved in a conversation that had nothing to do with you. Mom and Dad might be comfortable letting you be a bully, but I'm not. You'll apologize and keep your nose out of other people's business. It's not your job to play protector. That's what teachers are for. Are we clear?”

He looked put out, but he didn't argue, tossing back the potion without a word. He smacked his lips, his eyes lighting up like it was delicious or something. It occurred to me that maybe I shouldn't have trusted a potion from the kid who knocked around my little brother, but it did what Dante said it would. The bruises faded and disappeared completely within minutes, and when Ollie poked at it, he didn't flinch.

“Hey, that's cool!”

“You can thank Dante for that on Monday. Now, go on. I've got a client coming. I'll see you on Monday.”

He groaned but did as I said, handing me back the vial and trudging inside. Dad

looked at his face, frowning, and looked at me, but he didn't come over for an explanation. That would require him to be closer than six feet to hear me over the engine. And I wasn't nice enough to shut off the engine to give him the opportunity. I tucked the vial back in my pocket and mock saluted before heading back to my shop. I'd always be a pariah to them. The only family member who cared about me was Ollie, and I was determined to get him back on track.

CHAPTER NINE

AZIEL

It was by sheer dumb luck that my uncle never caught wind of the fight between Dante and the human kid. I gave him the potion to hide the bruise and when we went to the next family meeting, there was too much chaos for my uncle to even check in with him about his week at school and any information he gathered. Not that I thought Dante would snitch. He got the picture of what would happen if we weren't a team after our little trip Saturday night. But he was still only nine, and I didn't want anyone questioning him too hard. He wouldn't hold up well under pressure.

There wasn't a miraculous change in him in one day after he agreed to be better. I wasn't really expecting that. But I could tell he was trying. He at least picked up the clothes off his floor and put them in the hamper, and he ate dinner on the couch with me instead of holed up in his room. Baby steps were still steps, and I squeezed his shoulder to show my appreciation before he went to his room and I ducked out to do security at my uncle's club for the night. Dante could handle being alone for a few hours, and he had a phone to contact me if he needed me.

He'd been walking to and from school on his own for a few weeks now, so he let me sleep in the following morning. It was a little disconcerting. He was usually as obnoxiously loud as possible in the mornings to make me suffer right along with him. But I woke up to an empty apartment and when I checked his phone's location, he

was at school where he belonged. It was refreshing and as a reward, after I got ready for the day, I stopped at the store to pick up ingredients for his favorite dinner. He never got praise for doing the right thing from his old man. He deserved to know making the right choices was appreciated.

My uncle had been busy lately. He didn't tell me why or what was coming, but I could tell something big was going to happen within the next few months. He kept my jobs the same, but he seemed to be targeting human politicians lately. It was concerning. I didn't want to get anywhere near that, but I didn't have much of a choice. Luckily, since he didn't trust me to actually participate in the work, all I was required to do was to gather information. He had me following a politician around to get her schedule down. One of my uncle's soldiers took over a little after I was supposed to pick up Dante, and I flew off without a word to go meet him at the park.

I'd expected to find Dante on the playground as usual, listening to conversations and doing his job. When I didn't find him, I checked the GPS on his phone and followed it to the basketball courts. He was playing ball with the human boy and his older brother, a big smile on his face. It meant I'd have to get information for him to keep him out of trouble, but seeing how happy he was, I let that go.

"Az! Come play!" he shouted, waving me over. I shook my head, pointing at a bench instead, and sat to watch them as they played. For being so small, the human boy was pretty good at the game. He was quick and dodged past Dante and his older brother, getting close enough to the net to get the ball in. His brother snatched him up and swung him around, shouting at Dante to get the ball. Dante darted forward, snatching the ball away, and took off with the human boy following behind him with a laugh.

It was hot, the height of summer, so it didn't surprise me when the human boy pulled off his shirt and used it to wipe his sweaty face. Dante did the same after shooting me a questioning look. It was when the older brother mimicked them that I stiffened.

I'd never taken a close look at his tattoos. I didn't see the point. But Athena's voice filtered through my head as I stared at the white tiger stretched across half his chest. The tattoo made the skin look shredded, the snarling tiger peeking out. Dread filled my stomach, and I yanked my phone out of my pocket without hesitation, dialing Athena's number. She answered on the first ring, her craggy voice smug.

"You found him."

"Tell me this is a joke."

"I'll do no such thing. I'm not prone to lying," she replied, and I could hear the grin in his voice. She was enjoying this.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Whispering so the trio wouldn't overhear me on the court, I growled at her. "There's no way, Athena. He's a damn human! Do you want to get him killed?"

"I told you, Azzy. You have a choice to make. Submit to the white tiger and find your freedom, or refuse and face your demise. He's stronger than he looks. Let him help you."

"Submit?!"

That came out a little louder than I'd intended and it drew the attention of the older brother. I turned away from them, hissing into the phone.

"Athena, you can't—"

"I'm not doing anything to you, Azzy. It's the fates that choose your future. I only deliver the message. Make your choice. And tell Dante to come see me this weekend. He's a strong boy, and I missed having someone to help me at the shop."

She hung up before I could argue, and I seriously considered smashing my phone. She knew. She knew when she gave me that message that the 'white tiger' was human. His association with me would get him killed. I was dooming him if I spent any time with him. I didn't want my salvation to end his life. It would make me just like the rest of my family, using weaker beings to get what they want.

"Everything okay?"

I'd heard him coming, but I was too in my own head to say anything to him. I needed

to leave. Being near him was stupid. For all I knew, our family could be watching this place. The reminder made me straighten, and I looked around warily. I couldn't see our family, but that didn't mean they weren't here.

“Dante! Time to go!”

He spun around, whining at me. “Aww, already? But we haven't finished the game yet!”

“Dante,” I snarled. It got my point across because he stopped arguing, his head drooped forward in a pout. He waved at Ollie, trudging over to me as slowly as possible. The older brother frowned.

“If you need to be somewhere, I can bring him home. We weren't going to stay much longer anyway. I've got clients in an hour. We can finish the game and—”

“No. We need to leave. Thank you for watching him.”

I didn't give either of them the chance to argue before I grabbed Dante's shoulder and teleported us away. We popped straight into my apartment, which I never did, proving just how thrown I was.

I'd trusted Athena my whole life. She never had an agenda. Her visions were always the truth. If I steered clear of the human, I'd be asking for trouble for myself. But I couldn't bring myself to put his life on the line to save mine. No, I'd face whatever the second path was. I'd hurt either way, but at least I wouldn't have a human's life on my conscience.

I avoided thinking of the human all week. Dante didn't make it easy. I told him to stay away from the human boy and he kept demanding to know why. I refused to tell him, and it pissed him off that I was keeping things from him. I tried to be honest

with him after he showed up, since keeping him in the dark wasn't going to do him any favors, but I couldn't talk about this with him. He wouldn't understand.

He pestered me about it until the family meeting on Saturday night. He knew better than to bring up the humans this close to my uncle, so he mostly grumbled under his breath as we teleported outside the giant mansion and headed inside.

I always hated this house. It was a mirror of the one in the Other Realm, with dim lighting and dark walls. Instead of books on the bookshelves, my uncle kept the skulls of his victims because he was a sick motherfucker. The staff who took care of the house were all human, and they weren't welltreated. If they found themselves in the room when he lost his temper, they were his punching bags and there was no guarantee they'd survive the interaction. They cowered and hid as often as they could, and kept their heads down when they couldn't. I hated being in this place.

Dante had his head down too, and I had to nudge him into lifting it back up. Showing fear in front of my uncle would only get him hurt. He needed false bravado at the very least until he could muster up a good enough mask to hide his emotions.

We stopped just inside the meeting room. I preferred to stick to the back of the room to not draw attention to myself, but when we arrived, all eyes swung towards us. My stomach clenched tightly, but I kept my face blank as my uncle beckoned us.

“Good. You're here. Come forward.”

His tone was light and almost friendly, which was a big red flag. Trepidation slithered across my skin, my heart rate picking up as Dante and I moved forward through the crowded room. The sneers and dirty looks were normal for me, but they seemed more intense tonight and I was worried about what that meant.

Once Dante and I were standing in front of my uncle, the path we'd come through

closed behind us so that a semi circle of family members surrounded us. With my uncle and his older sons in front, we were boxed in, and the unease only grew.

“Do you have news for me?” he asked pleasantly.

“Yes. The politician—”

“Not you,” he snapped, a hint of his normal venom coming out. He masked it quickly and shot Dante a soft look. “You. What do you have for me, son?”

Dante’s eyes widened at the word, and he looked wary as he took a half step forward. “I... I heard one of the kids in school talking about how her dad is the most important person in the city. Her last name is Donnatelli.”

My uncle hummed his acknowledgement, gesturing for him to continue. “Go on. Anything else?”

Dante’s brows furrowed a little. Usually, one bit of information was enough for my uncle. He expected little from a nine-year-old. The old man was fishing and I could make a guess as to why.

Dante shook his head slowly. “No...”

My uncle’s eyebrows raised slowly. “No? You’ve been with them all week, and you don’t have more? That seems suspicious, Dante. Tell me, is your cousin leading you astray?”

CHAPTER TEN

AZIEL

Confused,Dante looked at me. I should’ve warned him never to look away from my uncle. It only gave him more ammunition. By looking to me for answers, Dante was proving that he valued my opinion more than my uncle’s.

It happened quick. One minute I was standing next to Dante, the next I was on the ground, Ilus’s fists pounding into my face as other family members kicked at my sides. I knew better than to fight back, but that didn't make it hurt any less. I could barely hear Dante’s confused cries as they hurt me.

“No! No! He’s not! I–”

A loud crack filled the room, and between blows, I saw Dante hit the ground hard. My uncle stood over him, his teeth bared, fury coming off him in waves. He snapped his fingers and the people hurting me stopped on a dime, taking a step back. Ilus grabbed me by my hair and forced me to my knees, jerking my head back as he put a blade to my neck.

“You dare lie to me? I know you’ve been consorting with humans! I knew better than to let that piece of shit raise you without reports!”

Dante shook his head wildly, eyes wide, and his hand on his cheek where my uncle had backhanded him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“No? Then explain this!”

A cascade of photos spilled across the floor in front of Dante. I couldn’t see that well with the way Iluz held me, but one slid close enough for me to see it. The basketball game. Dante was smiling and laughing, blocking the human boy from getting the ball, the older brother in the background with a soft smile on his face. Shit. I knew being near them would only cause them trouble. I should’ve told them to wait for the meeting until I was there. I should’ve warned Dante not to get too close. Now he was on his own. Nothing I could say would change my uncle’s mind. I deserved to die for not protecting them better.

“It’s a ploy!”

I’d closed my eyes, not willing to watch Dante get hurt because I was stupid enough not to explain things better. It was the coward’s way out, but it tore at my insides, watching them hurt him, and I didn’t want to lose my control. But my eyes flew open at his response. The whole room was watching him as Dante shoved to his feet, his chin lifted and his fists clenched at his sides.

“Explain,” my uncle demanded.

“Azriel said to pretend to make friends so I could get information. No one would tell me anything if I was mean. That’s how I heard about the girl’s dad. The humans don’t run away from me anymore.”

Disgust crossed my uncle's face. He didn't believe in playing nice to get what he wanted. But he didn't care how I got the information as long as I got it. I taught Dante the way that worked best for me.

Kaiser made an irritated sound, jabbing his finger at the photos. "That boy is not part of a prestigious family. What exactly were you hoping to gain from him?"

Dante didn't hesitate, glaring at his older brother. "His family works for the big families. They get information all the time. His dad works in the same building as Cesar Perez. The library his mom works at has a book club run by Charlotte Clifton. And his older brother gets all kinds of information from his clients!"

Those were big names. Huge names. He never mentioned anything about that to me. Not that I ever asked. I only made sure he had enough information to make his dad happy. But getting information on those families was like striking gold. And Dante knew that. He stood his ground, his glower in place, even as my uncle seethed at him.

"Getting information through others is the coward's way. How do you know anything you overhear is true?"

"I check for him," I gritted out, carefully swallowing around the knife at my throat. Iluz pressed harder, cutting into the skin, but he didn't finish me off. My uncle swung his gaze to me, narrowing his eyes.

"Prove it. Give me information on Perez."

Luck or divine intervention was the only thing that could explain the fact that I actually had the information he was looking for. Athena told me to protect the white tiger. Apparently, lying to save his life was enough.

"He's working with the politician you told me to watch. They met twice this week for

lunch and discussed an anti-paranormal campaign for the upcoming election. Perez wants to back McMillan and get his agenda on the ballots. They don't let little kids at the restaurant those two meet at. Dante told me so I could go for him."

With a furious snarl, my uncle snapped his fingers, and Iluz released me with a shove. I dropped forward, catching myself on my hands, and pushed myself to my feet. My entire body screamed in pain, but I refused to let it show on my face, standing my ground as my uncle stalked back to his stupid throne. Seriously, he had a throne. Like a corrupt king. I hated him so much.

"Fine. If you want to be so pathetic as to follow your cousin's example, then do it. Get me more information on those families. And Aziel. If he fails, it's you who will face the consequences."

I bowed my head slightly to acknowledge him. I knew that already. I'd known that from the beginning. And I'd take it as long as they stopped hurting Dante. I waved him closer, putting my hand on his shoulder as I guided him to the back of the room. We weren't expected to stay. They didn't want me knowing their plans, so we headed straight outside and I teleported the second we stepped past the gate.

I stumbled when we got to the alley near my apartment. I could feel the blood dripping down my neck from where Iluz cut me, and my body protested the beating. Dante looked worried, hovering beside me, but I waved him off, shaking my head.

"I'm good. Just need rest. Let's go home."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He slipped under my arm, letting me balance myself against him. He was tall enough that I could rest my forearm against his shoulder a bit, which helped. It felt like at least one of my ribs was broken, which was making me hunch as pain shot up my side with every step. My entire body screamed in protest. I swore those assholes wore steel-toed boots daily in hopes of getting to hurt me. The stairs down to my apartment were a bitch, and I had sweat on my temples and upper lip by the time we got to my front door. Dante pulled out his key while I leaned against the frame with my eyes closed.

“How come you never teleport straight home?”

“They can track it,” I murmured. “I avoid it when I can because they don’t know where I live and I don’t want them to find out.”

It was rare that I’d teleport directly into my apartment. I avoided it as much as possible. In the past year, the only time I did was after I found out about the white tiger bullshit. And it pissed me off that we couldn’t avoid them anymore. Those brothers were the key to the information we needed to survive. If I wanted to live past next week, if I wanted Dante safe, I needed to spend time with them. And that scared the shit out of me.

Dropping onto the couch, I grimaced from the pain. Dante locked up behind us, coming to hover at my side with a deep frown on his face.

“What do I do?”

“Nothing. We used the last potions I had on you and Ollie. I’ll get more in the

morning. I'm just gonna rest my eyes for a bit."

Normally, the beatings I got were meant to hurt me but not kill me. Not while I was still useful to my uncle. This time, they wanted to kill me. Only Dante stepping in saved my life. The pain was excruciating, though, and I didn't have the energy to do anything but give in to the pull of darkness. It wasn't the first time in my life that I'd passed out from the pain, and I doubted it'd be the last.

I woke up to murmured voices and a potion being shoved down my throat. A familiar voice spoke, amusement laced in his tone.

"Damn, Athena. Couldn't be a little nicer? The man looks like shit," Felix snickered.

It took a second for me to open my eyes, my focus on not choking on the potion. I groaned as it swept through me, settling the aches and pains enough for me to breathe right. I blinked my eyes open, looking around the room.

"What are you doing here?"

I hadn't seen my friends since the wedding. None of the mates were here, just my friends and Athena stood over me. Felix jerked his chin over my shoulder and I followed his direction to find Dante standing on the other side of the couch.

"Your cousin called Athena. Athena called us."

Callum stepped forward, his frown deep and prominent. "Why didn't you tell us your family was hurting you? We could have helped."

I shook my head, slowly pushing myself upright, one arm hugging my side. The potions took the edge off, but until I could see an actual healer, the more severe injuries would still be there. There wasn't anything I could do until morning.

“There’s nothing you could have done. He’s got a damn army.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding us?” Hendrix queried quietly.

I pressed my lips together, avoiding their gazes. It wasn’t the only reason. But I didn’t want them to know their matings drove me away. It wasn’t fair of me to put that on them. They found people to make them happy. They shouldn’t feel guilty about that.

“Why he stayed away is irrelevant,” Athena interrupted. “The only thing that matters now is that you are aware of the danger. There will come a time when he needs you. You need to be prepared for that.”

They all looked worried, but determined to help me. I hated it. I never wanted to need them. I didn’t want to drag them into my issues. I spent years keeping things vague enough that they wouldn’t ask questions. Now Athena wasn’t giving me a choice. If I didn’t want them to get hurt, I had to come clean at least enough to keep them safe. They needed to know what to look out for. If my uncle came for them, they needed to be ready.

“There are things about me you guys don’t know...”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DECLAN

“We were wondering if you would watch Oliver for the week. We’ve been planning this trip for a long time, and we were going to send Oliver to his grandmother’s house, but she had a fall. She’s okay, but she doesn’t feel comfortable watching him anymore. We can pay you...”

No, they couldn’t. They only offered because they were desperate. I was their last

option in watching Ollie. I knew they thought I'd taint him with my gayness. I'd roll my eyes, but I just didn't care enough to fight with them.

"That's fine. You don't have to pay me. Did you talk to him about butting into people's business?"

My mother's lips pursed in a poor attempt to hide her displeasure. She didn't want me parenting Ollie, but they weren't going to be the ones to do it. As long as he wasn't gay, he could get away with anything. And since one of his closest friends was a little girl, they figured that was a good sign of his sexuality. I questioned that, but never out loud and never in front of them. I was worried about what they'd do if they thought he was gay at such a young age.

"Your father said he would talk to him. There's nothing wrong with standing up for people—"

"There is when it gets him hurt. He can have the same effect by getting an adult instead of putting himself in danger. He's lucky that the last boy apologized for his behavior. If his new bully was a paranormal, I'd be afraid for him at school."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

From the look on her face, she wanted to argue with me, but since the fate of their vacation rested in my hands, she held back. I knew about their cruise. They'd been saving and planning for it for years. They started long before I moved out. They never got a real honeymoon and since they worked for a living, saving for something like that took forever. They got close a couple times, but then something big would come up, like a shot engine or a new roof, and they'd be forced to start again. They were finally getting the chance to go, and only Ollie's care stood in their way.

"Is he staying with me tonight? When do you leave?"

"No. We're driving to the dock on Sunday afternoon. We'll drop him off Sunday morning after church."

Of course they would. Just had to squeeze in a little religious manipulation before they sent him to stay with me.

"Alright. I've got a client at noon, but—"

"You have an extra bed, right? We don't..." She paused, trying to figure out how she wanted to word it. I saw right through her crap, though. I scowled at her, not bothering to hide my irritation.

"You're serious right now?"

Her shoulders came up, and she took a step back automatically. "We don't think you'd do anything. It's just—"

“You’re afraid my gay will rub off on him somehow? Are you really that dumb?”

“Watch it,” Dad snapped. He’d been standing by the door, listening to Ollie chatter about his new friend at school. They didn’t have a problem with Ollie making friends with demons, but they had a problem with me. Apparently, gay was worse than demonic.

Swinging my attention to Dad, I glowered at him. We had this argument at least twice a year. They tried to convince me to ‘just try dating a woman’, ‘you won’t know if you don’t like it if you’ve never tried it’. We ended up in a screaming match every time and I would ignore them for a few weeks until the anger died down and things went back to normal. I wanted to go off on them again, but Ollie was watching us with a frown right beside my dad. I didn’t fight in front of him if I could help it.

“For your information, I have a pull out couch. That’s where he’ll be sleeping. All his movies will be child appropriate, and I will keep the rainbow flags at a minimum. Happy?”

I could read their response clear as day. They weren’t happy in the slightest. They probably would’ve preferred giving Ollie to the state instead of leaving him with me. They said they loved me and they were polite for the most part, but there was a big part of me that disgusted them and it would always taint our relationship. Once Ollie was old enough to take care of himself, I fully planned on cutting them out. I had no doubt they were looking forward to the same thing. All we had to wait for was him to be old enough to be out and about safely by himself. I wasn’t going to risk my relationship with my brother until he could visit me on his own.

Mom’s voice was tense as she forced a smile. “We appreciate you watching him. We know it’s last minute. We’ll be gone for a week. He’s got conferences coming up, so make sure to go to those.”

Like they'd go to them in the first place. It was always going to be me. They wouldn't take off work for something like that unless they absolutely had to. I waved them off, giving Ollie a fist bump on my way past. "See you on Sunday, dude. Don't forget your controller if you want to play against me. My spare finally kicked the bucket."

"Okay, Dec. See you Sunday! Don't forget the ice cream!"

My parents led him out with sour expressions. It was the worst thing on the planet to them to leave their son with a gay man. I wanted to find some kid movies with gay characters just so I can fuck with them a little.

The interaction with my parents left me in a foul mood. I was quiet through my appointments, my focus on my work and not the roiling irritation in my gut. I was working so hard to not think about it that I didn't hear the bell ring over the door until Ben spoke.

"Uh, hey. Can I help you?"

"Have you ever done these things on paranormals?" was the reply. I sat up with a frown, wheeling my chair back a little to see who showed up. Three demons and a human woman stood just inside the door, but one of them was familiar. He looked uncomfortable and like he wanted to be anywhere else, but his friends were more relaxed, looking around curiously.

"Uh, I haven't. I think Declan has. Hold on. Dec?"

The client in my chair was twisted in their seat to see the newcomers. She didn't look bothered by the interruption, and when I murmured that I'd be right back, she gave me a thumbs up. Pushing out of my seat, I tugged the gloves off my hands, tossing them in the trash on the way. Since I was familiar with one of them, that was who I

greeted first.

“Hey... You’re Dante’s cousin, right?”

He didn’t look like he wanted to answer me, but his friend elbowed him and he grimaced, gritting out a reply. “Yes. My name is Aziel. Dante told my friends about your shop and they were curious. And really annoying.”

That last sentence was muttered under his breath, like he didn’t actually want me to hear it. I bit back a laugh, offering my hand to the one closest to me. “I’m Declan. To answer your question, I’ve tattooed witches before, but never demons. I’m not sure if the process is different. I’d have to do some research.”

“Hendrix,” the closest one replied. “I know someone who can help answer that if you need it. He worked in the Other Realm when I was younger, but he hasn’t found a place to set up shop on this side yet.”

That was an interesting thought. Back before my run in with the witches, I’d been open to the idea of working with paranormals. My client base was small since I wasn’t well known yet, and I didn’t really care who I was tattooing as long as I was paid. I’d put that idea aside after the incident with the witches, and I wasn’t sure I was comfortable changing that, but Ben looked curious and I didn’t want to be rude by refusing outright.

“Uh, sure... But why aren’t you going to see him instead?”

The woman, a tiny thing with a cocky attitude, nudged Aziel forward. “This one expressed interest, and he doesn’t trust people easily. Since your little brother and his cousin are friends, we figured he’d feel better with you than Hendrix’s... old friend? Acquaintance? I wasn’t really paying attention when he mentioned it.”

Aziel shot her a dirty look, but she ignored him. The guy never struck me as the type to get a tattoo. He was too uptight. But every interaction I'd had with the guy only left me more confused than before.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“I mean, I guess I can see the appeal to that. But I’ve never tattooed demons before, so I really need to look into it first. If it’s possible, then we can set up an appointment.”

“Oh, me too! I’m Felix, by the way. The cool one.”

Hendrix frowned at his friend. “Didn’t Tyler tell you not to get anything without him being here?”

Felix rolled his eyes. “Duh. I’d bring him too. He’s human. He wouldn’t even need to wait. That guy is hot. Tyler would look even better with his own tattoos.” He gestured to me, chatting animatedly.

I huffed out a laugh. “Thanks, I guess. Here, why don’t I get your information and the name and number of your contact and I’ll get back to you if it’s possible or not. And if your...”

“Mate,” Felix finished.

“Right... If your mate wants his own ink, then he can email me to set up an appointment.” I grabbed a few cards off the front desk, handing them out. Hendrix scribbled the name of his contact on a piece of paper and handed it to me, and I wrote down general information on each of them. Aziel stood at the back, discomfort clear across his face, but when it was his turn, he mumbled out his information without needing a push from his friends. Once we were through, he hesitated.

“Dante... He asked if he and Ollie could play again. I understand if you’re busy, but

he hasn't made many friends yet and now that they're past the fight, he likes hanging out with Ollie."

Ollie had been upbeat about spending time with Dante, too. After they apologized, they got along pretty well, and not once did Dante lose his cool or act out around us during our game. Even when Ollie was kicking our asses.

"Sure. Just text me and we can set things up. I've got Ollie for the next week while my parents are on vacation, so after school works, or the weekend in the mornings if that's easier for you."

"He'll definitely text you. Won't you, Az?" the woman snickered. I wasn't sure why she was laughing, and the way she leered at him said she was enjoying ribbing him, but I let that go. If I didn't know any better, I'd assume she was teasing because he was into me. He'd given no signs of being interested, so I doubted it. Whatever. I had enough on my plate without having to worry about stuff like that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AZIEL

I hated my friends. They were getting far too much enjoyment out of this. After telling them the truth about my family, Athena decided to spill the vision she had about me. Normally, she kept that kind of thing to herself unless someone asked for her to share, but she said it was for my own good. Now my friends were determined for me to spend time with the human, and they refused to take no as an answer. Which is how I found myself back in the tattoo shop on a Saturday afternoon under some crap pretense of Dante wanting to play with Ollie. Even Dante was determined to help, and he said he was going to play with Ollie every day of the week until Declan and I were at least friends.

The shop was busier than it'd been the last time I was here. There were two people getting tattoos and two more waiting on the couch near the front desk. I kind of expected them to look at least wary when Dante and I showed up, but this seemed to be the wrong crowd for that kind of reaction. I got a few curious looks, but after Declan lifted his chin in greeting, they went back to their phones and conversations.

"Ollie is watching TV upstairs. Gimme a minute, I'll call him down," Declan called over his shoulder.

Dante crept closer to where Declan was working, standing on his tiptoes to get a better view. Declan noticed and shifted a little, gesturing with a tip of his head for Dante to come closer.

"What do you think?"

Moving to Declan's side, Dante studied the ink. "That's really cool, but you know they don't look like that, right?"

Both Declan and the guy in the chair looked surprised. "Wait. The grim reaper is real?"

Dante scrunched up his nose and looked at me. "The what?"

Stepping closer, I looked at the tattoo. I'd seen images like that before. Humans used them regarding religion and death, but if they went with the literal sense, grims were very different.

"It's a human thing. They aren't drawing actual grims."

Declan tipped his head curiously. "Grims and grim reaper aren't the same thing?"

I shook my head. “No. Other than being dangerous, they don’t have much to do with death. And the cloaks are a myth. They don’t actually have corporal forms. They’re more like a black mist, so that’s probably why humans saw them that way.” My gaze flicked down to the tattoo again, and I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “Tattoos like that might flatter them, though. You’ll be less likely to be attacked by them.”

The man in the chair looked surprised, a big smile blooming across his face. “No shit? That’s awesome.”

The man who greeted us the night before, who had been working on a tattoo the next chair over, snorted and lifted his head from what he was doing. “Damn, I guess that means I’m clear, too. You’re gonna have to add one to your collection, Dec.”

Declan rolled his eyes. “I’m good, thanks.”

Standing this close, I could see the tattoos on his arms and neck. There didn’t seem to be a specific theme to them. A compass on the right side of his neck, an old clock face on the left. Roses on his shoulder, a bunch of lines that looked like a date on the inside of his arm, and more. I didn’t realize I was staring until he looked back up at me. That was when I finally noticed his eyes.

“Your eyes are two different colors.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He smirked, raising his eyebrows at me. “Just noticed that? Yeah, it’s called heterochromia. It’s a definite conversation starter.”

“Probably one of the few rare times the word hetero would be attached to you,” the other tattoo artist snickered.

Declan raised his middle finger at the man. “If you’ve got enough free time to be an asshole, Ben, go call Ollie so he can play.”

Ben chuckled to himself, rolling away from the tattoo he had been working on so he could head towards the back. Ollie came racing down a minute later, wearing long basketball shorts and a tank top. He was ready for the park, which was where Dante wanted to go play. He wanted to make an appearance, so if our family was watching, they’d see him getting information. I turned to follow them when they headed towards the door, but Dante scowled at me and crossed his arms.

“We don’t need a babysitter. We can get to the park ourselves. You can wait here.”

I rolled my eyes. He was too damn obvious about getting me to spend time with Declan. They all were. The meeting the night before to get information about tattoos was painfully obvious. I wouldn’t be surprised if Declan caught on already.

“That’s fine. We’ve got an open couch policy. You can hang out. As long as they go together, I don’t mind them going by themselves,” Declan answered behind me.

“Okay, bye!” Dante shouted, grabbing Ollie’s wrist and racing out the door before I could protest. When he passed by the front window, he smirked at me. The little shit.

I'd be getting back at him later.

With a heavy sigh, I moved to lean against the wall by the door. The couch was probably big enough for three people, but I didn't want to crowd the humans. I pulled out my phone, texting my friends that they corrupted my cousin, and pretended that I wasn't watching Declan out of the corner of my eye.

Athena was less than clear about what she wanted me to be doing with the man. The word submit made me nervous, though. I outweighed and towered over the human, and I was supposed to, what? Get on my knees for him?

Okay, that wouldn't be the worst idea on the planet, but that was about as far as I'd probably go in submitting.

"I got an email from the contact your friend gave me last night. He replied a lot faster than I expected. Said he could come talk to me in a day or two."

Glancing up from my phone, I frowned. It took me a second to remember who he was talking about. Hendrix had connections I didn't, through his band and his family. I shouldn't have been surprised he knew someone who tattooed paranormals. I'd never met the person, but then again, I avoided people outside my inner circle for a reason. You never know who might work for your family and report back against you.

I didn't reply to Declan's comment aside from dipping my chin to acknowledge him. I wasn't really a people person. I was fine with my friends, but I'd known them since I was a kid. It was rare for me to meet new people, and even more rare for me to think about things like hookups. It required a level of trust I refused to hand out easily.

"He said the only difference with tattooing demons was the type of ink. If I can get my hands on it, then you and your friends can get your work done. Did you have anything in mind?"

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “No. Not really.”

I never actually considered it. The story about me wanting one was just an excuse made up by my friends to get closer to Declan. They were going to force us to spend time together, even if I had to get a permanent etching on my skin to do it.

“That’s fine. I’ve got a portfolio I can show you to give you some ideas. Let me just finish this up.”

I spent the afternoon looking through Declan’s art and chatting with him between clients. The boys came back for a snack at one point, disappearing upstairs, but Declan didn’t seem to mind. He was the opposite of me, calm and relaxed, without a hint of apprehension whenever someone new stepped into his shop. Meanwhile, I watched each person suspiciously until they left or until Declan gestured them into the chair to start their tattoos. And even then, I watched them out of the corner of my eye. I kept waiting for someone to lash out, and I guess I wasn’t subtle about it. As dinner rolled around, Declan took a break to feed the boys and tipped his head in a gesture for me to follow him. Once we were climbing the stairs, he glanced over his shoulder at me.

“You okay? You seem really tense.”

“I’m fine,” I grumbled.

Unfortunately, if we did spend time together, he’d have to get used to this. I spent my entire life on edge, waiting for one of my family members to lash out at me or one of our enemies to come for me in a revenge plot. I trusted no one, and since I was supposed to protect Declan, I trusted no one around him, either.

Declan paused at the landing at the top of the stairs, turning to face me, his eyes narrowed. “Liar. Tell me the truth. Is something going on? Family doesn’t normally

stick around during playdates, and you looked like you wanted to jump everyone who stepped into the shop. Did I miss something?"

"It's nothing," I growled.

He crossed his arms, not backing down an inch. I couldn't tell him the truth. He'd take it the wrong way. And I didn't want to admit he'd gotten on the radar of my psychotic family because of my carelessness. I avoided eye contact, frowning at the door, trying to figure out some kind of response, when his hand gripped my chin and forced me to look at him. His voice dropped to a whisper, his body a lot closer than I'd noticed before.

"From what I can tell, either you're here protecting me from something you don't want to admit to, or you're the possessive type and interested in spending time together. Which one is it?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DECLAN

I'd felthis eyes on me all afternoon. Subtle wasn't really his strong suit. And every time someone came into the shop, he glared at them. I had a few clients whisper to me, asking about him and why he was staring. I had to make up excuses because it didn't make any sense to say that Ollie's friend's cousin was hanging out for the fun of it. No, he was hiding something from me. If there was some sort of danger, I deserved to know.

He looked surprised, his eyes flying to meet mine. He was a step down on the stairs, putting us at even height, and I could see the uncertainty in his posture. I was testing the waters with the second option, but nothing else made sense. Danger or sex. Both would make someone hover and glare at strangers coming close.

“I...”

I got my answer when his eyes flicked down to my mouth and back up. I wasn't shy about it, and I didn't pussyfoot around my interests, either. I had always been a cut to the chase kind of person. I didn't like playing games. Aziel was hot, and I wouldn't say no to some fun, but he had to be upfront about it. I didn't do the whole experimenting thing. If he wasn't sure, then he needed to find someone else to bring him on that journey. I didn't have time to play nice.

“If there's something you need to say, just say it. Otherwise, I'm going to make the boys some dinner. I don't have time for games.”

I gave him a second, but when he didn't offer me an answer, I shook my head and turned toward the door, pausing when he finally spoke.

“And if it's the second option?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow at him. “Depends. Is the hesitation because you've never hooked up before?”

He frowned. “No. I just don't do it often. I don't... trust easily.”

Yeah, no shit. It was written all over him. But for some reason, he trusted me. His friend said the same thing about his tattoos last night. He could've gone to his friend's contact, but he trusted me more. I wasn't sure what I did to earn that, but I wasn't going to throw it in his face.

“Same. I’m cool with having some fun, but not if this is some kind of experiment. If you want me, just say something.”

I didn’t really do casual, I preferred to be in relationships, but after my last bad break up, I avoided getting back out there. Maybe something casual was what I needed to get back on the horse. And once it was out there, Aziel was less shy about it.

“Busy tonight?”

Lucky for him, this was the one night this week I didn’t have Ollie with me after dinner. My parents squeezed an extra shift at work for a little more of a buffer in their spending for this vacation, so Ollie was left with me, but they weren’t going to have him spend the night one day earlier than they had to. They’d pick him up after dinner.

“Ollie leaves at seven with our folks. You got a babysitter?”

At the basketball game, Dante told us he lived with his cousin because his place was closer to school. He didn’t talk much about his parents or why he didn’t live with them, but he seemed happy living with Aziel, and that was all that mattered.

“Yeah.”

“My shop closes at nine. I’m done cleaning up a little while after.”

“See you at ten,” he growled. The discomfort was gone, and his eyes were heated, and excitement built up under my skin. It’d been a while, and I was looking forward to working off some pent up frustration that had been building the past few weeks.

The universe must have been looking out for me, because the rest of the evening went without a hitch. The boys ate their food and played video games. Aziel took Dante home just after my parents picked up Ollie. And my notoriously late client was

actually on time, which meant I was done just before closing time. I sent Ben home after we cleaned up and locked up behind him, booking it up the stairs to get ready.

I had enough time to shower and make my room a little more fit for company, but Azriel was fucking prompt and I heard the knock on the back door exactly at ten. I didn't bother with shoes, since we weren't planning on going out anyway, and I didn't dress up either, sticking to sweats and a t-shirt because I'm a lazy shit. None of that seemed to bother Azriel, because when he looked me over after I opened the door, there wasn't an ounce of disappointment in his face. Lust kind of blocked out everything else, and I was more than okay with that.

"Gonna come in, or are we fooling around out here? Gotta say, I'm not really looking for jail time right now."

A smirk flashed across his face, taking the edge off all that tension and scowling I'd seen all day. He was hot all growly like that, but he was a lot hotter when he smiled, even if it barely counted as a smile. He followed me inside, locking the door behind him, which made me grin. Looks like someone planned on staying a while.

We made it up the stairs before he spun me around and his mouth crashed against mine. Not one to back down from a fight, I shoved my tongue past his lips, tangling it with his. It was an all out duel, both of us trying to dominate the other's mouth until I jerked away with a frown.

"Why do I get the feeling we should've discussed things before we agreed to this?"

He growled, and his face turned away from me. It almost seemed like he was irritated, but it needed to be discussed. I didn't bottom. It wasn't my thing. Tried it, didn't love it. No one I'd ever dated since complained about it. But Azriel was as dominant as I was, and we might need to skip penetration if we both couldn't agree.

“Az?”

He huffed out a sharp breath, scowling at the floor. “You lead. Just... go easy. I’ve never—” He cut himself off with a snarl. He didn’t look happy with the idea and I wasn’t about to force him, but when I opened my mouth to say something, he attacked me, taking his frustration out on my mouth. He sucked on my tongue, nipped my bottom lip hard, and knocked the rust off me in three seconds flat.

For someone who said I could lead, he really fought hard against it. I had almost no hope of manhandling him when he was that much bigger than me. It was when I fisted his hair tightly that he got the picture, growling low as he loosened his grip on me.

“If this is what you really want, then stop trying to control shit. I’m not going to force you, but I’m not going to let you get away with taking over, either. Yes or no. Pick one.”

“Yes.” It was a growl, deep and definitely not human, but when I pushed against his chest, he let me lead him to the bedroom. Shoving him onto the bed, I stood between his knees with my arms crossed.

“Strip.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He was at war with himself, glaring up at me even while he pulled his shirt over his head. He was a goddamn mystery, and I had so many questions, but when he leaned forward to untie his boots and nuzzled the outline of my cock in my sweats, all thoughts aside from sex fled.

“Unless you’re gonna put it in your mouth, I suggest you knock that shit off.”

That smirk flashed again, and he straightened, his hands running up the backs of my legs to squeeze my ass. When I narrowed my eyes, his grin grew.

“Fucking brat. On the bed. I was gonna be nice, but you’re asking for it.”

He made a tsk sound, unbuttoning his jeans and dragging them off before shifting himself to the middle of the bed. “Who the fuck wants nice?”

“The guy with the virgin ass might,” I muttered, crawling up the bed to join him. He was massive, probably too big to be on a queen-size mattress, with muscles to spare and horns that would probably gouge a hole in my headboard if I wasn’t careful. I felt powerful being in control of someone as big as him. I ran my palms up his legs and along his thighs, grinning when his cock twitched in his boxer briefs when I got too close. I ignored it, moving upwards until I was poised over him, my hands on either side of his head.

“Because I’m not an asshole, I’m gonna ask one more time. You sure about this? We can get off in other ways if you aren’t comfortable.”

His mouth twitched like he was holding back a scowl, but he dipped his chin once.

“I’m sure.”

Oh, I was going to have some serious fun with this. I didn’t know why he was so damn determined to give me all the power, but I wasn’t going to turn it down. I ran my tongue along his neck, nipping on his earlobe before I whispered in his ear.

“You’re in for one hell of a surprise.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AZIEL

A large part of my mind protested what we were doing. I didn’t enjoy giving up control. It made me feel vulnerable and weak, and I despised that. But I remembered that stupid word Athena used. Submit to the white tiger. It was torture, I hated it, but I also didn’t want to stop. Not just because of the vision Athena had, but also because, for the first time in my life, I didn’t have to think about what to do next. Declan was in charge and as much as that pissed me off, it was a little freeing. Not that I’d ever admit that to anyone. Once this vision was fulfilled or whatever, I would take back my control. I needed it to survive.

I had to fist my hands in the bedding to keep myself from taking over. It was instinct by now, and I’d never allowed myself to be beneath someone before. Declan took his time exploring me, teeth and tongue running over my skin. I snarled at him, wishing he’d pick up the fucking pace so I could be done already, and I felt him grin against my chest.

“The more you complain, the more fun it is for me. Keep going. It’ll only drag this out.”

Asshole. I wasn’t this cruel with the people I brought into my bed. Granted, I could

count on one hand the amount of times I trusted someone enough to do that, but still. I got to the fucking point without preamble.

Declan's teeth on my nipple forced my attention back on him and my growl tapered off into a groan. That was new. He nipped and soothed the sting with his tongue, and every swirl made my stomach tighten and my cock leak. My brow furrowed. I wasn't that sensitive. Why—

Like he knew I was getting distracted, Declan switched sides and sucked hard enough to cause pain. My head flew back as I groaned loudly, my cock throbbing for attention.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?”

Lifting his head, Declan shot me a smug look. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

My expression flattened. No, I really didn't. He was going to say something about me giving up control and it would only piss me off. I lifted my chin, refusing to answer, and his responding grin was a little intimidating. He was enjoying the fight, and I hated him for it.

“Relax, baby. I'm just getting started.”

“I'm not your baby,” I snapped, sucking in a sharp breath when he punished me by biting a little harder on my nipple. He teased me, switching between light and soft to sharp and rough. It was disconcerting and hard to follow, and the amount of precum leaking from my cock was making a mess. Why the hell did I enjoy this so much?

When Declan finally moved on, dragging my boxers down my legs and tossing them away, I wanted to sob with relief. I didn't, that would never happen in my lifetime,

but I felt the pressure in my chest. Declan couldn't be human. It made no sense. There had to be sorcery involved to get me to react this way.

“Still fighting, huh? Do you ever shut your mind off?”

“Never. Can we just hurry up already?”

“That the kind of thing you say to all your hookups?” he murmured, his hot breath trailing along my length without him actually touching me. I was going to respond, at least to tell him to fuck off, but he pushed my thighs up and apart and I felt myself stiffen. I never let someone have my ass. They weren't even allowed to play. I didn't trust people enough to allow that.

“You can always bow out. I'm not going to make you.”

That felt a little like a challenge. He probably didn't mean it that way, he had checked more than once to make sure we were on the same page, but it still felt like one. I glared down at him, planting my feet on the bed.

“I said I'd do it. Are you gonna be a pussy about it or are you gonna do something?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

His answering grin was feral, and he leaned over me to pull a bottle of lube out of his nightstand.

“You’re asking for trouble, baby. It's almost like you want me to be rough with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m starting to think you don’t know how. Biting isn’t what I’d call—” My voice cut off, a strangled sound escaping me as he pushed a finger inside me. He gave no warning, and he wasn’t nice about it. I had only myself to blame for pushing him, but I wasn’t going to apologize for it. I was doing what the damn vision said to do.

“You were saying?”

“Fuck y—”

A groan ripped from my throat as he pushed another finger in with the first. He backed off only for a second before shoving back in. Lightning shot up my spine as he brushed over my prostate. I’d found it before on my past partners, but never my own, and any and all protests about my current position disappeared. I groaned as he pumped his fingers, just rough enough to make me shiver. It burned when he added a third finger, but he kept stroking my prostate and teasing my cock with little licks that were almost torture, until I was pushing back for more.

When he withdrew his hand, I choked down a protest. I wasn’t going to admit to him how much I liked that. How badly I wanted him to touch me again. I hated myself for it, and I growled when he moved off the bed.

“Relax, baby. You’ll get what you need in a second.”

“Fuck off,” I snarled. His condescending shit pissed me off and distracted me from the turmoil reaction to his touch. Which was probably his goal, since he was fucking grinning at me.

When he stripped off his boxers, I sat up suddenly, frowning at him. “What is that?”

He arched an eyebrow, a smug look on his face as he stroked his cock, almost hiding the discovery from me.

“Want a closer look?”

I narrowed my eyes. I was curious, but I got the feeling that if I asked, he’d make me get on my knees to get a good look. What little I saw was still shocking, though. And despite the promise in his eyes, I had to get a better look.

“Show me.”

He smirked. “You look like you already know what I want first.”

With a growl, I shoved myself off the bed and dropped to my knees. I wasn’t kind when I fisted him, but he didn’t seem to mind the rough touch, groaning as I stroked over him. His dick was pierced. I’d never seen anything like that. And it wasn’t just once. Little silver balls ran along the underside of his cock in two rows, including one through the head.

“Why would you do that? Doesn’t it hurt?”

He hummed, his hand covering mine as he urged me to stroke him. “Hurt like a bitch when I got it done. But it feels good now. Makes me more sensitive. And my partners

seem to enjoy it.”

Without thinking about it, I leaned forward and ran my tongue along the piercings underneath. Declan groaned, but he didn’t let me explore for long. He fisted the hair on the back of my head, tugging hard enough to force me to look at him.

“The one choice you get tonight is how I take you. On your stomach or on your back. Hurry up or I’ll choose for you.”

The order burned against my mind, but I moved to lie on my stomach on the bed anyway, silently cursing Athena in my head.

I refused to look as Declan tore open the little foil packet. I knew humans used them to protect against diseases and technically he didn’t need to use them with me, since demons can’t catch human diseases, but I didn’t correct him. I wanted to get this over with more than I wanted to argue about protection.

My entire body tensed when the head of his cock brushed against my ass. I braced myself, willing him to get it over with, but he must’ve felt it because he didn’t move. He chuckled low, leaning over me to nip my earlobe.

“You really think I’m gonna do anything while you’re that tense?”

“Just fucking do it,” I snarled.

He hummed, running his hands along my spine, teasing my wings, and down to my ass and along my tail. With me refusing to look over my shoulder, I couldn’t tell what the hell he was doing. When he spread my ass cheeks, I thought he was finally giving in, but it wasn’t his cock that pushed inside me. It was his fucking tongue.

“Fuck!”

My body contorted in pleasure as he unleashed that teasing mouth on my ass. He licked, sucked, and nipped, until I was almost begging for more. I wouldn't get off that way, but the torture had me riding the edge the entire time. A few strokes of my cock and I'd explode. He pushed his fingers back in, his tongue teasing the rim as he stretched me. And this time, when he pulled away, I couldn't hold back my protest.

“No, don't stop...”

His chuckle made me shiver, rougher than I'd expected. “I'm not going to stop. I'm just going to give you a different kind of pleasure.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

It was all the warning I got before he lined himself up and pushed inside me. Even with all the prep, it burned, but not enough to block out the feeling of those metal balls on my insides. The one on top rested against my prostate as he paused, giving my body time to adjust. Anticipation made me tremble, and when he leaned back and thrust in hard, I shouted in surprise.

“Oh, fuck!”

He wasn't snarky, and he didn't tease me anymore. He set a punishing pace, riding my ass hard, and my eyes rolled into my head. The metal balls were the sweetest kind of torture to my rim, the top one teasing my prostate even through the rubber of the condom. I buried my face against the pillows, muffling the noises I couldn't stop from spilling out of my mouth. At least until Declan gripped one of my horns to force my head back. He didn't know the pleasure some demons got from that kind of touch, and I nearly exploded instantly.

“Don't hide from me, Aziel,” He growled against my ear. “I want to hear you take what I give you.”

Like a rubber band breaking, something snapped inside me and I felt myself surrender to his words. Right now, in this moment, I wasn't in control. I took everything he gave me and more until the only thing I could hear in my mind was white noise. No more fighting, no more protests. I relaxed and let him take over.

“Yes! Like that! Fuck yes!” he shouted.

I could only groan in response, a new kind of tension coiling in my middle. I wasn't

going to last much longer. It was more pleasure than I'd experienced before and I couldn't hold back.

"Close..."

He groaned, bucking harder against me, making my eyes squeeze shut from the assault as he brutally pegged my prostate.

"Do it. Come for me, baby. I'm right behind you."

Like a bomb going off in my middle, I exploded, pleasure and relief rushing through every inch of me. My back bowed, my ass clenched tightly, and stars danced behind my eyes. It wasn't the demand that set me off. It was the fact that he was with me the whole way. It was just pillow talk, I knew that. But imagining that was true felt better than anything else.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AZIEL

It took a second for my mind to focus. That release was so intense, I couldn't think enough to get my body to move. But I did need to get moving. I did what Athena said. I let Declan dominate me. That had to be enough.

He had been catching his breath, his hand planted on the mattress to keep him off my back, when he finally spoke.

"Well, that was fun."

I grunted, pushing myself up once he moved away. He sat back, his breathing still stilted, studying me as I sat on the edge of the bed.

“If you give me a few minutes, we can go again.”

It pissed me off that my immediate thought was yes. I told myself I wasn't going to do that again. It didn't matter how good it felt. I grabbed my clothes off the floor, masking the want coursing through my system.

“I'm good. I gotta get back.”

“Ah. Probably don't want to keep the babysitter waiting. I get that.”

It was a convenient excuse, and I bobbed my head in agreement. No point in pissing him off by saying I wasn't interested in more. It'd be a lie anyway. I just didn't want to say that out loud. I tied my boots, tugged my shirt over my head, and stood. Declan dragged on his sweats, but otherwise didn't bother to get dressed. He followed me to the back door, shirtless and too damn good looking for his own good.

This was the part I was unfamiliar with. I didn't do hookups or relationships. The few times I slept with people, it was transactional. They wanted to hook up with a demon, I wanted to get off. And once we were through, they left me alone. But Dante still needed to hang out with Ollie for information. I had to see Declan again. And I didn't know what the hell to say to him.

“Change your mind?” he teased. When I turned to face him, he was leaning against the door jamb, his arms and ankles crossed and a smug look on his face. That look made me want to pummel him and kiss him at the same damn time. It was annoying. I chose to ignore it instead.

“No. But I don't want things to be awkward. Dante likes playing with Ollie. He'd hate me if I ruined that for him.”

Declan's smirk softened a little. “Don't worry. It won't be awkward. We're both

adults. It's not like we promised each other marriage. We got off together. That's it. The boys can still play."

The fact that he wasn't demanding more from me was refreshing. I worried when I gave in to him, that he'd see himself as above me and demand obedience or something stupid. I'd have to hurt him if he did. But what we did in the bedroom didn't seem to extend outside of it.

"If I know Dante, he'll be up my ass to see Ollie again tomorrow."

Declan huffed out a laugh. "Guess I'll see you tomorrow, then. Ollie will be here a little before lunch."

Nodding, I spread my wings and, without another word, launched myself into the air. I hovered until he closed his door and I heard the lock click into place before heading for Athena's place. Dante could take care of himself for a few hours and normally I would've just left him alone. I left Dante with her tonight because I wanted to see her once I was through, to make sure this stupid vision was done.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

When I landed on her front walkway, though, she was waiting for me. She had a deep frown on her face and she beckoned me closer before I could even fold my wings again.

“You need to go back.”

“What? Why?”

“They followed Dante here. They could’ve followed you there. Go back and protect him.”

Stunned, I looked around. “How—”

She made an irritated sound, waving me away with a shooing motion. “There’s no time for that. They won’t attack in daylight, not without catching attention from the council. Stay there until daybreak and then come back here. Go!”

With a frustrated growl, I teleported back to Declan’s place. Sure enough, one of my uncle’s soldiers was casing the place. He startled hard when I landed behind him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Pulling himself together, he sneered at me. I didn’t know his name, but I didn’t really care to. Not all the soldiers who worked for my uncle were blood relations. No one cared if I remembered their names. “I could ask the same thing of you. Wait until Lord Camus hears about you hooking up with humans. He’ll have your head for sure this time.”

Lord Camus. What a fucking ridiculous title. He was lord of nothing. He just liked to make himself sound important to his peons.

The little soldier made a mistake coming here. I might not fight humans, but I had no issue fighting other demons. I didn't want my uncle to know about what happened with me and Declan. And I had no problem making sure that secret never got out.

Pulling a packet out of my pocket, I tossed it at him. "Catch."

He missed, and the packet bounced off his chest, powder exploding all over him. He looked stunned, shooting me an incredulous look. "What the fuck was that?"

"Teleportation blocker. Didn't want you running off before I could deal with you. I wonder if my uncle will notice one missing pawn?"

The lower ranks underestimated me a lot because of the way my uncle treated me. They thought I was a pushover who couldn't fight. This one wasn't the first to find out how wrong that was.

By the time the sun crested over the horizon, I was exhausted. I stayed on the roof of Declan's place, watching over him, until I was sure no one else would come. The little shit I dealt with last night didn't get a chance to report to anyone else, at least according to what he told me. No one else knew about Declan, aside from him being related to Dante getting information. And I was going to keep it that way, even if I had to sit up here every night.

Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. Athena's vision said if I submitted, that I'd finally be free. I did that. Protecting Declan afterwards was a kindness, because I didn't want him hurt being involved with me. The sun was up, Athena said they wouldn't come in broad daylight, and I could distance myself from him to keep him safe. Only Dante needed to stay close. I could drop him off with Ollie so he could

continue to get information and stay the hell away from Declan.

I headed back to Athena's place once the sun had fully risen. I was too tired to fly, so I teleported to her front door and pushed inside, joining her and Dante in the kitchen. Athena was making breakfast with Dante on hand to help her. I remembered a time when I did the same exact thing. She was the reason I knew how to feed myself.

"How did it go?"

"You were right. A street soldier was poking around when I got back. No one else came the rest of the night."

Her wrinkled skin made her frown more pronounced, and she flicked her gaze to Dante and back to me.

"Dante, dear. I need to go to the farmer's market this morning. You will join me. Do me a favor and go into the back garden. The crows should have left me some new bones. I'll need them. They like to scatter them instead of leaving them in a convenient pile, so you'll have to search a bit." She rolled her eyes at me. "To get me to exercise, according to Vivi, the last time she visited."

Dante looked suspicious. He was old enough now to know he was being sent away to stay out of the conversation. He didn't argue, though. We both waited a few minutes, I heard the back door open and shut, and I opened my mouth to speak, but Athena put her boney finger up.

"You're not clever, boy. Your cousin used to do the same thing when he was being nosy. Go outside until I say otherwise."

I heard Dante huff from the hallway. He stomped off and this time, the back door slammed loudly as he did as he was told. Athena shook her head.

“Children. Always think they’re the smartest people in the room.” Her eyes turned to me. “You’re sure he was the only one?”

“As sure as I can be. It didn’t take much to get him to talk. He was going to take Declan and bring him to Camus when he reported me, so my uncle could punish me by hurting Declan. He hadn’t reported it yet.”

She hummed, stirring the food in the pan. “You’ll have to be more careful in the future, then. I doubt he’ll be the last soldier sent to watch you.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? I did what you said. I fulfilled the vision. I don’t need to see him again.”

She shot me an irritated look, turning off the burner on the stove. “No, you did not. If you did, you would be there with him and not here with me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“What the hell are you talking about? You said submit to the white tiger! I did that!”

The room grew darker, like the clouds had passed in front of the sun. That wasn't what was happening, I could see the sunny backyard through the window. It was Athena losing her patience that made the room tremble and the air grow cold. I'd seen her get angry only once in my life, when my uncle showed up on her doorstep demanding she hand me over after my parents tried to leave the family. She refused, and when he attempted to take me from her, the amount of psychic energy that overtook the yard was terrifying. She blasted Camus with it, sending him sailing off her property, and she said if he ever came back, she'd tear the fabric of his future apart. She couldn't protect me forever, but if he had gotten to me that night, no doubt he would've used me to punish my father the same way he used my mother.

“Lower your voice,” she demanded.

Fury and confusion swelled in my chest, but I knew better than to challenge her. She helped raise me and I knew she cared for me, but she wouldn't hesitate to put me in my place. There was a reason I respected her so much.

“I'm sorry. I just thought—”

Her magic pulled back slowly, and the temperature of the room went back to normal. I fought the urge to shake the chill from my skin.

“I know very well what you thought. I told you to submit to the whitetiger to earn your freedom. I never said anything about sex.”

My mouth fell open. “What did you mean, then?”

Making atksound, she turned back to the food, lighting the burner again to rewarm it. “I meant what I meant. You have been fighting your whole life, Azzy. It’s time to let someone else care for you. The white tiger will give you what you need. And not just in the bedroom.”

Horror slammed into my gut, and I launched to my feet. “Hold on. You’re saying I need to— Are you insane? Just one night with him almost got him killed! I’m not risking his life to save mine!”

“His future and yours were always intertwined. Such is the way of mates, dear one. You would have found each other eventually. As I said before, he is stronger than he looks. If you want to be free of your uncle’s control, then the white tiger is your salvation.”

Mates. No. I couldn’t mate. Not with a human and not with anyone else. It wouldn’t help me be free of my uncle. It would give him leverage against me. He’d use my mate to force me to do his bidding. I never wanted a mate.

“I’ve known you a long time, Athena. I never thought you’d be cruel.”

She frowned, turning to face me again. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what would happen if I mated. You know what my uncle would do. He’d use my mate against me to force me to hurt people. I’d never sign someone up for that kind of life. You were wrong to push me towards something I couldn’t have. It’s cruel.”

Her expression softened, and she puttered closer, urging me with her hand on my arm to sit back down. Even sitting, I was taller than her, but she didn’t ever seem to mind.

She cupped my cheeks in her hands, leveling me with a look.

“You listen here, Aziel Shadowwalker. Your happiness has always been my greatest concern. I cannot tell you all I’ve seen. It would change the outcome. Just know, every guidance I’ve given you is leading to your happiness. I would not tease you with something you couldn’t have.”

A deep, painful longing twisted in my chest. I wanted to believe her, to know that my future wasn’t filled with pain and premature death. But I was too afraid to hope.

“I don’t want my happiness if it destroys his. I won’t be like my uncle.”

“I know.”

She didn’t change her mind or give me another path. She just held my face and looked at me with love and compassion. She was the only person who ever did.

I relented. “Can you promise me this won’t end up killing him or his family? I’d rather spend the rest of my life running if it does.”

“I can’t promise much. The future is ever changing, you know this. But I can promise that he will be unharmed. You have people, Aziel. Rely on them to protect your mate. Only together can you succeed.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DECLAN

The contact they gave me for paranormal tattoos showed up on Sunday morning. We weren’t open yet, but I heard him knock and came down to see who was here. To say I was shocked was an understatement. He wasn’t what I was expecting, and it took a

few minutes for me to stop gaping at the literal minotaur in front of my shop.

I was a little uneasy about letting him in. Aziel and his friends were a lot less intimidating than this guy, and that was saying something since Aziel looked like he kicked puppies on the regular. This guy didn't give away any emotions on his face and he had to duck to get into the shop.

“You Declan?”

I blinked a few times, shaking off the nerves. “Uh, yeah. Sorry. I'm Declan Gray. You're...”

“Mannyr. My friends call me Manny.” He offered me his hand, which engulfed my own as he shook it. He was gentle enough, he didn't hurt me, but still. The unease was real, and I almost wanted to change my mind about meeting this guy.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

The bell above the door to the shop rang and Aziel stepped inside, an irritated look on his face. He came up short when he saw Manny and I'll admit I was relieved to see him. Surprised to see him so soon, but so fucking relieved. I still wasn't comfortable around paranormals, but Aziel was different. I was oddly comfortable around him, even after a short amount of time. Last night was proof of that.

"Az. This is Manny, the contact your friend gave me. To teach me about paranormal tattoos?"

Manny turned, offering him his hand. "Mannyr. My friends call me Manny."

"Aziel Shadowwalker," Aziel growled in response. He looked just as wary as I did, and I didn't know how to take that. Was he being possessive again, or did I have something to worry about?

Manny's bushy brows drew together tightly. "Shadowwalker. Like the crime family?"

My eyebrows flew up, and I whipped my head towards Aziel. He never said anything about a crime family.

Aziel looked annoyed, scowling at the minotaur. "Declan said only a special ink was needed. What kind of ink?"

Manny and I both saw through his subject change, but Manny ran with it, digging through a messenger bag I hadn't noticed before. I'd been too busy staring at his face. He looked like a bull on hind legs. It was disconcerting.

“These are what need to be used for paranormals like demons or gargoyles. Though gargoyles will need a special needle. They’ve got tough skin. Vamps and witches can use the regular stuff, but vamps need a smaller needle or they’ll bleed too much. And maybe a bodyguard. Those bloodsuckers ask for tats then lash out when you poke ‘em.”

That made me snort and broke the tension a little. “I’ll keep that in mind. I’ve only ever tattooed a couple witches before. It... didn’t end well. I’m, uh, I’m okay with helping Az and his friends, they seem cool, but I don’t know if I’ll do anything else for now.”

“What happened?” Aziel demanded.

I shot him a bland look. “Why? You gonna track them down and hurt them for me? I’m not a damsel in distress. I handled it and they never came back. Simple as that.”

Aziel snarled, but I ignored him. It was Manny’s frown that caught my attention.

“You sure about that?”

“I mean, I’m here every day and I haven’t seen them. Why?”

He shook his head. “Don’t think they’d come back, but they might make it harder for other people to come here. You been approached by paranormals since?”

I opened my mouth to reply and snapped it shut again. As a matter of fact, no. No paranormals since the witches. I’d been happy with that, since I wasn’t comfortable with paranormals anyway, and never thought to question it. Manny headed for the door and Aziel followed behind him, both of them searching the outside of my shop. They pointed at something under the bay window, and Manny beckoned me outside with a wave of his massive hand.

“Look here. They put a spell on your shop. If a paranormal was walkin’ past, they wouldn’t see this place. The spell tells ‘em there’s nothing here and they keep walkin’. They’re screwin’ with your business that way. Might even work on some humans.”

Well, fuck. My shop wasn’t that busy, but I thought that was just because I wasn’t well known. I was still relatively new to the area. I just thought paranormals didn’t come here because they weren’t interested.

Still...

“You didn’t notice because you were happy about it,” Aziel pointed out. “Tell us why.”

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. “I told you. It was nothing. They got tattoos, tried to scam me with a glamour, and when I proved them wrong, they tried to jump me. My dad showed up before things got too ugly, though, and they left.”

“And you’ve been wary of paranormals ever since.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement. If Aziel took offense to that, he didn’t say anything. He just looked back down at the mark on the wall. “My friend’s landlord is a witch. I can ask her to remove it. But I’m not going to if you don’t want to tattoo paranormals.”

There was an accusation there, and my spine stiffened. I didn’t discriminate against paranormals. I was wary around them. That didn’t make me a bad person. But from the look on Manny’s face, he didn’t agree with that. His expression flattened, and he took a step back, offering the ink he brought to Aziel instead.

“Well, here’s the ink. If he needs more, you’ll have to go to Hell.”

I made a choked sound, incredulous. “Excuse me?”

Az rolled his eyes and ignored me. “That’s the only place?”

Manny nodded. “That I know of. Haven’t found anywhere else that sells it. The creator is a stingy bastard, refuses to sell the recipe to anyone else.”

“He lives in Hell. Are you surprised?”

Manny huffed out a laugh, but his face fell flat when he looked at me again. He turned away, giving his full attention to Aziel. “I’m gonna head home. Don’t wanna be where I’m not welcome. If you want someone with experience to do your tats, send me a message.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He didn't say anything else to me, just shoved his hands into his pockets and walked away. The dejected look ate at my insides and when Aziel turned his sour expression my way, I threw my hands into the air.

“What? Am I not allowed to react when I'm fucking targeted and attacked? I was here alone, Aziel! I was handling it until my dad showed up, but I might not have been that lucky if someone as big as you came, causing trouble. I never actively turned people away. I just didn't question why none ever showed up,” I snapped defensively.

He considered me for a second, but I couldn't tell if he agreed or not from the look on his face. He was comically blank, and it irritated the hell out of me. I spun on my heel, storming back into the shop, only to come up short with him right in front of me. I jumped, whipping my head around to where he'd been standing before and back to him. Fucking teleportation.

“Real funny. Can you just—”

“Do I scare you?”

My head jerked back, surprised. “What?”

“You heard me. You got attacked once and never tried again. Are you afraid of all paranormals? Do I scare you?”

“No! I'm not afraid of paranormals! I'm just cautious! That doesn't mean paranormals shouldn't be treated fairly!”

I didn't know why I was shouting. I never had to defend this to anyone else before. My dad was the only one who saw it happen. And Ben came after the attack. He never questioned why we didn't tattoo paranormals. But saying out loud that I was glad paranormals couldn't see my shop made me sound like a jackass and I hated myself for it.

“I believe you.”

Stunned, I gaped at him. “I’m sorry, what?”

He still didn’t look pissed. A little defensive, maybe, but the look of understanding wasn’t forced.

“You stood up for me and my brother in the park when you didn’t even know us. And other than when we showed up to confront you, you’ve never treated him poorly, even after the fight with Ollie. I wish there were more humans like you, so I didn't have to worry so much about Dante. If you don’t want to invite paranormals into your work because you feel you can’t defend yourself, I won’t judge you for that. I don’t think less of you for it.”

The comment about me not being able to defend myself dug a little. I scowled at him, but I was more mad at myself. I never wanted to discriminate. But I let one bad experience set the tone for how I interacted with paranormals from then on. I’d gotten into way more fights with humans in school than I ever did with paranormals. It just felt more dangerous. I could hold my own against humans. If someone bigger than the witches came after me, I might not have been so lucky.

“It’s not... It’s not that I don’t want them here. Honestly, when I first opened this place, I’d been interested in learning how to tattoo paranormals. I believe in inclusivity. And it’s not like I’m making enough money to be able to turn people away. I just... In my experience, once bullying starts, it takes a fucking fight to stop

it. I didn't think I could hold my own if that happened.”

“You don’t have to change things here.”

I made a face. “Yeah, but it’d be a little hypocritical of me to fool around with a paranormal, but not be willing to work around them.”

A mischievous expression crossed his face. “Well, we could always keep fooling around until you’re more comfortable around paranormals.”

I huffed out a laugh. “I won’t say no to that. Shop doesn’t open for a few hours. Wanna go upstairs?”

I needed a distraction, and Aziel’s offer seemed perfect to me. I’d re-evaluate my stance on paranormal tattoos later. Right now, I wanted a repeat of last night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AZIEL

I felt stupid showing up at Declan’s shop to ask for a relationship. I didn’t do relationships. But Athena drilled it in my head that if I wanted things to get better, I had to trust in my mate. She wouldn’t tell me how she knew Declan was my mate, and I wasn’t entirely sure I believed her, but I was desperate for a change. And she promised he and Ollie wouldn’t get hurt. She was sending reinforcements to put wards on Declan’s shop, and there were a few charms in my pocket for him and Ollie to keep them safe.

I was worried about how this would turn out. Athena was a great oracle, and it was rare that her visions didn’t pan out. But she couldn’t control the future and she wasn’t infallible. Declan, Ollie, and Dante’s safety was my priority. I’d test the waters, but if

it became too dangerous for any of them, I'd walk away. I wasn't going to put them at risk just for a chance to make my life better. I wasn't my uncle.

I could see how conflicted Declan was. He either didn't realize he was discriminating, or he was reconsidering it now that he knew other paranormals outside of the ones who attacked him. I'd be finding those little shits sometime in the future. I wasn't going to force Declan to open his shop to paranormals, but I got the feeling he would anyway. He didn't like the idea of being part of the problem for paranormals.

To distract him, and myself, since I was still raw after my discussion with Athena, I agreed to go upstairs. I wanted that feeling back, where my brain shut off to everything but pleasure. I needed it.

I liked how straightforward he was about it. There were no stupid games to get what we wanted. He offered, I accepted, and we were naked in his bed ten minutes later. I appreciated that about him.

His tongue tangled with mine, his body pinning me to the mattress despite the weight difference. I could overpower him, Athena said the submission bullshit didn't have anything to do with sex. I just... didn't want to. I'd never do this kind of thing again if things didn't work out with him. I wanted to enjoy it while it lasted. And I trusted Declan not to ridicule me about it.

His fingers were teasing over my hole when his phone went off. He looked irritated as he pushed up on one hand, twisting enough to grab it off the nightstand.

"Sorry. I gotta check it. It might be—" He rolled his eyes. "Yep. My parents are on their way." He tossed the phone back onto the nightstand. "We gotta make this quick. Shower sex?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

I didn't have a problem with that. I had to go pick up Dante from the farmer's market eventually anyway.

"Sure."

He grinned, rolling off me and snatching the lube and a condom out of his nightstand. I caught his wrist before he could walk away.

"You don't need that."

Looking at me over his shoulder, he raised an eyebrow. "I mean, I know I'm clean because it's been a while, and I was tested after the last guy, but I don't know you that well and—"

I shook my head quickly, sitting up. "It doesn't matter. Humans and demons can't share diseases. The government did plenty of research before the integration to make sure paranormals were safe crossing over. I can't even catch a cold."

His eyes bugged out slightly before he scowled. "Fuck, now I'm jealous. Last time I got sick, I was laid out on my ass for like a week. It's a pain in the ass trying to tattoo with a runny nose."

Pushing to my feet, I plucked the condom out of his hand and tossed it back on the nightstand. He looked amused, and he didn't argue, tossing me the bottle of lube before leading me to the hall bath. His place wasn't huge, one big room with the living room and kitchen and a hall with one bedroom and one bathroom, but he was living alone. He didn't need much else. At least the ceilings were high enough that I

didn't have to duck through door frames.

While he started the water, I leaned against the counter, watching his ass flex as he bent over. He straightened and flicked the water off his hands, turning to frown at me.

"If we didn't need them, why did you let me use one last night?"

I shrugged. "Didn't think we'd do this again. Figured it didn't matter."

"What changed your mind?"

The truth was on the tip of my tongue. I wondered what he'd say if I told him an oracle thought he was my mate. Or that he was the key to my future. It all sounded very... permanent, and I didn't think it'd go over well. One hookup doesn't make a relationship. And I wasn't going to guilt him into it. I figured fuck buddies was better than that right now.

"The piercings."

His eyebrows jumped up, a smug grin on his face. "Seriously?"

"Felt good," I replied nonchalantly. He didn't make fun of me for it, mostly chuckling to himself as he tested out the water and climbed into the tub. I followed him, glad he had a curtain and not one of those glass showers. Those were cramped for someone my size.

He let us both rinse off before pushing me against the wall. It came easier this time, giving in to him. I fought tooth and nail last time because I didn't want him to think I was weak. He didn't treat me like that, though. He made it clear more than once that it was my choice, and my giving in didn't make him better than me. Giving in to him wasn't what I was used to, and I wanted to feel that relief again.

When he wrapped his fist around my cock, I groaned, thrusting against his palm. He tightened his grip, almost like a punishment, and I grunted, stilling my hips. He started again once I did, teasing me with slow pumps of my cock. Too slow for me, but whenever I tried taking over and fucking his hand, he stopped.

“I thought we were in a hurry,” I growled.

He chuckled. “We are. This would go a lot faster if you stopped trying to take control. Relax, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

My chest tightened to the point of pain and I had to shut my eyes to hide my reaction. It was too close to what Athena predicted. That Declan would take care of me. She didn’t mean in this context, but it hurt to hope. A part of me wanted her to be wrong, so I wouldn’t have to drag this innocent man and his family into my shit. The rest wanted her to be wrong because I didn’t want to risk experiencing something I could lose if my uncle found out.

Declan somehow always knew when I wasn’t in the room with him. He leaned forward, biting down on my nipple just hard enough to send a shockwave down to my cock. I groaned, dropping my chin so I could watch him better.

“There you are. Welcome back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up.”

“Just wanna make sure you don’t miss the show,” he smirked.

“The wha—”

When I wasn’t paying attention, he’d covered his palm in lube. Wrapping his slick hand around my cock, he coated me in it, then fisted both of us in one hand and

thrust. My head flew back on a gasp, the slickness and the glide of his piercings making a damn joke of all my previous jerk off sessions combined. He rutted against me, dragging those piercings along my length, his hand keeping a tight squeeze on both our cocks together. It was so fucking hot, I felt like we went right from foreplay to on the edge without any time in the middle to enjoy it. It was too damn fast. I wanted to drag it out, to take our time, but time wasn't a luxury we had and I needed to come.

“Declan...”

He hummed, his cock shuttling against mine as he picked up speed. When he wrapped his other hand around us, covering us both completely, I lost it, making a mess over our cocks and his hands. He groaned and when I finally opened my eyes to look at him, he was glued to the view, his teeth bared and a fierce look on his face. He thrust against my sensitive cock, revving me up for another round. Demons needed almost no recovery time before we were ready to go again. I was ready for more, about to suggest he get off in my ass, but pounding at the door caught both our attention.

“Fuck,” he growled, his grip loosening.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Before he could step out of the shower and walk away, I sank to my knees and swallowed him. He shouted in response, his hips thrusting slowly at first before he took control completely. He grabbed my horns, sending waves of pleasure down my spine, and used my mouth to get himself off. And I fucking let him.

It didn't take long before I felt him tense. When I flicked my gaze up, he shot me a look. It was part warning, part begging for me to finish him off. Even in control, he made me feel like his equal. I sucked harder and his cum flooded my mouth less than a second later. He threw his head back, letting out a quiet groan. His hips kept moving in little jerks until his cock stopped twitching and he finally stepped away. He didn't get a chance to come down from the high before someone pounded on his door again. He scowled.

"Shit. Hate to ditch you, but—"

"Go. I'm gonna get dressed and go meet Dante. The babysitter has him working with her at the farmer's market, and I don't want him causing trouble."

Declan snorted. "I could see that happening. Okay, cool. See you later?"

The boys still had plans to play, so yeah, I'd be back later. I dipped my chin to acknowledge him and he climbed out of the tub without a word. He surprised me when he spun around, pressing a quick kiss against my lips, but he disappeared before I could respond.

Befuddled, I rinsed off and hopped out, listening as I toweled off. They ingrained it in me at this point to listen in to conversations around me, and I didn't feel ashamed

about it.

“Hey, buddy! You ready for a fun week?”

“Yeah! I brought my controller. Can we play right now?”

Declan chuckled, but the sound was a little off. Tense. I tipped my head, trying to figure out why, when someone else spoke.

“We told you we were coming. You couldn’t put some pants on before now?” a woman complained.

“Sorry. I was in the shower.”

“We texted you twenty minutes ago!”

“Alright, alright. I’ll go get dressed. Relax. It’s not like I’m going to taint anyone just because I haven’t gotten dressed yet.”

“Taint people with what?” Ollie asked. I was wondering the same question. And while Ollie wasn’t going to get an answer, the woman screeching at him that it wasn’t his business, I could ask Declan myself. I teleported to his room to avoid flashing a little kid in the hallway, popping up right as Declan closed the door. He jumped, scowling at me.

“That’s fucking annoying,” he growled under his breath. I ignored that.

“Taint people with what?”

He sighed, heading to his closet to grab some clothes. “My gayness. My parents are homophobic. If they didn’t need a babysitter, they wouldn’t want anything to do with

me.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DECLAN

The incredulousness on Aziel’s face was justifying. But I didn’t want to get into it right now. If my parents knew a guy I was sleeping with was in my room with my brother here, they’d take Ollie and forget their trip. I had to at least appear straight or they’d never let him come over again. I put up my hands, keeping my voice at a whisper.

“I know. Can we talk about this later? If they find out I’ve got a hookup here, they’ll throw a fit. I don’t want them to take my brother away.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he didn’t fight me. He yanked his clothes on, storming closer once he was through. I thought he’d yell or demand I stand up to them or something. Instead, he dipped his head and kissed me quickly, mumbling against my lips.

“I’ll be back later with Dante. Lunch is on me.”

And then he was gone. The teleporting thing was really starting to bug me. But then again, when I came out of my room fully dressed and my mom leaned past me trying to get a look in my room, it made me feel better to know I’d never get caught with Az. If I needed him gone, he’d disappear without issue. That was kind of convenient, actually.

“Alright. Dressed. Now, don’t you two have to get to the docks?”

Mom was pissed that I didn’t answer the door right away. She knew I was here and

Ollie had a key, but apparently today she was looking for any sign that I couldn't handle watching Ollie this week. There wasn't much she could do if she found anything other than cancel her trip. Dad didn't even come upstairs, so he obviously didn't care enough to cancel. I heard him honk and raised my eyebrows at Mom significantly.

She scowled, grinding her teeth as she said goodbye to Ollie. "If you need anything, call us. I mean it, Oliver. Anything at all."

"We're good. Come on, Dec! Let's play!"

Mom's eyes narrowed on me as I went to join my brother, but she gave up, storming out of my place and slamming the back door so hard, I was worried she'd cracked the frame. I shook my head, mostly to myself.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“Hey, Dec? How come mom and dad don’t like you much?”

Dropping onto the couch, I sighed. “Did they say that?”

“No. But they don’t have a lot of nice things to say. Did you fight?”

I tipped my head back and forth. I’d been debating when to come out to Ollie. I planned on waiting until he was thirteen and a little more mature. But if my parents were talking shit behind my back, I didn’t want him thinking I’d done something to them.

“Technically, no. But it’s complicated. They’re mad because I’m not straight and that bothers them. They think I should try harder to be with women. And they don’t want me tainting you with my queerness, either.”

His brow furrowed tightly. “You can’t taint someone. Being gay isn’t catchable. Wait. I didn’t ask. You’re gay, right? Or bi?”

A little tension eased in my shoulders. I hoped Ollie would take it well, but he was raised by our parents. They could’ve influenced his judgment.

“Gay. Women don’t do it for me. That disgusts Mom and Dad. If they didn’t need me to watch you, they wouldn’t come visit anymore.”

“But... You’re their son. They don’t love you because you’re not into girls?”

He looked legitimately worried, which made me wonder if he didn’t fall into the

strictly straight category either. He was a little young, but then again, I knew by his age, too. Had a big crush on a boy in my class. He'd been nice enough to turn me down gently. One of the very few times that ever happened. I put my hand on his shoulder to reassure him.

"I'm sure they still love me. If they didn't, they would've cut me out completely, regardless of needing a babysitter. They still trust me with you. They just don't want me telling you about it. So do me a favor and keep this between us. They don't need to know you know. I'm not ashamed of it, but I don't want them causing trouble for you either."

"Okay... but for the record, there's nothing wrong with being gay."

I chuckled, ruffling his hair. "I know that. They just don't agree. How'd you learn about this stuff anyway? I figured they'd want to bury your head in the sand as long as possible about this kind of thing."

He made a face, kicking off his shoes and pulling his feet onto the couch. "School. They talked about it during health class last year. I think they were getting everyone ready for the new kids."

That made sense. Showing the kids there are differences in humans, too, would make the shock of paranormals a little less jarring. I loved that they were teaching that, and I had high hopes for the next generation. When I was in school, the only thing they talked about in health class was hetero-normative bodies and sex. I had to wonder if my parents knew about that lesson.

I shook off the stress of my mom showing up here, loading up Ollie's favorite game. "Az told me Dante wants to come play again. Are you two getting along?"

He nodded quickly, his eyes glued to the screen. "Oh yeah. He's cool. Kinda grouchy

around other kids, but he's nice to me now. I want to introduce him to some of my friends, but not all of them."

"Yeah? Why not?"

He lifted a shoulder, glancing over at me. "Some of them are kinda jerks about the paranormals at school. I tell them to knock it off, but they don't listen. I don't want them to treat Dante badly. He hasn't even met them, he didn't do anything to them."

Pride lit up in my chest and I reached over to grip his shoulder with a smile. "You're a good friend, Ollie. Dante is lucky to have you. I don't think there's anything wrong with being picky about who you introduce him to. You're protecting him. But maybe don't hang out with people who like to discriminate against others."

"Yeah, I know. You should probably pay attention though, otherwise I can do this." He used my distraction to his advantage and attacked my character. I didn't have a chance to react before he killed me and knocked me out of the match. His cackling ended the heavy conversation, and I spent an hour trying to get back at him. The kid was good, though, and I didn't stand a chance.

"Dec? You up there?"

"Hey, Ben! Yeah, I'll be right down!" Tossing my controller onto the cushion beside me, I sighed. "Alright, you evil mastermind. I'm gonna get ready for work. Are you gonna stay up here or come down with me for a while?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully before shutting the game off. "I'll come down with you until Dante gets here. He's never played before, so I've been teaching him how."

"Sounds good. I bought extra snacks so both of you can go nuts. Just don't spoil your lunch. Aziel is buying, apparently."

He tipped his head, following me down the stairs. “Are you guys friends now?”

“Pretty much. I like having someone to chat with while you two are playing.”

“Good. You need more friends than just me. That’s just sad.”

Shoving his head playfully, I rolled my eyes. “You’re a butthead. Go set up the front desk for me.”

“What’d he do?” Ben asked, already setting up his station.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“Dec needs more friends! It’s sad!” he called out, taking off before I could whack him. He was in an evil mood today. Hopefully, Dante could distract him for a while and get him off my back.

Ben nodded in agreement, but he wasn’t smart enough to duck in time. I popped him in the back of his head with a mock scowl.

“Alright. Today isn’t going to be mock Declan day. Both of you have work to do. Get it done.”

The rest of the morning was pretty busy. I had clients right after we opened, and I realized I needed to pay the rent on the building and a few other bills were about to come due. Between those, I also texted Aziel to let his friends know if they were still interested that they could either come in and talk to me or email to set things up. I made plans to call Manny and apologize, but I got distracted by a walk in before I could follow through, so I made a note to myself to get it done later.

Aziel showed up just before lunch with Dante and a box of pizza. He was in a better mood than when he showed up this morning, and Dante was practically bouncing off the walls. He and Ollie grabbed the box and darted off without a word to go upstairs and I shook my head at Aziel’s frown.

“They’ll be up there most of the day. Ollie said he’s teaching Dante how to play his favorite video game. They’re good up there. Did you get my message?”

He nodded. “I let them know. Hendrix said he’d do some research first, but Felix will be by later with his mate.” He made a face. “Prepare yourself for those two. They’re

idiots. Luckily, they mostly mess with each other, but they'll try to get you involved if they can. They've been in a prank war since they got together."

Oh joy. Guys like that irritated the hell out of me. "I'll be on the lookout. What about you? Got any ideas yet?"

Settling himself onto the couch, he shrugged. "Not yet."

"You know, for someone who said they were interested in getting a tattoo, you don't seem to be really invested," I pointed out.

A slow smirk crossed his face. "Would you be pissed if I said I only asked to get your attention?"

I assumed that was the case, but that didn't mean I didn't like hearing it. I huffed out a laugh, dropping my attention to the tattoo I was working on.

"Not pissed, no. Might take you upstairs later, though."

"Oh, really?" Ben drawled, rolling back a little to look at us both. "Do I hear romance is in the air?"

I rolled my eyes so hard, it bordered on painful. Pointing at him, I shot him a dirty look. "Don't start."

A shit-eating grin overtook his face, and he opened his mouth to no doubt say something irritating, but Aziel's growl made him hesitate. When we both turned to look at him, he was glaring at Ben.

"You heard him."

Ben's grin fell, and he immediately went back to work. I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. He looked like a scolded puppy just because my hookup got pissed at him. My shoulders were still shaking when I glanced back at Aziel.

"Might need to keep you around. You can put little shits back in line for me."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AZIEL

I never openly flirted with someone before, and I may have overreacted to the teasing. I wanted to kick myself for it, but Declan's overjoyed laugh settled me a little. And when he said he wanted to keep me around, a tendril of hope took root in my chest. I masked it, silently admonishing myself. I couldn't get attached. I had no doubt this would go wrong eventually. Athena said I would suffer in both paths. I didn't mind so much if it was just me, but if anything even threatened Declan, I'd walk away without regrets. I couldn't make that harder on myself by getting attached.

Exhaustion from all the sex and staying up all night pulled at me, and I sank into the couch little by little. I needed to be listening to get any information I could while I was here. But I drifted off before I could catch anything useful, Declan's smooth voice over the sound of the tattoo guns lulling me into a sense of ease.

I wasn't sure how long I was out. Not long enough, given that I was still tired when I tuned back into the surrounding conversations.

"Don't wake him. If he's that tired that he'll sleep in public, he's gotta be beat. Az doesn't ever relax enough in public to actually sleep," Felix reported, his voice low, like he was trying not to wake me. He sounded serious for once, which I appreciated, but he had a point. It was stupid of me to fall asleep in public. If one of my cousins showed up, I wouldn't be able to react fast enough to protect Declan.

“He’ll sleep better upstairs,” Declan argued. He was closer than Felix and I felt his hand on my shoulder, nudging me gently. “Hey. Go upstairs and rest.”

Blinking my eyes open, I looked around slowly. I really was wiped out. I never slept well in the first place, but since Dante showed up, that got worse. I was on alert all the time, thinking my family would show up and hurt him. I couldn’t relax. But I didn’t want to leave Declan unprotected. I frowned, willing myself to wake the hell up, when Felix tipped his head at me.

“Go, man. We’ll be here a while. Tyler wants to pick Declan’s brain for some ideas.” I heard the message underneath. He wouldn’t leave until I came back. He knew what I was afraid of.

Declan didn’t, so he was more demanding about it. “Go get some rest. Tell the boys to head to the park for a while so they don’t bug you. They shouldn’t be in front of a screen all day anyway.”

My instincts told me it wasn’t a good idea to walk away, but I trusted Felix to watch over Declan. He was an idiot, but he was a good friend. He wouldn’t dismiss my concerns for nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“Alright,” I gave in. “Only for a little while.” I was still uncomfortable with the idea, but Declan wasn’t taking no for an answer and he followed behind me until I collapsed face first into his bed.

“I’ll come back up in an hour to check on you. Get some sleep. You’ll need it.”

I huffed out a laugh at the tease, but didn’t respond. I couldn’t. The bedding smelled like him and that, combined with the soft surface beneath me, pulled me under with no effort. I didn’t even hear it when Declan walked away.

When I woke up a little while later, I could at least function. I didn’t move right away, enjoying five seconds of peace without a kid to take care of or my uncle demanding something from me. It actually surprised me that I hadn’t heard much from him since the last family meeting. Usually, he had sixteen hundred things for me to do for him during the week. It should’ve been a relief, but my instincts said I had something to be worried about. I sat up slowly, pulling my phone out of my pocket to check my messages.

Nothing from my uncle. I missed a call from Athena, but she left a message saying the witches who would ward Declan’s place would be coming at dinner time and for me to enjoy my nap. Of course, she knew why I didn’t answer. I rolled my eyes, forcing myself out of Declan’s bed. Until the wards were up, I didn’t like being away from Declan for long.

The boys were downstairs when I came down, sitting on the couch sipping on giant slushies. When I shot Dante a questioning look, he pointed a finger at Felix.

“He gave us the money for them. It was just down the street.”

Felix had his own slushie, spinning lazily on the stool behind the front desk. He lifted his chin in greeting.

“They didn’t go alone. Mal popped in and went with them. He’s not looking for a tattoo, but his new mate is curious. Kinda worried about it. He’s so little, you’d think the needle would go straight through him.”

Declan’s sigh was exasperated as he came in through the back door. “I told you, the needle isn’t that big. He’s got nothing to worry about as long as he can handle the pain. Honestly, I’m more worried about you than him. Frat guys don’t tend to handle pain as well as they think.”

Felix looked mock offended, his hand on his chest, but I ignored him, giving my attention to Declan. He had a box in his hands, and when he noticed me watching him, he shrugged.

“The mail guy handed it to me when I brought him the mail I needed sent off. I don’t remember ordering anything, but Ben went home early with a family emergency and I couldn’t ask him.”

Something about that seemed off, and when Declan pulled out a pocket knife to open the thing, I caught his wrist to stop him.

“Don’t.”

He looked confused, but Felix rose slowly, staring at the box. “Why did it move?”

I hadn’t seen that, too busy looking at Declan, but when I glanced at it sitting on the counter, the whole thing wiggled. Sucking in a sharp breath, I shoved Declan behind

me. The box was between us and the boys and I reacted without thinking, teleporting us both and shoving Declan towards the door.

“Out! All of you! Now!”

Dante didn't wait, dropping his slushie and grabbing Ollie's wrist, yanking him towards the door. Declan was confused, but Felix didn't give him a choice, shoving him outside. That left me alone with the box, and I set my magic free, fire licking at my skin as I approached. Whatever was in the box must've felt the heat because it started writhing and wriggling faster until the box slipped off the counter and landed on the floor. The tape on top wasn't on well enough to keep it inside, and the creature darted out the second it could get free, snarling and tossing things about.

Lesser demon. Not smart enough to speak or think on its own. It was more a nuisance than anything. Unless you were human, in which case, it could do some damage with its claws and teeth. I caught the thing as it tried to dart past me, snarling at it to get it to stop. Giant eyes peered up at me, tiny claws digging into my hand like it was trying to cause damage. It wasn't strong enough for that, and it looked terrified when it realized it had been caught.

“What is that thing?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the group hovering just inside the door. Felix protected their backs, one move away from scooping them all up and teleporting away if he needed to. I appreciated it, and when I waved them inside and he came closer, I clapped his shoulder in thanks.

He made a face at the creature, his nose wrinkled. “Who the hell is sending lesser demons here? They don't belong in this realm. How did it even cross over?”

“It didn't. It had to be brought over. It's not strong enough to do it on its own,” I

growled in reply. This was sent on purpose, and there was only one person I could think that would target Declan. Maybe I was wrong about the soldier being the only one who saw me with Declan.

“It looks like a squirrel,” Dante pointed out.

“Yeah, like a flying squirrel, but bigger. Can we play with it?” Ollie asked.

Declan’s eyes bugged out, and he immediately protested. “No, you can’t play with it! We don’t even know what it is or who sent it!”

The boys looked disappointed, but I shot a knowing look at Felix. I had a clue who sent it, and it wasn’t something I wanted to admit out loud to Declan. I’d have to, though. With the witches coming to ward the place and lesser demons being sent in packages, Declan needed to be more aware and more vigilant. I had to tell him the truth.

With a heavy sigh, I handed the lesser demon off to Felix. “Take this back to the other side, will you?”

Felix saw the resignation in my face and dipped his chin, accepting the demon and teleporting away without a word. Scrubbing my hand over my face, I mumbled out, “Dante, take Ollie upstairs. Declan and I need to talk.”

He didn’t argue either, nudging Ollie towards the back and up the stairs. I heard Ollie whispering, asking what was going on, but Dante knew better than to bring him into this. He’d keep the truth to himself.

“Aziel, what’s going on?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

DECLAN

“You’re in danger. And it’s my fault.”

His words slid like ice down my spine and I stood frozen a few feet from him, waiting for him to explain. I’d barely known Aziel for a few days. I couldn’t comprehend what could’ve happened in such a short amount of time that would put me in danger. Me and Ollie, since he was staying with me this week.

“My family... They’re not good people. I do my best to distance myself from the way they live, but they take exception to that. Violent exception. I’ve lost count of the amount of times I’ve ended up in the care of a healer when they went too far.”

Crime family. Manny said Aziel’s family was a crime family. I forgot to ask because I was too stuck on my unintentional discrimination issue.

“What does that have to do with me?”

Aziel kept his expressions close to the vest. He was either irritated or angry, or he wore a blank mask. Even in bed, it took work to get something other than anger from him. So the pained look that crossed his face spoke louder than his actual words. And his words were fucking loud.

“It wasn’t intentional, getting you on their radar. They saw Dante playing with you and Ollie at the park. He got in trouble for it and they took his punishment out on me. To protect me, he told them he was spending time with Ollie to get information. Your family works for some of the biggest names in the city. I told him once that making friends with the workers was a good way to get information. And since I had information to back up his claim, it got them to back off.”

My gut churned at his confession. He was using me and my brother to get information for his family. It pissed me off, and I reacted without thinking, marching up to him and clocking him in the jaw. He didn’t move much, and he didn’t fight back. He didn’t even flinch, like getting hit like that was normal for him. The shock and betrayal were mixed with a heavy dose of pity that threatened to knock me on my ass. He was used to getting hit.

I didn’t let the pity stop me from shoving him again. “So you were just using me? And Dante? He’s up there trying to get information out of Ollie? The kid who is working his ass off to be Dante’s friend? Even giving up his own friends who he knew wouldn’t treat Dante right? Are you fucking serious?”

Aziel’s grim regret was painful and when I shoved him again, he let me until his back was up against the wall. He wouldn’t look me in the eye, and he refused to fight back. He’d let me do whatever the hell I wanted to get back at him. And damn if that didn’t make me want to stop. I hated that. I wanted him to fight back so I wouldn’t feel so bad about it.

“You fucking asshole! You need to take your cousin and get the hell out! Now!”

He shook his head slowly. “I can’t do that. I thought I got rid of the asshole who saw me with you, but if they’re sending you packages in the mail, then you aren’t safe. I—”

“I’m not safe if you’re here! You’re the reason they’re doing this! If you go the fuck away, they will too!”

I knew before I finished that sentence that it wasn’t true. And the look on Aziel’s face said the same damn thing. Now that I was on their radar, there was no getting off of it. It wasn’t just me on their radar, either. My little brother was part of this, thanks to Dante. I shoved away from Aziel, ripping my phone out of my pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling the cops. I can’t believe you’d put a little kid in danger like that just to save your own ass.”

I never heard the bell ring over the front door, so when a voice spoke behind us, I startled hard, dropping my phone on the floor.

“He had no intention of doing that,” the old woman argued. “And you can’t very well blame a little boy for trying to save his cousin from his own mistake. Those monsters go after what you love the most and use it against you. Hurting Aziel was Camus’s way of showing Dante what happens when you go against the family way. Dante said what he said to save the one person who cares about him in this world. Surely, you can’t hold that against him.”

Spinning around, I took in the group behind me. A few faces I recognized, Felix and Hendrix, and the woman who came with them asking about tattoos. The rest I didn’t. Two more demons, somehow bigger and taller than the other three, and one other woman with blonde hair and bright purple eyes. They all looked grim, not dangerous, but I felt out of my depth. The desperate urge to get Ollie out of here and run the fuck away was so strong, I actually took a step towards the back.

The old woman who spoke first didn’t even glance over her shoulder as she spoke.

“Malakai, dear. Go upstairs and watch the boys for me. We’ll need to ward both levels and it’s not safe to leave them alone right now.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she waved me away before the words could get out. “There’s a lot to explain, I know. If it makes you feel better, Aziel fought tooth and nail against this. He didn’t want you or your brother involved. But fate is funny that way, never listens to reason. While we talk, Vivi here is going to ward your shop. It will protect you against unwanted visitors.”

When I shot an incredulous look over my shoulder at Aziel, it missed its target. He was too busy staring at the floor, regret and self hatred written all over his face. It pissed me off that my first thought was to comfort him. We hooked up twice. That didn’t make us a couple, and it wasn’t my job to make him feel better about the fact that he and his cousin fucked up our lives.

People started moving without my permission. Felix cleaned up the mess the lesser demon left with the woman who’d asked about a tattoo. Hendrix stood guard by the back door, another demon watching the front. The one they called Malakai headed upstairs, and the blonde started pulling things out of her bag for some kind of spell. That left Aziel against the wall and the old woman watching me. She pointed a gnarled finger towards the couch.

“Sit.”

“Or what? You’ll hurt me?”

She gave me a flat look, gesturing to herself. “Does it look like I’m equipped for that?”

It didn’t matter that she was beyond ancient. She was tossing out orders and everyone was listening to her. She had to be stronger than she looked. She must’ve seen it on

my face, because a smirk pulled at the wrinkles on her face.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“I knew it was a good match when I saw you. You’re smart. Now sit. Aziel did an awful job explaining himself. Guilt will often sway the tongue into forgetting the important bits.”

Without my permission, I found myself sitting on the couch, glaring at the old woman who sat on the other end, looking at me. There wasn’t anything she could say that would make this better. I should’ve trusted my instincts and stayed away from paranormals. I put Ollie in danger because I was a damn idiot.

She raised her eyebrow at me. “Are you done?”

“Can you read my mind?” I snapped, edging farther away from her.

“No. She’s just teasing. She thinks it’ll make you feel better. Athena be kind. He’s worried for his family,” the demon by the front door scolded.

She waved a hand dismissively. “I am kind. I can see his thoughts all over his face. I suggest you don’t play poker. You wouldn’t be very good at it.”

My brows furrowed and my gaze darted around for some kind of answer on who the hell this crazy woman was. No one offered me anything but a sympathetic smile.

“Now, before you toss Aziel to the wolves, there are some things you need to know,” she began, ignoring my obvious panic. “First, I sent him to you. Without you, he will die.”

My stomach dropped, and my mouth fell open. “What?”

She nodded once. “Azriel has been on his uncle’s list since he was just a little thing, when his parents tried to leave the family. Camus took this as a great insult and while he couldn’t kill Azriel thanks to my protection, he has been punishing him for his parents’ actions for years. Without your help, Camus’s patience will run out as soon as Azriel is no longer useful to him. I’ve looked into the future, and nothing I do can stop it. Only you can bring him peace.”

“M-Me? I’m human! What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Love him,” she replied easily. “I’m not asking you to fight beside him. That would be unwise and would go against my promise to Azriel.”

I shot Azriel a questioning look, but he still wasn't looking at me. He normally looked like he'd face down the devil without flinching, but now he looked like he was beating himself up. He deserved it, but I hated seeing him look so dejected. It was confusing, and I growled, mostly to myself.

“Can we skip to the part that says any of this is my problem? I barely know him.”

“Your mind might not know him yet, but your soul does. You are his mate. Even inaction on my part wouldn’t have kept you two apart for long. Your fates are and always will be intertwined.”

Shock and horror dumped into my system, choking the breath from me. No fucking way. I wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but I could make an educated guess. I’d spent most of my adult life avoiding paranormals. And now they were saying I was mated to one?

“Jesus fuck! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Felix snorted from his spot behind the front desk. He was back to spinning on the

stool and looked completely at ease with this whole situation. “Jesus fuck. That’s funny. Isn’t Jesus some kind of deity or something?”

“Shut up, Felix,” the group chorused.

Aziel warned me he was an idiot, but now really wasn’t the time to deal with him. The walls felt like they were closing in. This was insane. Thanks to one demon, I was on the radar of a dangerous crime family, who was sending monsters through the mail to get to me, and the fate of said demon’s life was in my hands. Oh, and we somehow belonged together. Because that made fucking sense. I gripped my hair, my heartbeat thundering in my ears.

“I understand your reaction, but there’s nothing to fear. I’ve seen only good things so long as you stick together. I—”

“No.”

Aziel’s voice caught everyone’s attention, and we all swung to face him. He was still glaring at the ground, but his expression was more determined and when he finally looked up, that dangerous edge to him was back.

“I told Athena I wasn’t going to take your happiness to find my own. You asked me to leave. I’m not forcing you to help me. You won’t have to see me again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DECLAN

The room protested, but Aziel didn’t flinch. His eyes were locked on me.

“Azzy, if you do this, you won’t survive. He is looking for any excuse to end you. I

can't protect you from this," the old woman pleaded.

"I deserve it, for dragging innocents into my life for my own selfish reasons." He looked like he was fighting to keep his expression neutral, the corners of his mouth fighting against a frown. "I'm sorry, Declan. Dante getting information was one thing. Getting information had never hurt innocents before. I shouldn't have gotten involved. It was my fault it escalated." He shifted his gaze to the demon by the door. "Watch over him until the ward is up. They'll come for him if he's alone."

And then he was gone. The old woman cried out in protest, and I felt the panic in the room. They wanted to chase him. But because he asked them to protect me, they wouldn't move until it was safe.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

My head was a mess of contradictions, arguments about staying away from him versus not letting him die to protect me. This whole situation was fucked. There were too many unanswered questions, and he ran before I could get things straight. The smart part of me said to let him go and whatever happens, happens. But then I thought about the way he gave in to me, the relief I wasn't sure he even knew he was projecting when he finally let go. He trusted me to take care of him, and the more I knew about his life, the more insane that sounded. Why would he trust me if there wasn't something there?

Sucking in a breath between my teeth, I shook my head. "Fuck. Where the fuck did he go? We aren't done talking."

The old woman was crying, leaning against the demon who had been guarding the door. He looked worried, stroking the woman's hair, and when I spoke, he didn't look up to answer me.

"It doesn't matter. He won't change his mind."

Like hell he won't. I wasn't sure I even wanted him to yet, but if there was one person who could sway him, it was me. I gritted my teeth, turning to Felix.

"Do you know where he went?"

He shook his head. "No, but why?"

"Because I'm not going to let him kill himself. There's gotta be another fucking option. Just someone tell me where the fuck he'd go. And get Ollie out of here. I

don't want him somewhere unsafe while I chase this idiot down."

They all looked shocked, but when I raised my eyebrows, no one could tell me where he went. No one but the old woman. She sniffled a few times, closing her eyes. I could see her eyes moving behind her eyelids, like she was looking at something, and when she opened them again, she let out a long breath.

"He's gone to the Other Realm. He's saying goodbye to his mother."

Another wave of shock. Seriously, this group was not giving me the best impression on being part of Aziel's circle. It was like they didn't even know him.

"His mother... is alive?" Hendrix asked. He hadn't moved from the back door, but he watched with a wide-eyed expression from his spot.

The old woman shook her head. "I'm not sure you can consider her alive in her condition. Callum, bring him to the Other Realm. There's a small house tucked into the mountain. You know the path. You and Aziel played there when you were little. Aziel is there, but he won't stay forlong. Find him before he goes. If he leaves, you won't have a chance of finding him before it's too late."

Callum pushed to his feet, coming to stand beside me. "Are you sure about this?"

"No. But I'm going anyway. Do I have to do something or—"

Yeah, he didn't wait for me to finish. My stomach dipped and my limbs tingled, but it took less than a second before we were somewhere outside of the city. There was a guard booth and metal poles along a path for a line to form in front of two massive rocks. There wasn't anyone in line yet, but the guard frowned at us when Callum came rushing over.

“We’ve got an emergency.”

“Last name?”

“Malatesta.”

“Nature of emergency?”

“His mate is in danger.”

He dipped his chin, stepping back. If that was their version of border patrol, it was seriously lacking. Callum didn’t hesitate, dragging me towards the rocks and pushing me between them with a hand on my shoulder. We stepped out on the other side to a world I’d only heard about. It was dark, like the middle of the night, and there were two moons in the sky. I didn’t have a chance to look around more than that because Callum teleported us again to a path at the bottom of a dark mountain. Alarm bells rang in my head about taking the path, since the trees blocked what little light there was and you couldn’t see past them, but Callum nudged me forward.

“I’d fly us, but the trees are thick and we won’t be able to land without injury.” He drew in a deep breath and his horns lit on fire, a lot like Aziel’s did at the park the day I met him. It gave off enough light to see our feet, and with his hand on my shoulder, we took the path through the forest.

“Aren’t you afraid of lighting trees on fire?”

It was a stupid question, but I couldn’t see shit, and it was unnerving. I needed a distraction.

“No. The flames don’t touch anything I don’t want them to. It’s more of a warning to others. If you see a demon with their horns on fire, steer clear. They’re not to be

trifled with.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

Callum didn't have the same trepidation that I did. His footsteps were steady, and he never looked down. It was like the dark didn't affect him.

“Can you see in the dark?”

He glanced down at me. “Better than a human can. We were born in this realm. Our eyes were made for the darkness.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

True. I let it go, watching my feet so I didn't trip over anything. The path seemed mostly clear, but there were roots every once in a while from the trees to contend with.

"You're handling this pretty well, considering."

I made a face, stumbling slightly over a dip before Callum righted me again. "If you call screaming at him to fuck off and punching him in the face, handling it well."

"You found out your family was in danger. I would've been angry too. But I know Az. He doesn't hurt humans. He wouldn't have gotten anywhere near you without Athena's guidance. She helped raise him. She is one of the few people he trusts in this world. I can't say he even trusts our friend group as much as her."

Drawing in a deep breath, I let it out slowly. "How does she know? That I'm his mate or whatever. We barely know each other."

"As much as humans like to say it's instantaneous, it really isn't. I was attracted to my mate. I wanted to spend more time with him, but I didn't know what he was to me until I was faced with the idea of losing him. Az is probably at the same stage you are. Attraction, protectiveness, maybe affection. The only reason Athena can see more is because she's an oracle. She must have divined it in a vision. She tries not to when it comes to things like mates. It puts too much pressure on a couple if they think they have to end up together. But I think she was desperate. We're all worried for him, but only she can see what the future holds." He paused for a second before continuing. "I don't consider her power to be a gift. I'd hate to know things that could save people and not be able to do anything about it."

When he first mentioned it, it sounded cool to be able to see the future. But he had a point. She saw what would happen if Aziel didn't stick with me. I heard the terror in her voice. It would be awful knowing someone was taking the wrong path but being unable to change it.

The trail opened up to a little cottage. Lights spilled from the inside onto the front lawn. It was too dark to get a lot of details, especially with the moonlight blocked by the trees, but the rock path seemed to glow as guidance and when we got close enough, a light flicked on beside the door.

Someone poked their head out, frowning at us. She studied us for a moment before pushing the door open and stepping back. Callum urged me forward with his hand on my shoulder, ducking inside the little cottage.

There wasn't much to it. It was mostly one big room, the kitchen in one corner on the left, and a little sitting area in front of a roaring fire. And on the right, Aziel knelt beside a bed occupied by a wisp of a woman. She was asleep, her breathing steady, and Aziel held her hand as he murmured quietly to her.

When I got closer, I could see more of the woman's face. It took me a minute to realize she was a demon. Her face was sunken, she took up almost no space on the bed, and where her horns should be were only jagged stumps.

“What happened to her?”

Aziel sighed, his eyes locked on the woman. “She tried to leave. Her and my father. They didn't agree with my uncle's vision and wanted no part of it. They dropped me and my sister off with Athena and promised they'd come back for us when it was safe. But they were caught before they got away. They made my dad watch as they tortured his mate. And then they killed him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AZIEL

I hated coming here. Hated seeing her like this. I was young when they tried to leave, but I still remembered her. She was a kind and gentle woman. She used to sing us songs to help us fall asleep and if I woke up with a nightmare, she'd lie down with me until I could fall back asleep. She didn't deserve to be hurt like this. They broke her, body and spirit. The only reason she was still alive was because a maid snuck her out when my uncle came looking for me and my sister.

I didn't see her again for ten years. That same maid found me while I was reporting to my uncle and asked me to meet her. She told me she didn't say anything before because she was worried I'd be like my uncle. My sister went down that path, resenting our parents for putting her at the bottom of the totem pole with our family. She still wasn't respected, but she was feared enough that they accepted her. But not me. I remembered enough of my parents' lessons to not let them change me. Once I was old enough, the maid led me to my mother. I hid her out here and visited her enough to let her know I was there, but not enough to draw attention. She didn't remember me often anyway, so I tried not to feel guilty about that.

The only other person who knew about this place was Athena. She was the one who helped hide her. The healer who took care of my mother was Athena's sister. It didn't surprise me that she told them where I was. It wouldn't change anything anyway. I wasn't going back. I was going to take the attention off of Declan and Ollie by doing what I should've done years ago. When I ran, they would come after me instead.

Kissing the back of my mother's hand one last time, I laid it gently beside her and stood. I stepped past Declan and Callum, stopping to thank Celeste for watching my mother before I left. She offered me a sad smile, squeezing my hands gently, but she didn't argue with me about leaving. She knew this was for the best.

When I stepped outside, Callum and Declan followed me. I couldn't teleport here, not without drawing attention to this place. I had no choice but to walk, knowing they'd follow me.

"Aziel, stop!" Declan demanded.

I ignored him. Nothing he could say would change my mind. They were targeting him. I had to get my uncle's attention away from him. I headed down the path, out of sight of the cottage and away from everything important to me.

With a frustrated growl, Declan tackled me. I hadn't seen that coming, so we both hit the ground hard. He had my arm wrenched up behind my back before I could get my bearings and the pain froze me in place.

"If you think for a second that I'm going to let you get yourself killed, you are delusional."

I struggled, a low growl in my throat, but every time I tried to move, he pulled harder on my arm until I felt like it'd pull from the socket. I experienced that once. It was excruciating.

Fisting the back of my hair, Declan forced my head back, hissing in my ear. "You came to me, Aziel. You drew me into this. You don't get to fucking walk away now. Not until I say so."

Despite the pain, goosebumps swept down my neck, and my cock swelled. He made me feel owned, but not like my family did. Like I was something worth fighting for.

"Callum, right?"

I heard Callum grunt in response.

“Can you give us a minute?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

He hesitated, but Declan didn't back down. He kept me pinned even after Callum walked away, his body weight heavy on my back. I groaned when he ran his tongue along the column of my neck, tipping to give him more room despite the tight grip he had on my hair.

"I'm so fucking pissed at you right now, baby. If you would've been honest with me from the start, I would've helped you. I would've kept my brother out of it, but I would've given you any information I had."

"I didn't—"

"Shut up," he snarled. "I'm not done talking yet. I get it now. Why you did it. You were trying to protect Dante from ending up like your mom. You were trying to protect yourself. I don't hate you for that. But you should've talked to me."

I wasn't sure what to say. Never in a million years would I ever have considered asking for help. It never even crossed my mind. I wanted to fulfill the vision as quickly as possible and get out of there before anyone saw me with him and realized what I'd done. I didn't want him or any other human to get hurt because of me.

"Fuck, I'm pissed. You fucking ran! Before I could even figure all this shit out! What the fuck!" He bit down on my earlobe hard enough to make it sting. It made me shudder and when he soothed it by sucking it into his mouth, my breath caught in my throat.

I could probably overpower him. Even if it hurt me to do it, I was bigger than he was. But something kept me in place. Some deep need to be near him. To give in to him.

To make up for what I did.

“Fuck it,” Declan murmured. Without warning, he released me. I thought he’d walk away, realizing he was better off without me. Instead, he gripped my hips, yanking me up onto my hands and knees.

“Declan, what—”

His hands came around my waist, wrestling open my jeans while he growled at me. “No. I’m still fucking pissed at you. But I’m in this, and I’m gonna prove it to you.” He yanked my jeans down over my ass and I was reeling so hard I didn’t do anything to stop him. “You better brace yourself, baby. I’m too angry to be gentle right now. I want you to feel me for days.”

DECLAN

I dove in before he could protest, attacking his hole with my mouth. He choked on a shout, his hips jerking forward, but I yanked him back before he could escape. I was relentless, loosening the muscles under my demanding tongue. I was still pissed. This whole situation was messed up. I understood better, now that I saw what he was afraid of, but I was still mad that he dragged my little brother into it. I wanted to punish him, but I also wanted him to know he wasn’t alone in this. It was complicated, and frustrating, and this was the only way I could think to deal with the anger without saying or doing something I’d regret later.

Pulling back, I sucked two fingers into my mouth, coating them in my saliva, before pushing them inside Aziel’s hole. He groaned, his back arching in surprise. He hadn’t seen this coming, and he was scrambling to keep up, but I never gave him the chance. I was too riled up to go slow.

I ripped open my jeans while I stretched him, pulling out my erection. Spitting in my

palm, I coated my cock in it. I didn't have lube with me, so we'd make do, but I didn't want to hurt him. I made sure I was slicked up as much as possible before replacing my fingers with my cock. Aziel groaned, rocking back, and I slid in to the hilt in one smooth motion.

"Fuck," I gritted out, my teeth clenched tightly together. I'd never fucked without a condom before, and the tight heat wrapped around my dick almost did me in. There was no resistance this time, no fight from Aziel. His body yielded to mine, and when I gave that first test stroke, he practically contorted with pleasure.

"Declan... Fuck..."

I snapped my hips roughly, throwing him off balance, his face almost in the dirt before I yanked him back. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes!"

Normally, I'd tease a little, draw things out. But neither one of us was patient enough for that right now. Aziel jerked back, meeting me thrust for thrust. The sound of skin against skin was loud in the dark forest. I had the fleeting thought that we could be drawing in dangerous animals or something, but it fled when Aziel's ass clenched tightly. He cried out, his claws digging into the dirt.

"Found it, didn't I?" I growled, focusing on that spot that he loved so much. He didn't answer me, but I didn't hold that against him. He wasn't able to say much at all. His words came out garbled and choked, none of it making any sense. I'd feel pretty proud of myself for fucking him senseless if I wasn't so close it was painful. My balls were drawn up, the tight squeeze of Aziel's ass trying to milk my release from me. I couldn't breathe, too lost in the pleasure for even that basic function.

It hit me without warning, my back arching in surprise as I slammed as deep as I

could inside of him. White flashes sparked in the edges of my vision and it felt like my soul was trying to escape through my dick. I barely heard Aziel's strangled shout, his ass gripping me harder and drawing out my release as he came.

Minutes felt like hours and only once his body relaxed could I breathe again. I sucked in a breath, a final shudder rolling through me before I collapsed forward on top of Aziel.

"I'm sorry," he murmured between panting breaths.

"I'll believe you if you stop running. We'll face this together. Deal?"

He trembled beneath me, resting his head against his forearms. I thought I'd have to pull away and force him to say it, but he caught my arm before I could, keeping me pressed against his back.

"Deal."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AZIEL

"How many comments are we gonna get from your friend? I doubt he went far enough not to hear us."

I shook my head, my arm around his waist. "None. Callum isn't like that. It's Felix you'd get shit from. Besides, if I commented every time I heard Callum and his mate, I'd go blue in the face."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“I heard that,” Callum grumbled. Declan was right, he didn’t go far. Far enough to give us privacy, but close enough to watch our backs.

It wasn’t smart, letting Declan fuck me like that where anyone could see us. But I needed it and I think he did too. He was still pissed. It was like a low level of tension in his shoulders, but he wasn’t seething anymore. He had one hand tucked in my back pocket, and I didn’t hate the possessive hold.

“Thank you for coming for me,” I murmured.

Callum gripped my shoulder, leveling me with a look. “Always. Now let’s get back. I checked with Felix while you were busy. They brought the boys to my place until the wards were up. Vivi should be done soon.”

We walked to the end of the path and a little beyond it before teleporting back to the transportation tunnel. There was a longer line waiting to go to the human realm, so I showed Callum and Declan to the tear my family always used. I kept Declan up against me, since it wasn’t exactly safe, but we passed through without issue and teleported back to Declan’s shop when we were through. I hated having to release him, but I couldn’t be seen holding Declan like that, so Callum teleported him instead of me. Mal was still there, standing near Vivi as she drew some runes on the doorframe. He relaxed when he saw us, letting out a heavy sigh.

“You found him.”

Callum hummed, peering inside the big front window. “Where’s Athena?”

“Hendrix took her home. She was really upset. He said he’d hang around until she felt better.”

I grimaced, the guilt like a lead weight in my gut. “I’ll go talk to her later.”

Vivi stepped back, studying the runes before nodding once. “There. All done. Who did that one, though? It’s clever, but if they already know you’re here, it’s not exactly useful.” She pointed to the one the witches had done to hide Declan’s shop.

“I need that one removed. It was done as a prank,” Declan replied. I saw the muscle tick in his jaw, he still felt guilty for being okay with it, but he was a good man. Once he realized he was making a mistake, he fixed it. It was something I admired about him.

Vivi wrinkled her nose. “A prank? That’s a lot of magic for a prank. It looks more like revenge if you didn’t ask for it. Did you accidentally piss off a witch?”

“No. They tried to scam him and took offense when it didn’t work. Can you remove it?” I growled.

“Not tonight. The warding took a lot out of me. But was it reported to the council? They should’ve taken care of it when it was created.”

“I didn’t notice,” Declan admitted.

Understanding crossed her face, and she nodded. “Okay, well, I’ll remove it some time this week. Both floors are warded and only those with good intentions can enter, so it won’t affect business. Don’t leave the windows open at night, it weakens the ward. And contact the council if you get any more trouble from the witches. I swear, people just pretend the council doesn’t exist. It’s there for a reason, you know.”

I got the feeling that message was more for me than for Declan. Vivi knew who my family was. She was the one who made me the teleportation blockers. She sent them through Athena because she didn't want to get on my uncle's radar, but she'd been suggesting calling the council for years. I always said no. They wouldn't step in without proof and getting some was too dangerous. I preferred to lie low and keep my head down.

Mal took Vivi home while Callum teleported Declan to his place to pick up Ollie. I followed to get Dante, and once we were inside and out of the way of the windows, Declan moved back to my side. It was comforting, and I leaned into him until the boys came racing out of the kitchen. Ollie skidded to a halt in front of Declan, pointing at Brandon as he followed behind them.

"Dec! We got to meet someone bigger than Dad!"

Declan snorted. "I'll say. Hey, I'm Declan. I hope he wasn't too much trouble."

Brandon was the quiet sort, bashful, and he didn't take offense to Ollie's comment. He shook Declan's hand before immediately stepping back and pressing himself up against Callum.

"They were fine. We mostly just talked. I was gonna make dinner if you're hungry."

Declan grimaced and scrubbed the back of his neck. "I appreciate the invite, but today has been kind of shit. My couch is calling my name. Raincheck?"

Now that I looked at him, Declan looked worn out. He was disheveled and mussed from our forest fuck, but his eyes were also bloodshot and he was less graceful than normal, like he was running on fumes. Since it was my fault, I was determined to fix it. Felix, who had been hanging out in the kitchen, and Callum helped me get everyone to Declan's place before going back home to their mates. The boys didn't

seem fazed by the events of the afternoon and were bouncing off the walls, so I let them pick a movie to get them to settle. After they were distracted, I nudged Declan to join them.

“Rest. I’ve got dinner.”

He raised his eyebrows slowly, a smirk pulling at his lips. “Is this to make up for being an asshole? Because I’m not gonna say no.”

I rolled my eyes, but I answered with a grin of my own. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s because you look like shit. You let me take a break today. It’s your turn.”

He huffed out a laugh, pretending to scratch an itch on his face with his middle finger. But he didn’t fight me, dropping onto the couch and kicking his feet up on the coffee table. The boys immediately mimicked him, snickering, and Declan watched them with a lazy grin on his face.

After I fed everyone, Declan headed to his room to take a shower while I watched the boys. I frowned.

“Why do you two seem so unbothered?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

Dante shrugged. "I told him the truth already. It felt wrong to lie like that. You never lie to me, so I thought it was better to be honest."

Ollie bobbed his head in agreement. "I overhear a lot about what's happening at my mom's work. She talks a lot. Not so much about my dad's, but he'll bring something up if Mom asks. Since Dante said he needed stuff to protect you, I told him I'd help."

My mouth fell open. "Protect me?"

"Duh. Dad said he'd hurt you if I didn't get any information." His expression darkened and his voice got quiet. "You're the only one who's nice to me. I don't want them to hurt you."

Dante and I had been living together for a few months now. I didn't think he liked me. Tolerated me, sure, because it was better than being at his dad's, but not enough to give a shit if I got hurt. It warmed my middle that he cared, and I was proud of him for making the choice I never even considered. I ruffled his hair, smirking when he grimaced and shoved my hand away.

"Well, you're smarter than me then. I'm not sure how long I'm going to have to grovel to make it up to Declan."

"Years. It'll be grueling," Declan commented airily as he joined us in the living room. He was shirtless, his hair still wet from his shower, a towel around his neck. My mouth went dry as my gaze trailed over him. When I got back to his face, he raised an eyebrow with a smirk.

“Subtle. Are you two spending the night? I don’t mind, but you need a shower first. You’re covered in dirt.”

Glancing down, I huffed out a laugh. He wasn’t wrong. The only clean part of me was my hands since I washed them to make dinner. Staying clean wasn’t exactly on my mind when he attacked me tonight.

Ollie flicked his gaze between me and his brother, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Are you two dating?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. Declan said we were in this together, and we fooled around together, but that didn’t mean we were dating. It was the first time I wanted to, but I didn’t think it was safe. And nine-year-old boys aren’t exactly steel traps for information.

“Why are you so obsessed with my dating life lately? You better not be dating and fishing for information. You’re too damn young,” Declan interrupted.

Ollie flushed dark red, successfully diverted from the question. Dante still looked suspicious, but at least he knew to keep that to himself. He knew the consequences if he didn’t.

While Declan bickered with his brother to distract him, I tipped my head towards the door to signal our departure to Dante. “We’ll see you two later. It’s a school night and I’m pretty sure Dante hasn’t done his homework.”

Dante made a face, which meant I was on the nose about that one, and when Declan shot a narrow-eyed look at Ollie, his grimace said he wasn’t done either. It was a smart thing to get the boys home. But I still didn’t want to leave. I could feel the wards, Vivi didn’t half ass them, but it worried me all the same to leave them here unguarded.

Like he could sense my anxiety, Declan smiled softly. “We’re good here. I’ll call if something else happens and I won’t bring random packages into the house without you checking them first.”

Dante snorted, and I rolled my eyes. “I appreciate that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And he would. Until we could figure out how to get free of my uncle’s control, I’d watch over him and Ollie every damn day. Maybe even after that. This was still new, and I didn’t want to get my hopes up that I could keep him, but I wanted to enjoy it while I had it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AZIEL

The following week was quiet. Almost too quiet. I expected more issues after that lesser demon was sent to the shop. But there were no more packages, no more soldiers casing Declan’s shop, nothing. My hackles were up and when I asked Athena if I should be worried, she gave a non-committal answer. Which meant she couldn’t tell me. She didn’t want to change the outcome of whatever was coming.

Dante and I had a new routine after that weekend. He and Ollie hung out together after school at the park, Ollie supplying as much information as he had already. With his parents on vacation, it wasn’t much, but Ollie also had a lot of friends and he could ask about their parents’ jobs without anyone questioning him. Him helping Dante meant Dante could watch over him while Ollie got him information, to keep him safe. When I was done with what minor jobs were sent to me by my cousins, I met them at the park, usually around the same time that Declan showed up. He walked Ollie home with one of my friends shadowing him, while Dante and I went back to my apartment. From there, we teleported to Declan’s apartment and spent the rest of the evening together.

We were prepping to leave to meet them when I noticed something new in Dante's backpack. I frowned, pulling out the little stuffed bear.

"What's this?"

Dante hadn't been paying attention, too busy looking for the homework he 'lost' somehow. When he looked over his shoulder, his skin turned a deep burgundy as he blushed all the way to his hairline.

"N-Nothing!"

I raised an eyebrow, holding it above his head when he tried to snatch it from me. "It doesn't really seem like your thing. Did someone give it to you?"

He hopped, trying to grab the toy, a little growl in his throat. When he got too embarrassed, he sat on the edge of his bed and whimpered. Chuckling, I handed it back to him as I sat beside him. He was quiet for a few minutes before coming clean.

"A girl in my grade gave it to me. She said she wants to be friends..."

"And did you give her something back?" It was common among demon children to exchange trinkets to begin friendships. Dante sighed heavily.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“No. I can’t figure out what to give her. I didn’t have to give anything to Ollie.”

I pursed my lips, fighting back a smirk. “Not true. You exchanged bruises.”

It made him snort, but his face fell after a second. He looked up at me with a deep frown. “What do you think I should give her?”

It wasn’t a question on whether he wanted to be her friend. He just didn’t know how to initiate it. It gave me hope for him, but it also worried me. We could hide him making friends if their families were influential, but if this girl wasn’t somehow able to offer him information, it might only put Dante in danger spending time with her.

Hoping to stall him until I could look into this girl, I lifted a shoulder. “It has to be something about you. Something you think is important. I can’t answer that for you.”

“What did you give your friends when you were young?”

A fond smile tugged at my lips. “Protection charms. Athena gave me one when I first met her and when I met my friends, I wanted to do the same.”

I’d given Declan and Ollie protection charms, too. Almost like I was offering my friendship, like I did when I was a kid. I hadn’t thought about it before, but I liked the idea of it now.

Dante frowned at his lap, so I squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. “It’s okay if you can’t think of something right away. Come on. We’re going to be late.”

He hopped off his bed, pulling his homework out from underneath his bed with a sheepish grin. We were just finishing packing up his bag when my phone rang. I answered it, dread filling my gut when my cousin spoke on the other end.

“Family meeting. Bring the boy,” Iluz snarled.

He hung up before I could reply, and I let out a heavy sigh. “Fuck. Looks like we won’t be going over tonight. That was Iluz. We have to go to a family meeting.”

Dante looked disappointed, but when I put my hand on his shoulder, he shored up his resolve and lifted his chin. “I’ve got lots of information this week.”

“Good. So do I. Offer as little as necessary and save the rest for later. Let’s get this over with.”

I texted Declan about the change of plans, and because I’m overcautious, I asked Callum to move them to his place for the night. The quiet week still made me uneasy, and I’d rather Declan and Ollie be with my friends than alone with wards.

I teleported Dante and me to my uncle’s home, but my cousin was waiting for us and blocked us from going inside.

“Other Realm. The meeting is at our family home.”

That surprised me. Once we crossed over, my uncle only ever went back to the family home to deal with enemies. I could never join because they didn’t trust me. At most, during those events, they stationed me here in the human realm to guard my uncle’s new home in his absence.

“Are you sure—”

Kaiser made an irritated noise, scowling at me. “Just hurry the hell up. You’re going to make us late.”

Without much of a choice, I teleported Dante and me to the tear. He looked worried, he wasn’t great at masking his emotions yet, so I kept my hand on his shoulder as I led him through. When we came out on the other side, a few soldiers were waiting for us like an escort. A sense of foreboding settled in my gut and I tightened my grip on Dante as they marched us to our family home. The same home I picked Dante up from all those months ago. Dante didn’t look any happier about being here than I was and without my steady guidance, I knew he wouldn’t be able to come closer.

Another layer of dread settled in my gut as we passed the dining room. When I was younger, that was where family meetings were held. This wasn’t going to be a family meeting. I knew deep in my soul that this wasn’t going to end well. Athena’s vision was wrong.

We followed Kaiser to the basement, and the crowd parted as he moved to join my uncle. The entire family was there, and they all glared at us as we followed behind him. Kaiser stopped us with a dismissive wave at the front of the crowd, giving us a front row view of the man and woman tied up and kneeling on the concrete in front of my uncle. I couldn’t see who they were by the backs of their heads, but I could make guesses based on the information I’d gathered recently. Attacking criminal humans who caused trouble was bad enough. Did he really think he’d get away with killing a politician and a CEO worth millions?

“Is that everybody?” Camus queried. He had a bland expression, like this was just another day for him, having two humans tied up at his feet.

Kaiser dipped his chin in acknowledgement. A smug look crossed my uncle’s face before he turned to the family.

“Excellent. This is an auspicious day for us. When they look back on our history, they will mark this day as the beginning of our reign over the filth of humanity.” He looked at the humans with disgust, but when he snapped his fingers, no one made a move toward them. Instead, pain blasted across the back of my head and hands grabbed me, shoving me to my knees next to them.

“But first, we need to address the traitors in our ranks. You see, Aziel, that lesser demon was a test. A test you failed. You are protecting that human. Care to tell the family why?”

Someone fisted my hair, yanking my head back, so that I was looking up at my uncle. He stood over me with a sneer, and I met his gaze without flinching. It didn’t matter anymore. I wasn’t going to survive this. I’d been working against this moment my whole life, but it finally caught up with me.

I wanted to resent Athena for giving me hope that I’d be free one day. I knew better. This was always going to happen in the end. But I couldn’t hate her for giving me what little time I had with Declan. To be truly cared for, even if it was only for a week. I’d take that memory with me.

“Tell them, Aziel. Tell them you are not only demeaning yourself by fornicating with the scum of the realm, you are mating with one.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

My eyes widened slightly. How did he—

“You aren’t the only one with an oracle under your control. They saw you on your knees for that pathetic little human. But don’t worry. He’ll be joining you soon. And you,” he turned slowly to look at Dante. He looked pissed, and I struggled against the hands holding me, needing to protect Dante. “You shameful little shit. I should’ve killed you, along with your mother. You were supposed to report on Aziel, to give us the ammo we needed to end him.”

Stunned, I fought harder, getting far enough away to look over my shoulder at Dante. He didn’t cower like I thought. He lifted his chin, glaring at his father.

“Aziel didn’t do anything wrong! You’re just mad because he’s better than you!”

The second my uncle reached for him, my magic exploded, sending those trying to pin me sailing away. Fire covered my body, and I launched myself at Dante, my wings spread, giving us the lift we needed to get across the room. Putting myself between him and the family, I shifted lower, my stance defensive.

“You can punish me if you want, but he’s a kid. He’s your kid. I won’t let you hurt him.”

Camus scoffed. “He is no son of mine. Pathetic, just like his mother. Just like you.” He chuckled, waving his hand lazily. “But sure. You can go first. Make sure Dante doesn’t miss anything. He should see what will happen to him if he doesn’t start following orders. Seize them.”

They came at us in waves, all of them trying to either pin me or get to Dante. I never fought back before. I didn't have any illusions that I'd survive it. But I was going to fight to give Dante a chance to get away.

"Dante! Go! Fly out of here!"

I heard him sob behind me. I knew he was scared, but they were more interested in me than him. If he flew out the window, I could keep them from chasing him. I just needed him to go.

"Dante!"

"I-I can't!"

Gathering as much energy as I could, I sent it out in an explosion of power. It knocked them away long enough for me to look over my shoulder. Dante had tears streaming down his face, his face pale. Gripping his shoulder, I pleaded with him.

"Please, Dante. I need you to go."

"I can't... I can't fly..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AZIEL

Someone tackled me before I could figure out what Dante was talking about. I fought, tossing them away, but Iluz already had Dante by the hair. He grabbed Dante's wing, forcing it open, and horror slammed into my gut.

Camus cackled from his spot at the head of the room. "Did he never tell you? He

killed his mother. As pathetic as she was, she was useful to me. He had to be punished for that. Didn't you ever wonder why he never opened his wings?"

His wings were torn apart. It could be hidden if he never opened them, but when he did, they were riddled with holes. A punishment for his mother dying in childbirth? He never had a chance to fly. They took the sky from him before he was old enough to understand. Fury burned through me and when another soldier tried to reach for me, I thrust my claws through his chin and threw him across the room.

I could accept my fate. The son of a traitor, the human lover. I never expected to live long. But Dante... He was a good kid. He was honest and protective and kind. He didn't deserve to be hurt for something he couldn't control. And they would pay for hurting him like that.

Turning to face my uncle, I let my magic build. He didn't look the least bit worried, an evil grin on his face as he stared me down.

"I can tell you want to kill me. But if you come for me, who will protect Dante?" His words made me hesitate, and he laughed maniacally. "Sentiment. It makes you weak. What will it be, Aziel? The broken cast out with no future, or the revenge you seek so dearly? Make a choice."

I took a step toward my uncle, the need to hurt him for what he did so overwhelming, I couldn't breathe. But I heard Dante's cry of pain. I couldn't leave him to suffer. He tried to protect me. I promised him I'd watch over him. So even though it would take away every advantage I had, I twisted, throwing my magic at the demons surrounding him. With a flap of my wings, I scooped up the humans and wrapped myself around Dante's small frame, using every ounce of power I had left to cross realms. It was exhausting doing it alone. Moving three people with me almost killed me. It left me weak, and I knew I wouldn't be able to protect him after this. But it was the only chance I could give him.

We landed in front of Athena's house. She was waiting for us, her arms outstretched. Shoving Dante away from me, I barked at him as I set the humans down at my feet.

“Go!”

He shook his head, but Athena pulled him into her arms, dragging him away from me. Stumbling back, I forced myself to smile at him. Blackness overtook the edges of my vision, the exhaustion too much to bear, but I pushed through so I could say goodbye. I didn't want him blaming himself for this.

“This was always going to happen. It's not your fault. I'm proud of you, Dante. Always remember that.”

His eyes widened, filling with tears, but Kaiser and Iluz teleported beside me and I didn't have the energy to fight them off. They grabbed me by the arms, teleporting again without pause. I saw Dante reach for me before we were gone. We reappeared in Camus's home in the human realm, where a familiar face was waiting for me.

“Hello, brother.”

DECLAN

Something didn't feel right. Aziel never missed a night here. He said it made him feel better to watch over us himself. He was so determined to protect us. And his family didn't meet until tomorrow night. It made no sense. I left Ollie in the living room, moving to my room so I could make a call without him eavesdropping. Callum answered on the second ring, his voice gruff.

"I know. I'm on my way. I'm going to move you and Ollie to Hendrix's home. Stay put."

"Okay. We'll be ready."

I considered calling my parents to come get Ollie when Aziel told me the truth. The only reason I didn't was because I was worried it'd only make more targets for Aziel's family to go after. They were safe on a cruise somewhere. Protecting two people was easier than protecting four.

Coming back to the living room, I tossed Ollie's shoes onto the couch. "Shoes on. We're leaving."

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safer than here. Callum will be here in a minute. I need you to do everything I say, alright?"

His brows drew together tightly, worry and confusion overtaking his features, but he

knew better than to argue. He tugged his shoes on, and when Callum and Felix teleported into our living room, we were both ready. There were no words exchanged. They each put a hand on our shoulders and in a blink, we were somewhere new. New and crowded. Aziel told me a little about his friends and their mates, but this was significantly more than I expected.

“What’s going on?” Tyler, Felix’s mate, queried once they ushered Ollie and me onto the couches.

“This is a precaution. Aziel and Dante were summoned home, unprompted. He’s worried about what this might mean. The Shadowwalker family is famous for the pain and violence they cause, especially against humans. Aziel has always been on the outs with them, but—”

“But then he met me,” I murmured. “They found out about us, didn’t they?”

Callum shook his head. “There’s no way to know that. All we know is that it’s safer to keep you here. If he needs us, we’ll be ready, and the rest of you will be protected. I’d rather be overcautious than under prepared.”

There wasn’t much else we could do but wait. Ollie found a friend of his, apparently the daughter of Hendrix’s mate, so they sat together and played. I didn’t have the emotional capacity to be introduced to all the people here. I paced by the big window that overlooked the city, my phone in my hand as I waited for word from Aziel. My gut churned uncomfortably and the longer we went with no news, the more uncomfortable I got.

“He’ll call. We’re always worried when he goes to family meetings, but he always calls afterward. It’ll be okay,” Felix offered, but he looked just as worried as I was.

“How long does it normally take?”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “There’s not a specific timeline. It can take hours or even days before we hear from him again. But—”

“Fuck!” someone shouted.

Whipping my head around, my mouth fell open as black smoke filled the room. I darted for Ollie, putting him behind me, but nothing appeared in the smoke. Everyone seemed to know what that meant but me, and Callum gave a knowing look to his friends before he disappeared.

“Wait—”

“Stay here!” Malakai barked, disappearing like Callum. The rest of the demons were gone in a blink. Fear coursed through my veins like ice and I stared at the spot where they disappeared from while the rest of the room burst into action. Three women and one man, including the woman who put wards on my shop, started murmuring, moving to four points in the room with their hands raised towards the walls. Another few started circling us like moving protectors, their stances low and ready. It left only the humans in the middle of the room. Tension shot through the ceiling and even though it felt like hours, only minutes passed before the demons reappeared. Malakai and Hendrix had two unconscious people in their arms, the bodies unmoving, with ropes around them. Callum held Athena’s hand. And a sobbing Dante was fighting against Felix. But no Aziel. Where the hell was he?

“No! No! They took him! We have to get him!”

My heart stuttered in my chest. I moved without forethought, pulling Dante out of Felix’s hold and setting him on his feet with my hands on his shoulders. He stared at me, pale and terrified, with a heavy dose of guilt in his gaze.

“Who took him? Where did they go?”

“M-My brothers. I don’t know where they took him, but they’re gonna hurt him. We have to get him back. He realm hopped with us. That’s too many people. It’s hard with just one. He won’t be able to protect himself.”

Cupping his cheeks, I brushed the tears away with my thumbs. “Okay. We’ll get him back. I promise.”

He sucked in a hiccuping breath before throwing himself into my arms. I hugged him tightly, looking up at the demons behind him with determination in my gaze.

“Where is he?”

“Declan, I know you want to help him, but—”

“No. I’m going with. I told him we’d do this together. I’m not arguing about this. Where the hell is he?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

“Camus Shadowwalker has two homes. One in this realm, one in the Other Realm. Camus is a cruel man, and he will want an audience. Aziel didn’t just mate with a human. He rescued the ones Camus wanted. Time is short,” Athena answered, her eyes hazy. “He wouldn’t wait to begin his punishment.” She blinked, focusing on me. “I promised him you and your family would be unharmed. If you go with them, I can’t guarantee that. But he needs you. He won’t last the night without hope. You’re the only one who has ever given him that.”

Releasing Dante, I pushed to my feet. “Then I’ll go. Just make sure my little brother is safe.”

“Declan!” Ollie protested. He pushed through the crowd, grabbing my shirt tightly in his fist. I didn’t have the time to explain this to him, so I pushed Dante towards him, leveling him with a look. “Watch over Dante for me. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Dante’s head jerked up. “N-No! I have to go too! I have to—”

“You both need to stay here. A demon battle is no place for little kids. If you want to help, talk to the council when they arrive. They’ll need to know everything to go after Camus properly,” Vivi argued. She already had her phone to her ear. Whoever the council was, she was calling them now. I brushed that away, kneeling in front of both boys.

“Look out for each other. And stay here. I can’t get to Aziel if I’m too busy worrying about you. I’ll be back.”

Rising to my feet, I followed Aziel’s friends out of the apartment and down to the

parking lot. Callum handed me his keys, pointing at a truck parked nearby.

“If he’s hurt and we’re busy, you’ll need to move him yourself. Let us handle the demons. You focus on getting him out. Don’t bring him back here. My father will be waiting for you at the transportation tunnel. Bring him there.”

I didn’t argue, and I didn’t ask why. I didn’t care. My one goal was to get Aziel out. If Callum said the transportation tunnel was safest, then that’s where we’d go.

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

Hold on Aziel. I’m coming for you.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DECLAN

The drive to the Shadowwalker home was tense and quiet. Callum and Malakai flew overhead, guiding the way. Felix and Hendrix rode in the truck bed, their heads on a swivel as they searched for enemies. No one came for me. We got all the way there without running into anyone. We decided to check the human realm first, since it was closer. There was a massive wrought-iron gate in the way, but no one guarding it. Malakai pushed it open, and I drove up to the front door, looking around warily. Nothing. There was no one here. Either they weren’t here, or they were hiding. I honestly didn’t know which was worse. Athena said we had to hurry. We didn’t have time to waste searching for him.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up when I stepped out of the truck. It was late, clouds covered the moon, and trees surrounded the house to block out any light pollution from the city. It was pitch black, and only the fire on the demons around me and the lights from the truck gave me any visibility. It was eerie.

“Anyone else feel like we’re being watched?” Felix murmured.

“We probably are,” Callum grumbled. “It changes nothing. We’re here to find Aziel. I don’t think they’ll give him up without a fight.”

Malakai landed next to me, pulling something out of the small of his back. “Declan. My mate has this for protection. You will need it more than I will.”

The pistol was small, barely the size of my palm, but fully loaded. I huffed out a laugh, checking the safety before looking up at him.

“Remind me to thank your mate later.”

He nodded once before turning toward the house. There were no distinct features, like they painted the whole thing black. No lights shone through the windows, nothing to indicate life inside. It felt like a long shot that anyone was here, but we had to check anyway.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

We moved en masse through the double door entrance, which was unlocked and unguarded on the inside. Red flags went up in the back of my head. Either no one was here or they wanted us to go in this direction. I pushed forward, using the light from the demon fire to guide my steps. I took the safety off the pistol, keeping it pointed down so I didn’t do anything stupid like shoot someone if I got startled. Felix and Hendrix checked doors to the left and right as we walked down the hallway, but they all turned up empty.

When the hallway split, we took a second to consider our options. It was hard to tell just how big this place was in the dark, but we didn’t want to end up lost in here. This was already taking too long. I was about to suggest going forward when Felix tipped

his head with a frown.

“What’s that sound?”

Without the sound of our footsteps, the quiet was overwhelming. Everyone else tipped their heads, listening, but I couldn’t hear anything. Callum pointed down the main hallway.

“That way.”

As we continued forward, the noise they’d heard finally got loud enough for me to hear it. A steady flutter, like dozens of wings coming from the double door at the end of the hall. We hesitated outside the door. Whatever was waiting on the other side wasn’t just one or two guys. I wasn’t sure how we’d hold up and I sent a silent prayer that Ollie would forgive me for this in the future.

A gut wrenching scream propelled me forward. It sounded like Aziel, and it was like I could feel the pain in my chest as he screamed. I launched myself at the door, throwing it open and darting inside.

Time slowed and stuttered, only bits and pieces filtering through my brain. Pools of blood. Aziel on his knees, blood gushing down his face. I couldn’t comprehend what I was seeing at first, until time sped back up again and I watched along with a goddamn audience as they literally ripped one of Aziel’s horns off his head with a loud crack. Aziel screamed again, agony etched into his face. The pistol came up automatically, and I fired at the female demon standing over him triumphantly. I never shot a pistol in my life, but I was so pissed, I pulled the trigger over and over until I got her in between the eyes. Her head jerked back, and she stumbled, collapsing on the floor behind Aziel.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

A loud cackle drew my attention to the demon sitting on a literal throne, watching like it was a fucking show for him.

“I told you he’d join us eventually, Aziel! Look! Now you can watch him die before we finish you off!”

Aziel’s head lolled. He didn’t hear a word of what that asshole was saying. The rest of the room did, though, and descended like a swarm. Callum appeared in front of me, throwing out a ball of fire that blasted several demons away. Felix, Hendrix, and Malakai followed suit, surrounding me as they fought back.

“Get to Aziel! Go!” Callum bellowed.

I waited for an opening before darting forward. I used too many damn shots on the chick hurting Aziel, so I didn’t bother firing at the demons swooping towards me. I let the guys handle them and fired instead at the demons holding Aziel prisoner. I got one in the shoulder, but my aim sucked and I missed the other twice before I finally got his leg. They dropped Aziel, barreling toward me, but Malakai knocked them away before they could get to me.

Aziel was lying in a pool of blood, unmoving, when I landed on my knees next to him. I shook his shoulder, but he was out cold. I’d need to move him myself, but there wasn’t a chance in hell I’d get through that swarm without a little help. The guys were fighting hard, but it was four against dozens. They were busy. I pulled Aziel’s arm over my shoulder, hoisting him against me, but he was like a deadweight. I grunted with the effort of lifting him, struggling just to get my feet underneath me.

“Pathetic. Do you really think you can save him? He’s not worth saving.”

The demon on the throne watched with amusement, not moving an inch out of his seat. If I didn’t have Aziel to contend with, I would’ve shot him for enjoying this so much. Heaving Aziel up, I leaned him against me to readjust my grip. Frustration and fear burned through me, tears pricking my eyes. I refused to let them fall, growling as I hoisted Aziel a little higher.

“Fool. You should have run while you had the chance.”

I never saw the demon move from his throne before he was standing over us. He grabbed Aziel by the hair, tossing him like a rag doll away from me. I tried to keep my grip on him, but it just meant we both went skidding across the floor. Turning over, I aimed at the asshole I had to assume was Aziel’s uncle, firing shot after shot until there was no ammo left and the gun clicked a few times. I didn’t hit him once. He was too damn fast. He blurred as he moved, laughing like it was a fucking joke. When I ran out of ammo, he appeared in front of me, an evil grin on his face.

“You and the rest of your pathetic race will die screaming by my hands. Maybe I’ll start with your little brother. Where is he tonight? All alone without you there to protect him.”

Bile rose in my throat at the thought of this asshole getting anywhere near Ollie. I had to remind myself several times that he was safe, surrounded by paranormals who would protect him. It didn’t make it any less terrifying to hear the threat out loud.

“What the hell did we ever do to you?” I demanded.

He chuckled, the sound evil and cruel. “What did you do? Nothing. You wouldn’t be able to hurt me if you tried. No, you just have the unfortunate circumstance of being disgusting and pathetic. When I rid the world of your filth, they will thank me for it.

Well... eventually anyway.”

He was a nut job. No wonder Aziel was so desperate to cling to any chance he had at getting away. He spent a lifetime under this guy’s thumb. I’d lie too, if I had a chance to get out.

A shout from the door distracted him long enough for me to draw my legs up and kick out. I hit him square in the dick, hard enough to send him to his knees. It didn't keep him down for long, though. I barely got to my feet before he snarled at me.

“You’re going to regret that, you little shit!”

He was close enough that when he lashed out, his claws slashed across my chest. Not deep enough to kill me, but it stung like a bitch. Any closer and I’d be dead meat. I looked around for anything to use to protect myself, but there wasn’t a damn thing. The room was empty aside from body parts and blood.

“That’s right, little mouse. Try and flee from me. Aziel is not worth protecting. Maybe if you’re fast enough, you’ll get away before I’m finished with him.”

There wasn’t a chance I’d leave Aziel behind. I resigned myself to a fist fight I had no chance of winning and glared at the asshole who had finally pushed to his feet. Bracing myself, I drew back my fist, but before I could connect with anything, a loud rumble shook the room and light exploded from the middle of it.

“No. No!” Aziel’s uncle screamed. He whipped his head around, baring his teeth at me, but he was more focused on the newcomers. I had no idea who they were, or if they were good guys or bad guys. I didn't wait around to find out. Once Aziel’s uncle was busy with his new friends, I used all my strength to get Aziel off the ground. He groaned, the first sign of him being awake, and I whispered to him as I dragged him out a side door.

“It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay. Just hold on.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DECLAN

I was running on pure adrenaline, getting Aziel out of that house. I didn’t look back, I didn’t stop, and no one came after us. I wasn’t sure how awake Aziel was, or if he even realized what was happening. He bore only a fraction of his own weight, moving on autopilot as I hauled him along. I was pouring sweat by the time we got out the front door and over to the truck. We had to duck once as another demon swooped down on us, but they were blasted with fire from someone inside and fell before they could swing around and try again.

Getting Aziel outside was one thing. Getting him into that goddamn truck looked like it was impossible and I whimpered as I leaned him against the seat. The damn thing was lifted, and it was hard enough to get Aziel to his feet, leaning on me. I didn’t think it was possible for me to pull him inside.

“Come on, baby. Work with me here. We need to get out of here.”

Aziel groaned again, leaning heavily against me. He couldn’t fucking hear me. Cursing under my breath, I looked around for another option. There was nothing.

“Do demons not fucking drive?” I muttered to myself. Shaking myself, I twisted, using my bodyweight to keep Aziel upright against the truck. Squatting, I put his legs around my waist as best I could, keeping my knees bent as I forced him and myself up those stupid steps and into the truck. It was exhausting, and I nearly slipped and dropped him at least twice.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a gravelly voice snarled from the other side of

the truck. I hadn't been watching around us, too busy trying to get Aziel into the truck. He stood on the driver's side and when he started dragging Aziel towards him, I shouted, grabbing the first thing I could reach on the floor of the truck and chucking it at him. The hammer hit him in the head and he stumbled back long enough for me to race around and pick it up again. I gave him no time to recover before I swung again, hard enough to knock his ass out.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

I hovered over the demon for a moment to make sure he wasn't going to get back up before turning back to the truck. The only good thing from that interaction was the demon did half the work of getting Aziel in the truck for me when he tried to drag him out the other side. I readjusted him enough to close both doors, his head in my lap, and fired up the engine, swerving as I headed through the gate and away.

“Aziel? Az? Baby, wake up.”

He didn't move, once again completely unconscious. A lump swelled in my throat, choking me as I barreled toward the transport tunnel.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on,” I pleaded.

I swerved through traffic, ignoring speed limit signs and red lights. If it wasn't so late at night, I might've gotten both of us killed trying to get him some help. I would wonder later why I never got spotted by any cops. I made it all the way to the transport tunnel before slowing down. I didn't want Aziel to fall by slamming on the brakes.

A massive demon who looked a lot like Callum was waiting for me with several other paranormals. They swarmed on the truck, pulling Aziel out and moving him to what looked like a stretcher. I protested at first, I didn't know who the hell they were, but Callum's dad pulled me out of the truck and hurried me after them.

“It's alright. They're going to help him. Let's get moving.”

I raced after the stretcher, bypassing the short line of paranormals waiting to cross

over. They were already gone when the transport tunnel spit us out on the other side, but Callum's dad teleported us without a word and we popped up just in time to watch them wheel Aziel into a tall bright building that looked like a hospital.

"He's in good hands. My wife is one of the best, and she has a good team waiting for him. He'll be alright."

There was no way he could know that yet, but I chose to believe him. The relief was dizzying and my knees gave out. If Callum's dad hadn't been paying attention, I would've hit the ground. He caught me against him, shouting for help as the exhaustion and adrenaline crash slammed into me. I was only half aware of being picked up and moved, the scenery changing without me really taking it all in. I was deposited in a bed and warmth sank into my chest and I just let it happen.

For what felt like hours, I laid there, staring at nothing, the image of Aziel being hurt playing repeatedly in my head. It wasn't until a familiar little voice called my name that I finally blinked.

"Ollie?"

My voice came out like a croak, my throat parched. I coughed to clear it, pushing myself up onto my elbows to figure out where his voice had come from.

"Ollie?"

He appeared in the doorway to the room I was in, relief flashing across his face as he darted over to me. He slammed into my chest, clinging to me with his hands fisted into my shirt. I hugged him back just as hard with one arm, the other holding me up on my elbow.

"What— How did you get here?"

He sniffled, scrubbing at his eyes as he pulled away. “Some people showed up at the place we were hiding. They said they were from the council and they asked a lot of questions. When they were done, there were a bunch of cars waiting to bring us here. Athena said we could trust them and that they’d bring me to see you.”

While he relayed his side of the story, a woman with a cloak and a long brown braid over one shoulder stepped into the room. She had a serious face, without a hint of smile lines, but her eyes softened when she looked at Ollie.

“You found him, I take it?”

Ollie twisted to see her, bobbing his head. He pointed at me. “This is my brother.”

She dipped her head in greeting. “My name is Melvina Shadowspear. A member of the Paranormal Council. I’ve gotten a few witness accounts on what happened at the Shadowwalker residence, but I’ll need to speak with you about your account of the events. I am happy to inform you that Camus Shadowwalker, the leader of the Shadowwalker clan, was captured. He, as well as nearly a dozen others, are in our custody.”

My relief was short-lived, and my gaze darted towards the door. “Aziel?”

She hummed, not taking any offense to the fact that I was more interested in Aziel than anything she had to say.

“As far as I’m aware, he’s still with the healers. I believe Healer Malatesta will inform you when they have more information.” Her gaze moved to Ollie, and she pursed her lips slightly. “Oliver, dear. I believe the healers have extra beds for family members that can be brought in here. My assistant will need help to make sure everyone has a bed to sleep tonight. Would you assist him? I promise, your brother isn’t in any trouble. I just want to speak with him for a moment.”

I appreciated her waiting until he was out of the room to ask me about what happened. I didn't want to give Ollie nightmares. I was going to have nightmares after all of that. Ollie looked uncertain, but I promised him I'd be here when he was done and he reluctantly followed a young man in the same robe as Melvina out of the room.

"I'm sure you understand why I don't want him in here," she murmured as she watched them leave.

"I do. I don't want him to hear this."

It took a while to get all the details. She wanted me to start at the beginning, from the day I met Aziel to tonight. I told her more than once that Aziel never did anything to us, but I was worried I was condemning him by admitting he was using me at first. Aziel's uncle had been forcing him to work for them for years. Aziel said he never took part in hurting people, but they could see him as an accomplice and I didn't want him punished. He suffered enough at the hands of his uncle.

A healer joined us as I was finishing up. She didn't say anything at first, though she did touch my hand. Where she touched me glowed and a familiar warmth spread through my body. It was the same thing I felt when I was first brought in here. When I looked down at the scratches on my chest, they were fully healed and the rest of my injuries and even strained muscles were gone. I hoped more than anything that they could do the same for Aziel.

"Did Aziel ever say anything to you about tonight? Or who might be involved? There were two humans at the apartment with your little brother who were injured. Did he say anything about them?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

I shook my head slowly. “No. I didn’t ask, either. The guys showed up with them and Dante, and I was more focused on him and the fact that Aziel was missing. Who were they?”

“A prominent businessman and a politician in the run for senator. Both were unconscious at the time and can’t tell me how they got to the apartment.”

“Aziel took them when he rescued me,” a small voice murmured. Ollie stood by the door with Dante at his side, both of them frowning. I didn’t notice them arriving, so I was worried about how much they heard, but the councilwoman didn’t ask. She tipped her head, ushering Dante closer.

“I was going to wait to talk to you until later. Do you think you can tell me what happened?”

He looked uncertain, and he held Ollie’s hand like a lifeline. I beckoned them both, and they joined me on the bed, one on each side of me. With Dante tucked into my side, he felt safe enough to speak to Melvina. He told her about how his father wanted to hurt them both for protecting humans, how Aziel was going to fight, but he used all his magic to rescue the humans and Dante from his uncle. He told her about Athena protecting them with weird magic and using some communication thing that looked like a marble to call for help. Then Aziel’s friends showed up, fought off the few soldiers who were trying to get to him and the humans, and took them back to the apartment.

“He wasn’t part of it. Aziel doesn’t hurt humans. He was protecting me.” He was getting loud, defensive, and worried about his cousin. Melvina put up her hand to

stop him.

“I believe you. This isn’t the first crime family we’ve had to deal with, unfortunately. Some family members aren’t there by choice. As long as he didn’t participate, he won’t be tried with the rest of them.”

“He didn’t! That’s why my dad hated him so much! He said Aziel was soft because he wouldn’t hurt humans!”

Melvina nodded, soothing him with soft words. “It will be okay, Dante. I promise, we’re only here to help. Now, can you tell me if there’s someone I can call for you? Your mother, perhaps? You won’t be going home with your father, I’m afraid.”

He shook his head quickly. “I don’t live with him. I live with Aziel. He takes care of me. He’s my guardian.”

She pursed her lips, glancing at her assistant, who stood just inside the door. “Find out if there is paperwork regarding that. It would make this easier.”

The assistant nodded and hurried off without a word. Another healer replaced him, this one a little older, with long black hair. She had a kind smile and when Melvina saw her, she looked relieved.

“Healer Malatesta. I hope you have good news for us.”

The healer sighed. “As good as we could’ve hoped for, I suppose.” She turned to me. “You’re Aziel Shadowwalker’s mate, correct?”

When I dipped my chin, she stepped up to the end of my bed. “First and foremost, I’m going to start with the good news. Aziel is alive. His injuries were severe, but he got here in time.”

Dante looked elated, but I held back from celebrating.

“What’s the bad news?”

Her smile turned sad. “Unfortunately, there were some things we couldn’t heal. Members of the Shadowwalker clan have been known to use poisons on their enemies that hinder our ability to heal them. He won’t be in any pain, but I’m afraid the horn he lost could not be reattached. And one eye was damaged quite severely. He’s not awake yet, but we don’t believe he’ll be able to see out of it. We did our best, but—”

“But you aren’t miracle workers. I understand. When can we see him?”

“When you’re through answering the council’s questions, I’d be happy to escort you to him,” she reassured me. “We moved him to a bigger room so that you all could stay with him if you wish.”

“We’re done here,” Melvina interjected. “I’ve gotten all I need. I’ll let Aziel get his rest for now and come back in the morning to get his full statement. I believe this family has dealt with enough for tonight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AZIEL

The last thing I remembered was my sister’s face. Seeing her, I thought I’d never wake up again. She was psychotic, my uncle’s top torturer, and she didn’t give a flying fuck that I was her brother. The chances of me surviving an encounter with her were slim to none. And I was too drained from realm hopping to fight back. So when I woke up warm and without any pain, I was confused, to say the very least. I almost thought it was a nightmare, but when I blinked my eyes open, I wasn’t in my bed.

The ceiling was unfamiliar, what of it I could see anyway. I blinked a few times, trying to figure out why my right eye wouldn't open, but when I reached up to touch it, a gentle hand pushed my arm back down.

“You're on the mend, but I would suggest for now not touching your injuries,” the warm voice warned.

Clearing my throat, I turned toward the woman who stood beside my bed. “Why can't I see?”

“When they attacked you, they used a poison. It blocked our ability to heal you. It took a while just to get the bleeding under control, but unfortunately, we weren't able to reverse the injuries you incurred.”

Injuries. A memory of the night at my uncle's home flashed through my mind and I reached again, this time toward my horn. The woman looked sympathetic, once again pulling my hand away.

“How much do you remember?”

“Not much. Where—” My heart stuttered in my chest. Dante. Where was Dante? Did I get him out in time? What about Declan? Oliver? Were they still safe?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

The woman's hands glowed as she settled them on my chest. "Deep breaths, Aziel. If you look to your left, you'll see your cousin asleep in the bed next to you. And in the chair by your side is your mate. His little brother is in another bed on your right. They're safe."

It was disconcerting, relying on only one eye, but I took them all in one at a time. Dante was hugging his pillow. It was a quirk of his. He made nests in his bed, I think to make him feel safer. I had to buy him half a dozen pillows when he moved in with me. Oliver was sprawled on his back, snoring lightly, drool dripping out of the side of his mouth. And Declan held my hand, his chin resting on his chest, his breaths deep and even. His clothes were torn and bloodstained, but I couldn't see any injuries on him. When I shot a questioning look at the healer, she smiled softly.

"He was seen to when he arrived. A few smaller injuries, but luckily, no poison was used. He made a full recovery after a few hours. His healer has checked on him a few times, he has nightmares of the events, but otherwise, he's just fine."

The relief was dizzying, but there was still the matter of my uncle. Was it even safe here? I didn't even know where here was. And what about my friends? I didn't remember enough of that night to know whether they'd come for me or not, but I wouldn't have gotten out without help. I wasn't supposed to survive.

"Healer Malatesta, I could use some support," the healer murmured, poking her head into the hallway. When Mama Malatesta stepped into the room, her soft smile cracked something inside me and I gritted my teeth against the urge to cry.

"Oh, Aziel. You've been through so much. It's alright."

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't hold back the stupid tears. I hated it, and it only pissed me off, but I couldn't stop it. I averted my gaze, glaring at the wall as the tears streamed steadily down my face.

"I attempted to ease his anxiety, but his mind is turbulent."

"As is expected. There is only one person that can help him now."

I expected more healing magic by Mama Malatesta to settle me or something. She was one of the best healers around. But Declan's hand released mine and when I jerked to face him, he was climbing into bed with me, pulling me into his arms. The dam broke, and I let him hold me, careful of my injuries, my face buried against his shoulder. I was sure he'd ridicule me for it later, until I felt tears hit my neck. He didn't say anything, he just shushed me lightly, petting my hair and holding me until both our tears stopped.

There was no hurry from either of us to pull away. I soaked in his comfort and took the time to process what happened. I'd never see correctly again. I'd get stares and questions about the horn. It was humiliating and infuriating, and I worried about what Declan would say. I wasn't the same as before. I never found myself particularly handsome, but I could only imagine what I looked like now. He might not want to mate with me like this.

"I can practically hear you overthinking right now," Declan murmured. "Whatever is running through your head, ignore it. You're still perfect to me."

I let his reassurances wash over me, letting out a slow breath. When I finally pulled away and looked at him, his gaze trailed over my face, and he smiled softly.

"It's a little badass, honestly. You're gonna intimidate the hell out of any little shit walking into my shop hoping to scam me."

Huffing out a chuckle, I shook my head. “It might not be smart to let me near your customers. I’ll scare them off.”

He made an irritated noise, shooting me a dirty look. “If they act like that, then I don’t want them in my shop anyway. Fuck them.”

If he’d said any bullshit about how no one would ever do that, I would have brushed him off. But Declan didn’t lie to me. He supported me and would tell the world to fuck off if they messed with me instead.

“I love you.”

He smiled softly, cupping my chin as he dipped to press his lips gently against mine. “I love you too.”

“Aziel?”

I stole one last kiss from Declan before I leaned around him to look at Dante. He was sitting up in bed, a worried look on his face. When I waved him over, he scrambled off his bed and into mine, hugging me tightly.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry he hurt you.”

I hummed, resting my head against his temple. “I guess we match now.”

He sniffled, his bottom lip trembling as he sat back and frowned at his hands. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was embarrassed. My brothers always made fun of me, even though they were the ones who did it. Them and my dad. I won’t... I won’t ever be able to fly.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Athena demanded, hobbling into the room. “You’re

young still. The future is full of surprises.” She stopped at the foot of my bed, smiling at me. “How are you, dear one?”

“Alive.”

It sounded like a dismissal, but to me, it was the most important thing in the world. I was alive. And the people I cared about were alive. Slowly, one by one, they filled the room. Oliver moved to sit at the foot of the bed once he woke up. All of my friends and their mates joined us. Even Callum’s family stepped into the room. I wasn’t sure how long I had before my uncle came for us again, but for now, I was alive and that’s all that mattered.

Mama Malatesta only let the visitors stay for so long. She said I needed my rest and they could come in smaller groups a little later. She was going to have me stay at least a week to make sure the poison was well and truly gone. It was my sister’s favorite weapon. She painted her claws with it so when she hurt people, they stayed hurt. I didn’t know what I ever did to her to make her hate me that much, but it didn’t matter. It wasn’t like I’d ever run into her again.

After everyone left, Callum’s parents took the boys to the cafeteria for breakfast while I met with a few members of the council. They’d been after my uncle for years, so they were eager to bring him to trial. Declan stayed by my side, his face tense and anxious as I went over my part in my uncle’s reign. Because I was directly related to him, a witch stood by with a truth sphere to check my story, while someone else recorded everything on video. I was honest with them about gathering information and acting as security. I knew I had some burden to bear for all the people he hurt. He wouldn’t have gone after them if he hadn’t gotten information from me. I held my breath when I finished, waiting for them to tell me I’d be punished right along with them, but councilwoman Melvina dismissed everyone with a smile.

“Your testimony will help us greatly, Aziel. We’re going to put your uncle away for a

long time. You don't have to worry about that.”

“What about me?”

She pursed her lips, her brows drawn together. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he hurt people because I gave him information. I played a part in it.”

“Ah.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Not a willing part, I’m sure. Besides, none of the information you gathered was obtained illegally. There’s nothing illegal about listening in to other people’s conversations. And if it wasn’t you, Camus would’ve had someone else gathering that information. You’re not in trouble for following orders to stay alive. We have special laws regarding family members under duress. And Dante told us what happened to your parents. That kind of threat would make anyone buckle under to survive. We’re more interested in Camus and his sons than you.”

“Dante?”

She shook her head. “No, not him. Though, I do have news on that front. Since your uncle signed the paperwork to make you Dante’s legal guardian, we won’t need to jump through hoops to send him home with you. We were going to have to terminate Camus’s rights to Dante, anyway.”

I frowned. “But he only signed the human paperwork on it. They did nothing in the Other Realm.”

She smirked. “It’s still legal. We’ve gotten a lot of confusion from paranormals about human legal documents. They think they’re not bound to them just because they’re

paranormal. Utter nonsense. We work with the humans, not parallel to them. Once you're released and Camus's rights have been terminated, Dante will be in your care."

Relief slammed into me hard, knocking the wind out of me. My uncle was gone, finally in the hands of the council. Dante was safe from him and legally mine. Declan and Oliver were safe and didn't have to hide in fear anymore. It all seemed too good to be true. At least until Athena's words crossed my mind.

Submit to the white tiger and find your freedom.

I submitted to Declan the day we agreed to tackle my uncle together. I stopped fighting the idea of him being my mate. I didn't fully believe I'd get to keep him, but I greeted each day determined to embrace whatever time I had with him.

Damn. She was going to be impossible to live with from here on out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DECLAN

We stayed in the Other Realm for a few days, but eventually I had to bring Ollie home before my parents got back. I wasn't happy about the idea of leaving Aziel's side, but my folks would lose their minds if I kept him for another week just because Aziel couldn't be released yet. Luckily, his friends were taking turns staying with him, so at least I knew he was safe. Callum and Brandon took us home through the transport tunnel, and I grimaced at the massive blanket covering the front row of seats in Brandon's truck.

"Sorry."

Brandon snorted. “Like we can complain about some blood when Aziel was dying. I’ll get it detailed. It’ll be fine. I’m just glad he’s okay.”

Callum looked over his shoulder at a light, raising his eyebrows at me. “I’m bringing you back tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah.”

Ollie protested with a frown. “What about me?”

“Mom and Dad get back tomorrow. You’re going home with them.”

“But—”

Putting my hand on his shoulder, I raised my eyebrows. “Relax. It’s only a week. And Ben has already agreed to let you hang out with him after school until I get back. Once Aziel is strong enough to come home, things will go back to normal.”

“What about Dante? We’ve got school. Is he coming back?”

“I’ll ask him, but I think he’s gonna want to stick close to Aziel for a while. They went through something really rough, buddy. They need time to heal.”

He still looked really hurt, his face pinched. “But the healer said they’re all better.”

“There’s more than just one kind of hurt, little one,” Callum interjected. “Physically, they’re on the mend, though Aziel might take a bit. But emotionally, they’re still hurting. They need time together to talk about what happened and move on from it.”

“Oh.”

Ollie frowned at his hands in his lap, his lip stuck out in a pout. I loved that he cared so much about Aziel and Dante and it sucked that he had to go back home alone, but it was for the best. He'd see plenty of both of them once they were allowed to come home. Aziel wasn't going anywhere, and he was Dante's guardian. They were a set pair. An adorable set pair who made jokes about their injuries to take back their confidence about it.

I had shut the shop down for a few days. With Ben out for a family emergency and me with Aziel, there was no one to run it. It would mean a lean month for bills, but I had enough in savings to deal with the loss. Luckily, the wards held up and nothing was touched when we got back. The witch who put up the wards even came to remove the prank one that hid the shop from paranormals.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:45 am

While Ollie decided to veg out for a while and just take a break, I hopped in the shower. Felix and Tyler brought me a change of clothes since mine were torn and blood stained, but I hadn't showered in a few days and I felt gross. I stepped under the spray, letting the hot water ease the aches in my body. Healing centers were a lot like hospitals in the human realm. The beds weren't big enough for two people and the chairs weren't comfortable to sleep in. They offered me a bed of my own, but I didn't want to be far from Aziel, so I stuck to the chair or squeezed in the uncomfortable bed with him. I couldn't wait to get him home so we could stretch out a little.

It was a little insane how quickly things changed since Aziel showed up in my life. I was focused on work and getting as much time with my little brother as possible. I avoided paranormals like the plague. Now I was mated to a demon, I was making friends with the dozens of paranormals who came to visit Aziel in the healing center, and already planning on moving Aziel and Dante in with me. Maybe. This place was a little small for all of us. Aziel said his place was bigger, but it was a little farther away. It'd make it more difficult on nights when I worked late. I also liked being able to roll out of bed and walk downstairs to go to work.

I pushed that aside, dropping onto the couch next to Ollie after my shower and pulling up a food delivery app. I was too lazy to cook tonight.

“What do we want to order? Pizza or Chinese?”

He leaned closer to look at my phone, studying the options thoughtfully. “It'd be cool if we could have both.”

“Like a little of each, or like some pizza Chinese food hybrid? Because the second one sounds gross.”

He snickered, shrugging his shoulders up and down. “I dunno. Pizza with noodles doesn’t sound horrible.”

“Gross. You eat like a pregnant woman, I swear.”

He cackled, shoving me away and tossing himself across the cushions. I swore he ordered weird shit on purpose just to gross me out.

Someone knocked on my back door, so I tossed Ollie my phone with a roll of my eyes. “Pick one. Not both. And if you get pizza, don’t forget at least one vegetable. I’m supposed to be taking care of you. If you skip a vegetable, I’ll make you eat a salad on the side.”

“And you say I’m gross,” he countered, scrolling through my phone. Knowing him, he’d order Chinese food just so he could say the few peas in the fried rice were plenty of vegetables.

When I got downstairs and found Ben waiting by the back door, I frowned. “Did you have a late night appointment or something? Where’s your key?”

He scrubbed the back of his neck with a frown. “It felt wrong using it when this isn’t about work. Sort of. Can I come in? There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Weird. I shrugged, stepping back to let him inside. Melvina said most of Aziel’s family was either dead or captured, but I was still cautious and locked the back door behind us, following Ben upstairs. He waved at Ollie and I gestured him toward the table so he could tell me what was on his mind.

“Is everything okay? You said you went home because of a family emergency.”

He sighed heavily. “Yes, and no. My mom had a stroke. She’s okay now, on the mend, but I think I need to move closer to home. My dad’s having a tough time and my sister just had a baby. They need help. I know I’m leaving you in the lurch, but—”

Putting up my hand to stop him, I shook my head. “Don’t. You don’t have to give excuses. I totally get it. You should always put family first. And since you’re so close to the end of your apprenticeship anyway, I’m comfortable signing something that said you finished it. You can find an open chair somewhere closer to home without having to finish under someone else.”

He let out a breath of relief, his eyes filling with tears. “Seriously? You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “You’re good, Ben. Does it suck that you can’t stick around? Sure, but if I can help you in any way, I’m gonna do it. Does that mean you can’t watch Ollie this week after school?” It’d make things a little more complicated, but I’d make it work.

“No, no, I can. I figured I’d give two weeks’ notice, that kind of thing. Mom’s still in the hospital right now, anyway. It’s not much time, but maybe it’ll be enough for you to find my replacement.”

“That’s nice of you, man. I appreciate it.”

After Ben left and Ollie gorged himself on Chinese food, I tucked him in and sat at the table with my laptop. I answered a few appointment requests, emailed a few clients to reschedule, and did the math on how long I could manage without Ben. I survived before he started, but he brought in a lot of clients and things were easier with the two of us here. I didn’t want to go back to working twelve-hour days every

damn day just to pay rent.

I was about to shut the laptop down when the post-it note I'd stuck to the front fluttered off of it and into my lap. I read it over, pursing my lips, and decided to send one more email before I went to bed. Hopefully, he could meet me tomorrow before I had to go back to the Other Realm to see Aziel.

My parents picked up Ollie at ten. They were tanned and a lot more relaxed than I'd ever seen them, and they looked happy to see Ollie. Mom even smiled at me when she came in to grab his bag.

"He's got one more page of writing to finish tonight. I figured you were a better coach for that than me."

"Yes, you always did struggle with that. Your handwriting was beautiful, but your sentence structure was godawful."

I snorted, lifting a shoulder. "Well, I can't be good at everything."

Ollie was already in the car, bouncing on the seat as he pestered our dad about him coming along next time. Mom let out a slow breath, the tension gone now that she saw Ollie unharmed and happy.

"Thank you, Declan, for watching him this week. We really appreciate it."

"Any time. I love spending time with him. If you guys need a weekend off or something, just let me know."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:46 am

Her smile was genuine this time. A vacation did a lot for her, apparently. I still questioned sometimes whether I should be helping them as much as I do, given how they treat me, but Ollie was worth it. My little brother was going to take on the world. I wanted to be there when he did.

They left just as someone knocked on the shop door. I locked up behind me and headed toward the front, holding the door open for Manny to duck inside. He looked uncertain and a lot uncomfortable. He pointed out the door, his voice gruff.

“You got rid of the spell.”

“I did. I realized I was letting one unpleasant encounter define my entire experience with paranormals, and that was unfair of me. I’ve made paranormal friends since then, and I’m even mated to one.”

His bushy eyebrows shot up. “Really? Congratulations. Is, uh... Is that why you called me here?”

“No. I came to offer you a chair.”

He frowned, and I chuckled as I gestured to the couch. I sat on my favorite stool facing him to explain.

“I just found out my apprentice is moving back home to be closer to his family. That means a chair is open here. I remember Hendrix saying you’ve been struggling to find some place to work. If you’re interested, I’d love to work with you here. We’d be partners, no one would be in charge or anything, and any changes to the place

would be decided on together. I'd still love to learn to tattoo paranormals, but I figured an expert in house might give us a boost in business."

He stammered a bit, his mouth opening and closing like he couldn't figure out what to say. "I, uh... I mean, are you— I..."

When I grinned at him, he snapped his mouth shut and scowled at me. "Shut up. Are you serious?"

I nodded once, fighting back a laugh. "Completely serious. I'm gonna be gone this week, my mate is at a healing center in the Other Realm and I want to be with him, but when I get back, I'd love for us to sit down and iron things out. Are you interested?"

"Hell yeah, I am!" he shouted. When I raised my eyebrows at him, he coughed and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I mean, yeah. That sounds good. Just send me an email on when is good for you."

Laughing, I offered him my hand. "I get the feeling I'm gonna like working with you."

CHAPTER THIRTY

AZIEL

I spent part of the time at the healing center learning to reorient myself. I struggled with spatial awareness and bumped into things a lot. Mama Malatesta said I'd get better with time, and after she was certain the poison was out of my system, she released me to my mate. Felix teased me when I rolled my eyes, saying it wasn't as effective with one eye all cloudy. He got punched for that, but he was cackling and, honestly, I didn't hate him joking about it. Teasing was better than pitying looks. He

treated me like normal and I appreciated that.

Since my apartment had more space, we decided to stay there for the time being. Less for me to bump into. It wasn't going to be forever. After Manny became Declan's partner at work, he suggested expanding into the empty shop next door so there was room for bigger paranormals. There was space upstairs in that one too, and Declan was already making plans with Brandon and his boss on how to upgrade it. It'd be pricey, but between me, Declan, and Manny, we got covered for a loan big enough to pull off the job.

Declan had been teasing when he said I'd be his bodyguard at work. I didn't know what I was going to do with myself for work, especially with my vision all messed up. Luckily, the paranormal government gave grants out to new families living in the human realm and Melvina said I qualified as a new parent since I officially adopted Dante. I could've just remained his guardian, but I talked to Dante about it and we both agreed it was better to have things be more stable with me as his official parent. I wasn't going to pretend to be his dad or anything, he was still my cousin, but at least he knew I loved him and wanted to be around for the future.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I walked down the hallway again and turned into the kitchen, just barely bumping into the door frame. I growled in frustration. My room was easier because it was on my left side coming down the hall, but turning right was a pain in the ass.

"Don't take your frustration out on the door frame. It's already costing an arm and a leg to update the shop."

Swinging around, I followed Declan's voice. He and Manny were supposed to be meeting the contractors right now. He wasn't supposed to be home yet.

"What are you doing here so early?"

“Lunch break.”

I made a face. “It's ten thirty.”

A smirk pulled at his lips, and he shrugged. “Okay, so I took an early lunch because I'm horny and I figured I could distract you for a little while.”

I huffed out a laugh, running my fingers through my short hair. Mal suggested the shorter cut would draw less attention to the broken horn. It actually worked better than I thought it would and I didn't hate it. Dante cut his hair to match, and it made me smile every time he stood next to me in the bathroom to style his hair in the morning.

“You're lying, aren't you? You knew I'd be climbing the walls without something to do.”

He hummed, striding across the room with a heated grin. “Or... I was hoping for an afternoon delight before Dante got back and we had to be quiet again.”

Out of everyone, Declan refused to pity me. He was supportive and comforting when I needed it, but he didn't make my injury the focus of our daily life. He could pull my head out of my ass no matter how badly I spiraled, and I sought him out, my nose bumping his before I found his lips.

It went from steamy and soft to demanding and rough in a flash. Declan was still aggressive with sex, and I still loved it. I let him push me onto the couch, groaning when he dropped on top of me and ground his hips against mine.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:46 am

“Your choice, baby. On your knees or on your back.”

That offer still sent shivers up my spine. He didn’t always give me a choice, but he always found ways to remind me we were equals. That I could trust him to take care of me.

“This is good. I want to see you.” As much as I could, anyway. He didn’t comment or tease, focusing more on removing my clothes. I was just as eager as he was, stripping him and running my palms down the sleeves of tattoos on his arms.

His tongue licked down my neck to my chest, and he nipped lightly before looking up at me.

“Gonna let me mark that virgin skin sometime soon?”

He pointed out that I never said no to getting a tattoo. I hadn’t decided what I wanted yet, but I intended to follow through. I had a mark from the pain my family caused me. I wanted something better to mark the life I had now.

“Fuck me first. You can tattoo me later.”

His wicked grin sent a thrill through me, and he proceeded to give me exactly what I wanted. I arched my back and groaned as he stretched me, sucking on the head of my cock just hard enough to drive me wild. I protested when his fingers pulled free, swallowing the sound down when his lube coated cock replaced them. He pushed in slowly, letting me feel each piercing as it massaged past my rim. I tossed my head back, a deep groan rattling my throat, and I heard Declan chuckle.

“You told me the piercings kept you coming back for more. Is that still true?”

I shook my head, even as he pulled out a little faster and those metal balls set me on fire. He was tormenting me, switching from fast to slow at random, so I couldn't tell what was coming.

“No? What, then?”

I couldn't think clearly with him inside me. I groaned helplessly and when I didn't answer him, he twisted enough to peg my prostate perfectly, but then avoided it until I gave him what he wanted.

“I, oh fuck, I, ah! I come back for you.”

He shifted himself, changing the angle and ripping a strangled sound from me when he pegged my prostate again. He kept his thrusts languid and easy, cupping my cheek to get my attention. When I looked at him, I saw the tension in his jaw, the effort to hold back from fucking me hard. But then he smiled at me, love and tender affection shining through his eyes and melting me from the inside out.

“I'll always be there for you, baby. No matter what.”

I wasn't as good with the sentimental one-liners as he was, so I responded with a kiss, putting every ounce of love I had for him into it. He kissed me back just as fiercely until I was shifting restlessly beneath him and thrusting my hips up to get some friction on my cock. Declan chuckled against my lips.

“Always trying to take control when we both know how much you love it when I lead.”

“So lead, then. Because right now, you're not doing much of anyth—” My snarky

comment ended on a strangled noise, my voice going up an octave as he bucked hard against me. He shifted, shoving my knees closer to my chest, and all that tenderness vanished as he fucked me hard. He gave me no mercy, finding that perfect angle and tagging my prostate over and over until I came with a shout, completely untouched. It covered my abs and chest, but he didn't slow down. He bared his teeth, somehow fucking me harder, our skin slapping together loudly.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck! Declan!”

I made the mistake of telling him a demon's recovery time was significantly faster than humans. He refused to stop at one orgasm after that if he could help it. He wanted to see how many times he could make me come before he followed me over the edge.

The second one was intense, my body contorting as he fisted my erection just as I let go. I almost knocked him off me with my movements and an embarrassing amount of begging spilled from my lips as he flipped me onto my hands and knees and kept going. The change meant his piercings joined in the fun with my prostate and I went blind from the pleasure. Myclaws dug into the couch, which I would regret later, and my cock dripped and throbbed with the need to come again.

“Ah, fuck...” he grunted, his grip on my hips tensing. When Declan started cursing, it meant he was close and pleasure zipped up my spine from the realization. He grabbed my cock again, matching the pace of his hips, and I lost my ability to breathe. Like a tidal wave, it slammed into me and I exploded harder than the first two releases combined. Declan followed me with a shout, slamming into me as deeply as he could as he rode it out.

We were out of breath, sweaty and covered in cum, at least on my end. Declan brushed kisses up my spine, kissing each wing once before moving on to my neck. I hummed, tingles still running through my blood. When our breathing came easier,

Declan pulled out and flopped back onto the couch.

“Well, it’s a good thing we listened to Art about getting couch covers,” he commented lazily.

I barked out a laugh, forcing myself onto my feet. I wanted to collapse face first onto the couch and pass out for a while, but I didn’t really want to lie down in a puddle of cum. Shower first, then nap.

“Pretty sure he didn’t have this in mind,” I replied as I walked away.

I heard him strip the couch, tossing the cover into the washer on his way to join me in the shower. He wrapped himself around me as we waited for the spray to warm up, kissing my shoulder lightly.

“No, maybe not. But they care about you enough to offer you advice. All your friends care. And I’m sure if you talk to them, they’ll help you figure out what to do next.”

I was distant with my friends after I got hurt. I didn’t mean to be, but I was still relearning how to function and I wasn’t used to asking for help. But Declan had a point. They were the family I chose, and I needed to learn to lean on them more.

“It’s Thursday. It’s supposed to be my turn to host poker night. Is it wrong to bring a kid to that, or should I ask Athena to watch him?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:46 am

He snickered, pulling me into the shower with him. “I don’t think Dante will let you keep him out of it, even if you wanted to. But I’m down to host if you are. It might make it easier on you.”

True. Last week was Hendrix’s night to host. Now that he was popular enough to play shows on weekends in fancy ass clubs, his Thursdays were free. But his place had too many things to trip over or run into. I skipped it for that reason alone.

“Call them. They’re your family. They’ve got your back. Just like I do.”

I always thought I’d have to keep the world at a distance. It made things less painful when I thought about losing it all. But Declan never stopped reminding me that I didn’t have to think that way anymore. It wasn’t an easy lesson, but with him and Dante encouraging me, I was learning to trust again. My uncle had set out to ruin my life in a revenge plot against my parents.

He failed.

I was free.

EPILOGUE

DECLAN

It took a while, but the expansion of the shop was finally finished. We had to shut down the shop for a week for them to blow out the wall between the two spaces, but we made it work. And Aziel didn’t know it, but I had them do work on the upstairs as

well. I wanted to make it easier for him to get around. Most of the walls were gone, aside from the bedrooms and bathrooms. The living room and kitchen was one big space and we would limit the amount of furniture we brought in so he wouldn't trip. Even a few months after the attack, Aziel still struggled sometimes with bumping into things. His depth perception was off and it pissed him off to no end. This would be easier on him.

Manny was practically vibrating beside me, he was so happy. We got some new equipment for bigger clients, and we already had appointments for next week with both paranormals and humans alike.

"Ready to go inside?"

"Yes!" He coughed, rubbing the back of his neck to hide his embarrassment. "I mean, sure. Yeah. Sounds good."

I bit back a laugh, leading the way inside. Manny had a sunshine personality, but he tried to hide it a lot. It didn't have anything to do with me, we got along pretty well after I apologized for being an ass, but apparently he used to live in Hell, and it was a rough area. He had to be tough to not get pushed around. And yeah, it blew my mind that Hell was a real place, but had no religious context to it. It was a town in the Other Realm that was on the rough side. Az and Manny brought me so we could set up a shipping schedule with the guy who had the special paranormal inks. Not one human being tortured in sight.

"Wow..."

I nodded in agreement. The shop wasn't a tiny space just big enough for two chairs anymore. It was roomy, with chairs of different sizes and two private back rooms for those who didn't want an audience. The bathroom was bigger than a broom closet, so anyone of Manny's size could fit easily, and the storage room now had wards on it to

protect the ink. Hell, the whole building had wards on it. Az insisted on that part. Only those with good intentions could walk through the door.

Letting out a slow breath, I felt some of the tension I'd been carrying the last few weeks fade away. Money was tight, and now we had a big ass loan we had to make payments on, but now that the shop was finished, we could have more clients, maybe even find another tattoo artist to join us. We had the space for it.

"You're, uh... You're having a party to celebrate it being done, right?"

"We," I corrected. "We're having a party. This isn't just my shop. It's ours. Besides, your cousin is catering."

Manny beamed at me. He was a little awkward sometimes, unsure of where he stood, but that was my fault. Now that we could start working more, we'd be around each other more often and he could see that I was sincere about him being a friend.

Rubbing my hands together, I sucked in a breath. "Alright. Let's get this place party ready. I need to pick up the boys from the park in a few hours."

Az normally did it, but he said he had something to do this afternoon and refused to tell me what he was doing. I'd be dealing with that later.

AZIEL

"We look forward to working with you."

It took time and a lot of help from my friends to find work. Declan wanted me to take my time, find something I would really enjoy, but I couldn't stand being a freeloader. With the rent on two different buildings and the new loan, we were bleeding money, and I refused to sit around and figure things out without something to fall back on.

It was Felix who actually got me the job. All my friends offered to help and brought me to work with them to see which jobs I could handle with the vision loss. I'd been considering working with Hendrix. He said he could always use more security now that his band was so popular, and I had experience in that, but he traveled a lot now, and I didn't like being away from Declan and Dante. Felix's office was a lot quieter than I was used to, but I didn't hate it. It would be nice to sit and do a job without fear of retribution. And his boss was understanding when I knocked shit over on her desk when I went to shake her hand.

Declan didn't know I was here. I was a grouchy asshole on most days, and he had to deal with me during my recovery. I wanted to do something for him. Finding a job, contributing to our lives together, that was something I could accomplish. I wanted to surprise him.

Felix was waiting for me when I stepped out of the office, and his boss rolled her eyes when she noticed him.

"Shouldn't you be working right now?"

"I'm on lunch. How'd it go?"

He looked as eager as a puppy and I had to twist my mouth to hide my smile. Felix came clean not long after he met his mate about what his friends meant to him. I felt the same way. So having me close by was a big deal to him. And it meant a lot to me that he cared that much.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:46 am

“I start on Monday,” I answered, then grunted as he jerked me into a back cracking hug. Felix was like Declan and he didn’t treat me like I was fragile. I relented enough to hug him back before stepping away. I still wasn’t overly affectionate with anyone but Declan. That was just my personality by now.

“Yes! Awesome. I need to tell Tyler. We should celebrate. Drinks tonight?”

I gave him a flat look. “It’s the party tonight.”

He grinned. “Shit, that’s right. Tyler’s getting tatted tonight too. This will be fun. We’ll make it a double celebration then. Maybe Mal can make some cake. And we need liquor! I should check–”

I grabbed him by the back of his suit jacket before he could run off. Idiot was going to bug the shit out of Declan and tonight was about him, not me. I’d tell him about the job when the time was right.

“Leave Declan alone. If I find out you told him before I did, I’ll hurt you. Got it?”

He glanced over his shoulder, shooting me a sheepish grin. “Yeah, alright. That’s probably smart. Gotta tell your mate yourself. You wanna join me and Tyler for lunch? We go to a great place down the street a lot. All you can eat wings.”

When I nodded and released him, he took off to find his mate. My new boss shook her head with a smile.

“He’s like a big puppy. But he went to bat hard for you to get hired. He didn’t need

to, I would've hired you anyway, but he really wants you to be here."

Warmth flooded my chest, and I felt myself smile. I rarely smiled before I met Declan. Now, thanks to him and my friends, I was smiling all the time. It felt weird, to be honest.

I spent some time in HR filling out paperwork after having a chaotic lunch with Felix and Tyler. Those two idiots were obnoxious. After I was through, I only had a few hours to get home and get cleaned up before the party. No way was I showing up to the party in a suit. Declan would have a field day.

My phone rang before I could teleport home and I sighed heavily. "Hi, Athena."

"Azzy! Get over here. I need a hand. I ordered a new bookshelf, and the thing came in pieces instead of put together. Who do they think I am? A carpenter?"

"Sure. Let me just go home and change—"

"Nonsense. I'm sure you look fine. If we don't start now, we won't get it done in time for the party and I don't want to drag this out for days. Chop, chop."

Athena never let me get away with arguing with her. I knew better than to try. If I didn't go right away, she'd pester me until I caved. And after everything she did for me, I found it hard to tell her no.

"Alright, Athena. I'll be there in a minute. Let me just text Declan."

"I'll allow it. Hurry up. And don't you roll your eyes at me."

I stopped mid eye roll and bit back a chuckle. "Sorry. Give me a few minutes."

It ended up not taking that long to put the shelf together, but Athena refused to let me

go home and change. She brought me some tea and demanded I tell her about my new job, because of course she already knew about that. My knee bounced, and I kept looking at the time, but she kept me glued to that seat until we had to go to the party. I dropped my chin against my chest with a sigh.

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” she snapped. “You look very handsome. Now let’s get going. Dante told me there would be food at this thing. You don’t want an old lady to starve, do you?”

Resigned to my fate, and the inevitable teasing, I teleported us just outside Declan’s shop. I could see him through the big front window and, like I always did, I took a minute to appreciate him before heading inside. I never thought I’d get that lucky to wind up with a mate. Especially not one as great as Declan. He wasn’t sweet and cuddly, like Callum’s or Mal’s mates. He wasn’t obnoxious like Felix’s mate. And he wasn’t shy like Hendrix’s mate. He was his own person. Rough around the edges like me and tough when he needed to be, but also kind and understanding. I trusted him more than I should have on day one, and that trust had only grown in the past few months. There wasn’t anyone that was better suited for me than him.

Athena squeezed my arm gently, and when I looked down at her, her smile was soft. “I made you a promise, Azzy. I told you that you would get your happy ending. Do I ever break my promises?”

“No,” I answered honestly, leaning to kiss her cheek. “Thank you. For helping me see him.”

“You did that all on your own, my dear. All I did was put you in his path. Now, let’s go. I’m sure your mate will appreciate you getting dressed up for his party.”

“I didn’t—”

She ignored me, pulling me inside behind her. She smirked and winked when Declan

dragged me back outside, a familiar fire in his eyes. I sure as hell wasn't complaining about it. I made a mental note to buy her something pretty once I could afford it. She deserved it.

Declan shoved me against the wall, his body pressed against mine. I shivered and pulled him closer, groaning when he yanked my mouth to his with a grip on my tie.

"I guess you like my outfit?" I murmured against his lips.

"If there wasn't a room full of people, I'd be dragging you upstairs to show you how much."

I hummed, pulling him closer and grinding our hips together as a wicked grin spread across my face. "Did I ever tell you how demons liked to claim their mates?"