



A Beginner's Guide to Ghosts, Fallen Angels, and Other Afterlifers (Demonic Disasters and Afterlife

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Cassius:

Cass has always had the sight. Although his official job may be to run his coffee shop, in reality he deals with grumpy ghosts, troublesome demons, uptight angels, and all sorts of paranormal issues. When the archangel Gabriel gives him a message that he has to help a gray angel, it's just par for the course for Cassius. But who could predict that Kushiell would be the brightest soul Cassius had ever met, even if the angel can't see that about himself? Cassius is determined not just to save the afterlife (and possibly the entire universe), but also to save one very sexy angel (who just might be his soulmate) along the way.

Kushiell:

Kushiell's work is his life, and if angels shun him and he feels like he never quite fits in with demons, at least he has the souls he redeems. That is, until someone steals his entire purpose in the afterlife. Some vague clues from a demon seer send him straight into Cass's coffee shop, where he learns some surprises about afterlife rules. With a little help from Cass, Kushiell is sure they can solve the mystery, especially since the coffee shop owner is the kindest, sweetest, sexiest human he's ever met. Now if only he could figure out how to respond to all the compliments Cass keeps sending his way, because surely someone as wonderful as Cassius couldn't be interested in a gray angel.

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Cassius sat outside his coffee shop, safely ensconced underneath the overhanging canopy, looking at the softly misting skies. The light rain, if it even qualified as rain since it was barely enough for an umbrella, gave everything a halo, and the air was still brisk—winter wasn't quite ready to give up yet—but it wasn't so bad that Cass felt the need to head back inside the shop just yet. He needed a bit of fresh air after the hectic morning.

The lunch bustle had died down, and they'd hit a blessed lull before the after work rush. The shop was almost empty, and he had left Steph to work the counter in case anyone came in, but for now she had her head buried in a textbook studying for one of her college courses, and all the patrons seated inside seemed happy and absorbed in work or their phones. Steph had tidied up the coffee station and they were stocked on baked goods, so he didn't mind when she got some work done in their rare down time.

Cass sat in the rather cozy shop chair (he prided himself on having comfy furniture), his phone on the table, upside down, one earbud in his ear, tapping his fingers impatiently on a manila folder sitting on the table in front of him. Across from him sat a full figured matriarch wearing a 50s style dress, complete with large, bright yellow roses. She had brown curly hair and a perfectly made-up face, and she usually looked kind and comforting, but at the moment she was staring at him disapprovingly.

“Must you really have that thing out all the time?” she asked, gesturing towards his phone. “You know how I feel about technology,” she sighed.

Cass sighed as well. “You know it's necessary, Aunt Ro.”

“I suppose so,” she muttered. “Who are you meeting today? I can’t imagine you’re sitting out here just for the enjoyment of the weather.”

Cast looked around, enjoying the sight of his little main street town, watching the occasional car drive by and seeing the bustle of people coming in and out of shops. “I love the rain. There’s something calming and soothing about it. Besides, it drives away the throngs of people.”

Aunt Ro chuckled. “Doesn’t quite drive all of us away, though, does it?”

Cass sighed again. “Yes, dear Aunt, not all of you. So why have I been blessed with this unexpected visit? What is it I can do for you?”

Aunt Ro sighed dramatically. She always could be a bit dramatic, but Cass loved her anyway. When their grandmother had died, Ro had become the unofficial matriarch. She had kept them all close and watched over everyone in the family. She’d fulfilled that role all her life, and it was a job she couldn’t seem to let go of.

“Well,” she replied, “it seems your cousin Ana might be having some trouble. The new man she’s dating. He has a look about him.”

Cast looked sharply at his aunt. “What kind of look are we talking about, Aunt?”

“The look of a man who goes to clubs after he drops her off and hooks up with random women. I highly doubt Ana is aware of such things. She isn’t the type to share,” Aunt Ro sniffed.

Cass sighed. “She might not take it well,” he offered.

Aunt Ro pursed her lips at him. “Nevertheless, she ought to know. What she does with the information is her business.”

“Ok. I’ll take care of it, Aunt,” he promised. He hated getting involved in anyone’s love life, but better him than Aunt Ro, that was for sure.

Cass noticed Michael heading down the street walking toward him. The cop—well, former cop now, he guessed—was solo for once, although he knew that Ari wouldn’t be far behind. As he made his way toward the table, Cass wrapped up his conversation.

“Well Aunt, it seems my morning meeting is here. I’ll have to let you go. I’ll talk to you later.” And with that he took his earbud out, placing it firmly on the phone.

Aunt Ro stared at him, giving him a bit of a stink eye. “I hate when you do that,” she replied.

Cass only smirked in response. He watched as Michael sat down in the chair that was currently occupied by Aunt Ro. She took on a hazy appearance for a moment before popping up and giving a disgruntled harumph. Well, he had given her warning. It’s not like she had to get sat on.

Ghosts did not like to occupy the same space as people, but it was her own fault. With a final harumph, she disappeared. He was sure she’d be back though. She loved spying on the family and making sure he fixed any issues that arose.

With that out of the way, he glanced at Michael. The former police officer, who was apparently now a private investigator of some type, had often come to him for help over the years. Cass had no idea if Michael understood how exactly Cass was able to help, but Cass certainly wasn’t going to explain his sight, and Michael had never asked. He’d just treated Cass normally and taken any tips he’d given, which Cass appreciated. Not everyone in the police department was so helpful—his quirkiness seemed off-putting to most normies.

Cass also wondered if Michael knew that he had angelic ancestry, or that he was dating and apparently tied to a demon. Cass's eyes had always been able to see the faint outline of transparent angel wings behind Michael, but after he'd started dating Arioach, the outline had gotten more distinct and visible. Michael's angelic blood was probably centuries removed, but something like that never fully went away.

Cass had always seen Arioach, Michael's current boyfriend, exactly as he was—horns, tail, and wings included. Sometimes he had to stop himself from wincing when he thought those wings would knock something over, but of course no one else could see them, and they weren't corporeal when Ari was in his human form. He often wondered what possessed him to hire the demon for the short stint that he'd worked in Cass's shop, but demons weren't usually much trouble, and Arioach had just been so damn friendly.

Something had happened between Mike and Ari, though, because they were inextricably linked together now. It was like thousands of almost invisible shining threads bound the two of them, and even now Cass could see those threads reaching out, down the street and into another shop, where Ari was no doubt causing some type of chaos.

The threads were beautiful, and Cass had to stop himself from staring.

"Hey, Cass. You called?" Michael questioned.

Cass slid the manila envelope over to Michael, grimacing a bit. "I know it isn't technically your job anymore, but Keats is working the case, and ever since the missing girl incident I really try to steer clear of him."

Michael snorted. "He's an idiot," he said, flipping open the folder. "You told him where the kid was. He's just bitter because he didn't want to listen and someone else ended up finding her and stealing his moment of glory. I'm so glad I don't have to

deal with him anymore.” Michael looked up at that. “Not that most of the force is like that, Cass. We’ve always appreciated any information you give us.”

Cass smiled. “I know. I just figured that you passing this along might go better than me doing it,” he said, gesturing again toward the file. It held information about an insurance policy that a certain dead person was sure the police were unaware of. Cass had promised to bring it to their notice.

Michael closed the folder, tapping it against the table. “Sure thing, Cass. I’ll always take any information you can give me. You’ve been so helpful over the years.”

Michael almost looked like he was going to ask a question at that point, probably one that Cass wasn’t sure how to answer, but Ari sauntered up behind Michael at that moment, and Cass almost had to squint at the bright glow that emanated from their ties when Ari leaned down to kiss Michael’s head and hug him.

That done, Ari looked over at Cass, smiling broadly. “Bruh! How’s coffee shop life, my dude?”

Always so damn friendly. Cass couldn’t help smiling. “Still sorting out the recipe book, Ari,” Cass joked.

Ari looked crestfallen at that. “My dude, I really did not mess with it that much. And that one recipe was actually a hit, so I can’t be totally faulted,” he insisted, smiling again.

Cass was about to reply, but Ari was back to leaning down against Michael, saying something softly in his ear before giving him a little nibble on the neck. Michael wiggled a bit, and those threads between them flared brightly again.

“Ok, ok, you two, off with you. I gave Michael what I needed to, and you guys

obviously have plans,” Cass laughed.

Ari boomed out laughter while Michael turned a shade of red, but they didn’t waste much time excusing themselves, calling out thank yous and goodbyes as they went.

Cass just smiled to himself. He did like those two, and he was sure he hadn’t seen the last of them. They were a totally unlikely pair, but somehow it worked for them.

His musings were interrupted as he noticed an angel in a white suit appear across the street. He had glorious white wings, pale hair, and his suit was blinding in its stark whiteness. He also looked utterly serious and not at all fun, and he had just noticed Cassius and was headed across the street.

Fantastic. Apparently his afternoon wasn’t done yet. Cass picked up his phone and put his earbud in. He didn’t think this one was fully corporeal yet—he had that slightly too bright quality that probably meant most mortals couldn’t see him—and Cass didn’t like being caught talking to the seemingly empty air.

The angel sauntered across the street, stopping at the table in front of Cass and staring at him.

“It isn’t polite to stare,” Cass announced, causing the angel to part his lips in surprise. The angel looked down at himself comically, probably wondering why Cass could see him.

“Anything I can help you with?” Cass asked.

The angel brightened up a bit, and it was like the rest of the world faded out at that, and the angel suddenly had on a heavenly looking, bright white robe. Cass had the impression that most people probably couldn’t see either of them at this moment.

Well, that was new.

It came to Cass suddenly that this was probably an officially sanctioned angelic message. He'd heard of such things from his grandmother when she'd been teaching him about the sight, but he never expected to get one.

"Gabriel?" he asked. "Messenger of god?"

The angel parted his lips again in surprise, deflating a bit, and the shine died down just the slightest bit. Cass almost laughed at the disgruntled face the angel made.

"You know, giving official messages never used to be this difficult," the angel grouched. "You are supposed to be in a state of shock, awe, and wonder. Where is the incredulity? Where is the astonishment and reverence for this miraculous moment?"

"Eh, I've watched too much tv for shock and awe at an angel in a white robe," Cass joked.

The angel, who Cass still thought might be Gabriel, sniffed disdainfully. "I told the angelic department that deals with mortal entertainment that they were letting things get out of hand. Mortals have no appreciation for miracles anymore. Why bother when you can watch one on a tiny screen whenever you want? It's appalling," he grumped.

Cass just laughed. "We do love our entertainment. Anyway, enough of it comes from true events, so I guess you guys only have yourselves to blame," Cass added.

"Yes, well, it does rather make my job more difficult. Why, just last week I delivered a message, and the woman actually asked if maybe I could do it again while hovering above her. And then she had the gall to take out her cell phone, like she was going to film me!" Gabriel muttered in disgust. "I am not going to end up on social media, for

heaven's sake."

"You would be quite the star, though," Cass joked. "They'd love you. You could be tik tok famous."

Gabriel sniffed again. "Yes, well, that isn't my job. Which is, by the way, why I'm here. I have a job to do."

Cass motioned his arm forward. "By all means, go ahead. Sorry to interrupt."

Gabriel straightened his robe, brightened up again, and cleared his throat. "Cassius Priam," he intoned. "Behold, I bring you tidings of a great task that must be performed. Do not be afraid, Cassius, for the Almighty has found favor with you, and you shall receive all the blessings of that favor in your task. You shall know the one you must help by his appearance, and together you will bring balance back to the afterlife."

The angel cleared his throat, and then he lifted an eyebrow, obviously waiting for a reaction.

Cass was not impressed. "That's it? That isn't very much to go on, you know. Never mind that if a stray angel or demon comes looking for help, of course I'll help."

Gabriel deflated a bit. "Mortals. You guys are never happy. No respect for the old ways. Look, a gray angel is going to end up crossing paths with you, and you'll need to help him. I don't have any more information than that, and I don't even know if he knows you'll be assisting him. I am, unfortunately, just the messenger," he sighed.

"Ok. Thanks, Gabe," Cass said, smiling. He could respect that the guy was just doing his job.

“It’s Gabriel,” the angel harrumphed, and with that, he was gone, and Cass was finally, blessedly alone.

A meddling ghost aunt, an ex-police officer of angelic ancestry paired up with a demon, and now a heavenly message about helping out another angel who was apparently gray—Cass thought of that saying about living in interesting times. It really was more of a curse than a blessing.

As he mused on that, he noticed that more people were walking down the sidewalks, and he figured they were about to get hit with the start of the afterwork rush. Ah well, gray angels and afterlife mysteries would need to wait until everyone got their afternoon lattes. With that, Cass headed back into the warmth of the coffee shop.

Mortals might not be impressed with heavenly messages, but they were quite enamored of their peppermint mochaccinos.

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Kushiel felt the burning through his skin, down into his very bones, like they were made of molten metal. The further he went into hell, the deeper the burning. He remembered, vaguely, the first time he had ventured below at the behest of the Almighty. He had thought the skin would be flayed from his body and had been shocked to see that he looked completely fine. Even then, the price had seemed small for his task.

He tried not to think about how much less it hurt now. The burning was a dull ache, but a familiar one. He didn't know if part of it was that he had gotten used to it, but he did know he was irrevocably changed by his job.

Sometimes it saddened him. He belonged nowhere now. His work was singular, and it was a lonely existence.

So lonely.

Once he had known the brotherhood of angels. But visit after visit to the underworld had taken its toll, and he wasn't sure where the pain was greater, in hell or in heaven.

The burning saturated his core in hell, but in heaven... the coldness was almost unbearable. It sunk through him and made his gait stiff, his teeth grit to avoid shivering. It felt like everything in him was made of ice and he would crack at any moment and shatter into a thousand pieces. Perhaps it would not hurt so much if other angels would share their warmth, would embrace him and offer comfort, but there was no comfort from his angel brethren.

He didn't even remember when it had started. Small, of course—a chill that he hadn't

even thought about, a strange look in passing from another angel, as he glowed a little less brightly than they did. Eventually, his glow was gone, and no angel brethren touched him or spoke to him. He became what he was now.

The gray angel.

The outcast.

The fallen one.

The only comfort was in his demon brethren, and he did consider them brothers, more so than anyone upstairs. They accepted him for what he was, at least. He put on a cheery face, like nothing bothered him, like he felt no pain, and he reveled in the nonchalance and casualness with which they all treated him. When their hands touched his overheated and pained skin in the underworld, he tried not to flinch, because any touch was a blessing, even if it was painful.

Sometimes, Kushiel thought they were the only thing keeping him tethered to existence. His loyalty had probably switched, as had been proven when he had gone to the demon Arioeh and Michael to warn them about an angel, but he knew that he was doing what was right.

Doing right was all he ever strove for, even if the cost often seemed too high.

Kushiel scoffed at himself. His musings were melancholy today. Despite the cost, he had faith still. He was not the pure being he had once been, but the price he paid was worth saving souls.

With that thought he shook his mood off and looked ahead at the mountain of Erebus. It was a black stone mountain that seemed to absorb all light, with jagged outcroppings and caves spread throughout it. The sky above it was bathed in red, like

a beautiful sunset that had gone wrong. There were dark clouds always floating on the horizon, like at any moment a torrent of needle-like, acid rain might come pouring down. Sometimes it did, and sometimes Kushiell was inside a cave doing his work. If it prolonged his stay rehabilitating a wayward soul, perhaps that was not a bad thing.

The trek was long and hard to reach the top, and he knew he could use his wings, but a price had to be paid, and his toils would help to pay it. Yes, the souls needed to pay much of the price, but Kushiell helped where he could. He took pride in helping souls in Limbo find peace and move on, whether their choice was heaven or not, but this work—this was the work that truly made the universe better.

He tried to hold within himself the hope he had for today. He had been working with one particular soul for decades, and each time, he felt that spark of light within it get a little brighter. The soul did not even remember its name or anything about its existence, and often that was for the best. He had hope that whatever it had done, it was ready, finally, for redemption. Perhaps today was the day he would see another soul transition from hell.

Not all souls lost to hell had to stay lost, and Kushiell was the only one who could help them find their light once again. When he succeeded, it made all his pain, all his suffering, all his loneliness, worthy beyond measure. Perhaps it was prideful to think that he was the only one who could do such work, but Kushiell had to have some comfort.

He reached the top eventually, his fingers bloody, his nails broken, but it was no matter—he would heal. He traversed the thin ledge to the cave where his charge was kept, noticing for the first time how quiet the mountain was. Often he would hear the sounds of the damned inside their caves, but a silence that was eerie pervaded the mountain. As he climbed into the small cave barely large enough for his wings, he called out the traditional greeting.

“Kushiel, the Rigid One of God, Angel of Punishment, has come to seek a soul who would find redemption.”

He waited, but only silence greeted him. No murmuring answered from the darkness.

He crawled deeper into the cave, and he realized what he should have from the start.

The cave was empty.

It should not be possible. Once souls were relegated to the mountain of Erebus, demons did not bother with them. These were souls who had lost themselves to guilt and shame, often not even knowing why anymore, and leaving them to their eternal pain was the most effective punishment. They were not taken from Erebus unless it was Kushiel who took them, and only then because their souls had lightened enough to move on from the darkness. It did not happen often, but it did happen.

Kushiel backed out of the cave and went on to the next on the outcropping. And then the next. And the next. And the next.

It took hours, perhaps even days, because Kushiel lost all sense of time as he checked cave after cave, eventually covering the entire mountain. If tears streamed from his eyes, and if his hands were bloody, his knees scraped raw, and his wings torn from jagged rocks, he hardly noticed. Because by the time he'd made his way to the bottom, he had accepted the indisputable truth, even though it was impossible.

Erebus was empty.

By the time Kushiel made it back to Limbo, he hardly noticed the lack of burning in his very bones. He felt... empty. He was a void. The lack of physical pain just drew him further away from reality.

His purpose had been taken away. He waited for anger, or sadness, but there was... nothing. Just that emptiness. A yawning chasm inside him.

He sat down, barely conscious of where he was. He knew not how much time passed before he realized a presence had sat beside him. He did not look over.

What was the point?

All that work... All those decades and centuries with those souls. He thought of each one, remembering them. He knew intimately every single one that had been housed in Erebus. He knew the shape and feel of them, the texture of their emotions, the weight of their guilt, and most importantly, the bright pinprick of light that existed hidden under the darkness in each one. He had, in his way, loved each and every one of them. He had shared their pain and suffering, and he had seen beyond it to the possibilities of a future outside of the underworld.

All for naught.

“Is there nothing we can do for him?” a voice whispered.

Kushiel knew that voice, but that didn’t seem important at the moment.

Nothing seemed important at the moment.

“We can just be here for him, little dude. That’s what we can do. We’ll sit here until he’s ready,” another voice replied, and then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

The hand squeezed, and the action was enough to pull Kushiel’s attention to his side.

It was the demon Arioeh who had spoken, and in his lap was his mate, Michael. Kushiel had the thought that there was something wrong with Michael being in

Limbo, but the thought floated away. They stared at him, and Kushiel had to look away at the pity in their eyes.

“Bruh, are you with us now?” Arioach asked gently.

“Where else would I be?” Kushiel answered.

“You were mourning, I think,” Michael answered calmly.

It was like Michael saying it made it true, because Kushiel doubled over in pain, and for the first time he realized that his cheeks were wet with tears. How long had he been crying?

“They’re all gone,” Kushiel said simply. “What is my purpose now?” he asked, looking at Arioach.

Arioach’s eyes were kind, and that hand squeezed his shoulder again.

“They aren’t gone, bruh. They have been taken from you, but you can find them. I saw it. You’ll go and find them. Someone will help you. I can’t see who, but they’re in the town Michael is from. You’ll get the souls back. You’ll set things to right. That’s your purpose now,” Arioach said, squeezing Kushiel’s shoulder again.

Michael’s town. Yes, because Michael was mortal. He looked sharply at the mortal soul in Limbo, panic overtaking him for a moment. Would Michael be stuck here now?

“It’s okay. I’m allowed to be here. We’re like afterlife Internal Affairs now,” Michael said, smiling slightly. “I can see you panicking a bit over my presence,” Michael clarified when Kushiel raised an eyebrow.

“Yup. Pretty cool job, huh dude?” Arioach said, smiling gleefully. He got serious then. “Anyways, some asshole is fucking with things and causing chaos, which oughtta be my department. The fucker. We’re trying to suss out who. But my only vision so far has said only you can find the missing souls, or recognize them, or something, and that there’s someone who can help you. That’s all I know.”

“It is enough,” Kushiel replied.

It was hope again. He pushed his chair back from the bar, finally taking in his surroundings. Michael and Arioach were staring at him, both smiling slightly, which was disconcerting with the weight of the events that were unfolding. But he didn’t have time to worry about their silly grins. With that thought he closed his wings around himself, preparing to go topside. He heard a muttered “Showoff,” before he teleported out of Limbo.

It seemed he still had a job to do, and he would do it. It was all that was left for him.

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Cass sighed dramatically.

“Don’t you make that noise at me, young man,” Aunt Ro demanded. “The spirits are restless, and you best pay heed.”

Cass finished at the espresso machine and walked right through Aunt Ro to get back to the counter. The unpleasant chill it gave him was worth it just to see her disgruntled face. She hated when her space was invaded.

She really knew better than to harass him while he was working though. Dire warnings and afterlife politics could wait until after the morning rush was over.

“It’s a matter of the very existence of the universe,” Aunt Ro complained, placing her hands on her hips in a way that accentuated the large begonias scattered over her dress.

He rolled his eyes and mumbled, “It always is.”

Steph gave him the side-eye, but she was used to him talking to himself and mostly ignored his quirks. It was why she still worked here and he paid her so well.

It wasn’t that he didn’t take his job outside the coffee shop seriously, because he did. It was just that there was always something. Since the archangel Gabriel had given him the prophecy, he had kept an eye out, but nothing out of the norm had happened.

Well, perhaps that was a bit of an understatement. Nothing out of the norm for his life had happened. He had talked to his cousin, which had gone about as well as you

could expect when you had to tell someone their significant other was cheating. He had also dealt with a demonic possession. Sort of. And he'd helped Michael and Ariocho a time or two again. And he'd dealt with a really grumpy murdered ghost. Then there was the hellhound incident, but the creature hadn't killed anyone or set anything on fire when he came into the shop, so who was he to complain?

See, a perfectly normal week in Paradise Falls.

Aunt Ro slapped her hand on the counter in front of him, distracting him for a moment from the present customer. He rolled his eyes when he saw her bracelet with rhododendrons on it. His aunt really needed to stop pretending they were living in the Victorian era. She really didn't need to communicate with hidden flower meanings when she was perfectly capable of harassing him verbally whenever she felt like it.

"Will that be all?" he asked the customer after ringing in their coffee. When they nodded, he replied, "Great! Coming right up! And no worries—I'll proceed with caution, because, you know, hot coffee can be dangerous."

Aunt Ro hmphed at the words he stressed, but hopefully she understood that he got her message just fine. The customer looked at him like he was slightly insane, but he was used to that look.

Aunt Ro disappeared with another harumph, and when Steph found a begonia in the dessert case where one hadn't been two minutes ago, she only blinked and stared for a moment before she handed it off to him and started on the next order.

Cass was never more thankful for her than in that moment.

By midafternoon, Cass was leaning against the counter and enjoying his own coffee and a moment of peace. He sipped at it, his phone and earbud at the ready just in case some wayward ghost needed his attention.

It had been a weirdly quiet few days though. He wondered if something really was upsetting the spirit world, and he sighed at the thought.

God, he was tired. Running a business full time, helping wayward spirits, and then also assisting the living when called on to do so—it was exhausting. He really needed to hire another Steph. She worked full time and knew all his quirks, and he had quickly promoted her to manager, but otherwise it was a revolving door of college students and teenagers who picked up hours here and there. He needed someone else full time. He had the distinct feeling that things were about to go sideways.

He sighed again, looking down and sipping at his coffee. At least the shop was blessedly empty for now, although he knew that would change after work hours were done.

When he looked up, his eyes were caught by the angel walking along the sidewalk outside the shop.

He was stunning. His wings flared out behind him, dark as midnight, glossy, and soft looking. He was wearing white pants with some kind of belt twisted around his waist, and his bare torso was drool-worthy. His eyes were a piercing blue that Cass could see even from here, and his hair fell in a dark, straight canopy over his shoulders.

And his skin was gray.

Cass shifted behind the counter, the arousal that burst through him not entirely welcome. Being turned on by the angel you were supposed to help wasn't really... helpful.

He made the conscious effort to see what everyone else saw. Seeing the world without his sight wasn't comfortable to do, and it inevitably gave him a migraine if he did it for too long. It was like squinting your eyes and looking through a really dirty

window at the same time. Everything seemed duller and fuzzy, and it took effort.

For everyone else, the angel had perfectly normal skin, if it was a bit pale, and he wore jeans and a white sweater. His hair and eyes stayed the same. The wings were, of course, gone.

Cass liked to know what the angels and demons who he talked to expected him to see. He didn't often share that he could see their true forms (including the clothing they wore while in the afterlife); it tended to freak them out. For being immortal beings, they were sometimes a bit weird about things.

When Cass stopped blocking his sight, the gray angel came back into focus, only for one second he wavered a bit, like a mirage in the desert, and Cass swore he was wearing a knit white scarf, but then he blinked and the vision was gone.

Huh. Weird. A premonition of a white scarf didn't give Cass much to go on.

The angel opened the door and came in, and Cass straightened up.

"What can I help you with, beautiful?" he asked.

The angel did a bit of a double take at the nickname, but Cass didn't take it back. He was beautiful. As he drew closer, Cass saw the glow within him. His skin was gray, but it was like all the glow that angels usually had on the outside had retreated to his inner being. His soul shone so brightly that Cass had a hard time not seeing it.

He tried not to see people's souls, and since that took extra effort (squinting in a different way, if Cass had to explain it), it wasn't hard to not see them. Looking felt invasive, like he was spying on someone in their underwear when they didn't know they'd left their curtains open.

But this angel's soul was a beacon underneath his gray skin, and little tendrils of golden light shimmered around it, like threads were reaching out and searching for something.

Cass cleared his throat, blinked, and made the effort to lock down his sight. He wasn't going to go ogling some angel's soul, no matter how beautiful it was.

"I'll take a black coffee," the angel replied.

"Name?" Cass asked.

"Kushiel," the gray angel replied. Then he turned a bit, like he didn't expect to chat.

"I'm Cassius. Most people call me Cass," Cass responded.

Kushiel looked at him and nodded, then turned his attention to the pastry case.

Okey-dokey then. Coffee first.

Cass poured a black coffee and brought it over, placing it on the counter. "What else can I help you with?" Cass asked.

"That'll be all," Kushiel replied.

Huh. "Are you sure?" Cass asked. This was the angel he was supposed to help, wasn't it?

"Yes, thank you," he replied, pulling a wallet out of thin air and removing a card to swipe. Cass knew that everyone else would have seen him get it from his pocket, but Cass wasn't everyone else.

He leaned on the counter. "Coffee is on the house. I think I can be of assistance with some other matters, however, angel," Cass responded. He knew he was grinning a little stupidly at the angel, but he was so darn sexy and shone so brightly that Cass couldn't help it.

Kushiel looked momentarily surprised, then an easy smile fell over his face. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Of course. I strive to be helpful, and I think you might need my kind of help," Cass replied, leaning forward a little more. Something smelled divine, and Cass thought maybe it was Kushiel.

The angel laughed, however, and took his cup off the counter. "Thanks for the offer, but you're not what I'm looking for," he replied, turning to walk out the door.

"I'm exactly who you're looking for!" Cass called out as the angel walked out the door, but he just turned, smiled, and let the door close behind him.

"He'll be back," Cass muttered, a little disgruntled at that turn of events. Surely there wasn't more than one gray angel out there?

"That has to be the worst pick up you've ever attempted," Steph said, carrying a tray of donuts in from the back.

"What?" Cass asked, surprised. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, I was kind of waiting for some awful pickup line about him falling from heaven when you called him angel," she said, arranging the donuts in the case while Cass gaped at her. "Then when you were all like 'you might need my kind of help' I almost dropped my tray," Steph said, imitating his voice on the quote. "He was definitely hot, but you're usually much more smooth than that. It was almost painful

watching you crash and burn.”

“I wasn’t trying—” Cass started, but then he cut off.

He replayed the whole conversation in his head. Add his goofy grin. Add his stupid sniffing of the guy.

Fuck.

He groaned and put his face in his hands.

Steph patted his back. “It’s ok, champ, we all strike out. I bet he’ll be back.”

At that moment their afternoon help came in—a high school kid who was picking up hours whenever possible to save up for a car.

“You’re tired. Go home. Relax. Derek and I can handle the evening rush, and I’ll close up. When you crash and burn that hard, a little time off is necessary,” she smirked.

“Brat,” he said affectionately, but he took off his apron and stuffed it under the cash register, despite the dirty look Steph gave him. He knew she’d hang it up for him, and he felt slightly bad about that, but if he went into the back, he’d find a million things he ought to do instead of going home. And he was tired.

He made his way out the front door and started walking. His house was one that had been handed down through his family, and it was less than a mile from his shop. It was a nice walk where he could clear his head a bit. He didn’t get so lost in his thoughts that he didn’t keep a lookout for a certain gray angel though. Because yes, he had definitely let that whole thing go sideways. Unless Kushiel didn’t even know he was looking for someone to help him? It was hard to tell.

Prophecies were such a pain in the ass sometimes. And this was coming from someone who often received them.

Well, no use worrying about it. Kushiell would be back. He was sure of it. He didn't have that itch or sense of wrong he sometimes got when he'd really fucked something up. He knew that feeling from when he was young and still learning, and he hadn't gotten that when Kushiell had left. If he had, he would have run after the angel.

He was at his house before he knew it, and he was distractedly thinking of Kushiell as he put the key in the lock. When he swung open the door though...

It was like he had conjured up that feeling of utter wrongness by thinking about it. It wasn't quite an itch, like he had done something wrong. Whatever this was, it wasn't his fault.

It was like he was doused in a bucket full of doom; he felt like curling up on the floor and crying.

Something was very wrong, and it was inside his house.

He stood on his front stoop for an inordinate amount of time. He knew he'd have to go in eventually, but... it just felt so awful. He wanted to weep, and he had no idea why, but the sadness was real and overwhelming. His body felt like it was crawling with ants—his skin was itchy and too tight. He realized that his hands were fisted so tightly that his fingernails were digging into his skin. He had the urge to just walk away. Leave and not come back.

He stayed there, though, resisting the urge.

He was Cassius Priam, seer, medium, and oracle. He had the gift of sight and astral walking. He had helped thousands of souls in his life, and a feeling, no matter how

debilitating, would not stop him from his work.

He took a deep breath and stepped into his house, letting the door close behind him.

His house was old and didn't have an open floor plan like so many newer houses, and there was a small entrance hall that led into the rest of the downstairs, which included a living room, a half bath, a formal dining room, a large eat-in-kitchen, and a back porch. Stairs were to his right, which led to the bedrooms.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting in the house, but he was not prepared for the sudden appearance of Aunt Ro directly in his path, and he almost shrieked in surprise.

She looked washed out and gray, which was entirely unlike her. She usually appeared in vibrant technicolor—sometimes even more vibrant than realistically possible. She was muted now, though, and that frightened Cass. Still, he recognized the rue on her ghostly dress.

“For sorrow or repentance, Aunt Ro?” he whispered in question. He wasn't even sure why he whispered, except it felt like talking too loudly would disturb... something.

She began wringing her hands, looking over her shoulder toward the rest of the house. When she faced him, he saw tears sliding down her cheeks. “Oh Cass, I couldn't leave it here alone to come and get you. I'm not even sure what you can do to help.”

“What is it, Aunt Ro?” he asked, concern washing away the last of his hesitance.

“I didn't know where else to bring it,” she replied. She moved out of the way then, gesturing him onward into the house.

He walked down the hall and into the living room, and when he saw the soul that was

inside, he understood why Aunt Ro had said 'it.'

He couldn't tell if it was male or female. In fact, he wouldn't have even known it was human, except he had the distinct knowledge that it was. He occasionally dealt with other beings, even though it was difficult to communicate with them, but this soul emanated humanity.

It also emanated sorrow. And pain. And grief. And so much regret.

It was almost without form. Cass felt like he was staring into a dark corner to look upon it. He couldn't quite make any details out, and his eyes kept wanting to skitter away. When he turned off his sight, it was gone, but he still felt it there. When he tried to look more closely, he only saw a roiling mass of darkness, although occasionally there was the barest glimpse of shining light within it.

It existed on the astral plane, which meant it was technically a ghost. Only Cass had never seen anything like it in all his time on Earth, and he had no idea what he was supposed to do with it.

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Kushiel sat on a park bench, the rain falling softly around him in a light mist. He knew he was soaked, but what did it really matter?

He was cold, yes, but it was even colder when he ventured into heaven.

It had been a week since he'd come looking for his lost souls. A week, and no progress. A week, and not a glimpse of a soul. No sign of help, either.

He thought back to the coffee shop he'd ventured into. Had that only been yesterday? The guy who had flirted with him had been adorable, and if Kushiel hadn't been on a mission, perhaps he would have spent a bit of time flirting back. There was something about the man that called to Kushiel; his light brown tousled hair, the smattering of freckles on his fair skin, his light-colored hazel eyes, and his shorter stature made him extremely appealing, although Kushiel didn't think he had a type. Nevertheless, he had felt attraction for sure.

Unfortunately, his thoughts had strayed back to the cute barista more than once, and guilt ate away at Kushiel for that. He had a job to do, and here he was distracted by... carnal thoughts.

Of course sitting on a park bench in the rain wasn't accomplishing anything either. Heavens, he was really fucking this all up.

He heard voices and laughter coming down the path in the park, but he didn't move. He wasn't visible to humans at the moment, so he wasn't worried.

When Michael and Gabriel, two humans who were mated to demons, walked into

view, however, Kushiell became corporeal again.

“Holy fuck!” Gabe called out, grabbing onto his chest and his brother’s arm at the same time. “You scared the shit out of me just appearing like that!”

“Kushiell!” Michael cried out, and he sounded a bit more glad to see Kushiell than Gabe was.

Kushiell didn’t blame Gabe for not liking him; he had been the bearer of some upsetting news when he’d visited the human and his demon, Asmodeus. He didn’t think he would be happy to see him, either, if he were Gabriel.

“I am sorry for intruding upon your walk. I shall take my leave, if you like,” Kushiell volunteered. “I only thought to ask Michael if perhaps there was any other news for me.”

Gabe rolled his eyes, however, and plopped onto the park bench next to Kushiell. “Don’t try my patience, Kushiell. Why are you sitting on a park bench in the rain? You’re getting soaked, for heaven’s sake. You have about as much common sense as a teenager.”

“You are out walking in the rain and have also sat on the wet bench,” Kushiell pointed out.

Gabe snorted. “Nope, no changing the subject. I know that look, and it’s nothing but trouble.”

Kushiell merely sighed and looked at Michael, who just shrugged. The sigh had Gabe leaning in closer and really staring at him, though.

“You’re in trouble,” Gabe said, leaning back. “What’s wrong?” he asked, and he

went to put his hand on Kushiel's arm. Kushiel must have flinched, because Gabe held still for a moment, then he slowly brought his hand back to his lap.

It wasn't that Kushiel didn't like to be touched; it was just that he wasn't used to anyone wanting to touch him any time recently. At least not people who knew him and saw him as he was.

"How can we help?" Gabe asked softly.

Michael sat down on the other side of Gabe then and started explaining. "Some souls were stolen from the underworld, and Kushiel is the only one who can get them back. Ari had a vision that he needed to be here. That was about a week ago, maybe? Have you managed to retrieve them?"

"No," Kushiel answered, the weight of failure heavy upon him.

"Ah, I see," Michael responded.

"Well, where do we start looking?" Gabe asked, and Kushiel was surprised enough to look up.

"Why would you help me? You do not even like me," Kushiel responded. He felt stupid as soon as he said it. It didn't matter if Gabe liked him, after all.

"Of course I like you, you idiot. You helped Az and I out, and you helped out Michael and Ari too. Big time, from what Michael has said. So of course we'll help you out too," Gabe responded. "Why on earth wouldn't we help?"

Michael hummed softly, though. "You are supposed to get help, but I don't think it's from us," Michael muttered. When he looked up and saw Gabe scowling at him, he added, "Of course we'll help however we can. I just mean there's someone specific

who is supposed to help, and I don't think anyone in our family is that specific person. Unless..." he trailed off, looking at Gabe.

"Nah, I don't think it's Grams," Gabe answered. "She gave him that white scarf she knit, but that already happened—it isn't from the future. I just saw her yesterday and she mentioned not a word about angels of lost souls or anything. You know she can't keep her mouth shut about that kind of stuff."

"There's quite a few demons around; this place seems to be a beacon for them. I actually saw a possession the other day." Michael snorted, apparently remembering the incident. "That was pretty trippy. The possessed guy was apparently happy about the whole thing."

"Listen, if a demon could possess me and teach my 6th period class, I wouldn't complain," Gabe mumbled. "Why admin thought putting that crew of kids together was a good idea... Anyway, I'm not sure demonic help is really what Kushiell needs."

With that thought, they all sat for a moment, thinking. It was still lightly misting, and Kushiell was aware of the humans getting wet, but they had on rain jackets and didn't seem to mind. He knew he should usher them on their way, but it was rather nice to have company for a moment, even if they were just sitting there in silence.

"I do know a guy..." Michael started off.

"What are you, a mobster?" Gabe snorted, playfully pushing his brother.

"Well, the guy is an informant of sorts. He used to help the police department out. He seems to know a lot of stuff that goes on in town. If anything weird is going on, he'd probably be clued in on it," Michael responded.

"Well then, there's a plan. We can go talk to this guy and let Kushiell know what he

says. Who is it, anyway?" Gabe asked.

"His name is Cassius. He owns—" Michael began, but Kushiel cut him off.

"A coffee shop?" Kushiel finished.

"Yes!" Michael replied. "Have you met him?"

"Yes, I stopped in. He was flirting with me, I think," Kushiel answered, and then he thought back to the conversation with the barista again.

The barista who had called him angel.

The barista who had asked him if he needed help.

The barista who had said that he was who Kushiel was looking for.

Kushiel put his head into his hands. "I'm an idiot," he muttered.

Gabe snorted, but Michael looked sympathetic. "Cass says some weird stuff sometimes, and he's easy to misinterpret. I wouldn't worry about it. We can come along and smooth things over," Michael reassured him.

"That won't be necessary," Kushiel answered. "He was offering to help me, and I clearly misunderstood. I will go back and see him. You two have helped enough, and I have a feeling your soulmates will be looking for you before too much longer. I don't think I need Ari and Az's assistance in speaking to this coffee shop owner."

Gabe snorted, and Michael even smirked at that comment.

"Yes, our two demons would probably only make things ten times more complicated

than they need to be. Chaos and lust, after all,” Gabe laughed.

With that Gabe and Michael got up in unison, giving him instructions to call if they needed him and telling him “not to be a stranger,” which he had always thought was an odd human phrase. How could he be a stranger if they knew who he was?

As they walked off, laughing and talking together, Kushiel had a moment of envy. He called the demons his brothers, but really, he was alone. He was not fully angelic anymore, but nor was he in any way a demon.

He was an only child of the universe.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to have had someone to do the work with him, but he knew those thoughts were silly. You could not change the workings of creation.

Well, perhaps a few lucky demons could, since Az, Ari, and even Minos had found soulmates in humans. Kushiel pushed down envy again; it was a useless emotion, and a soulmate was not for one such as him. It didn’t seem to be for any angels, and surely if one was chosen to find such an unparalleled gift, it would be an angel of the utmost worth.

It would not be him.

With that, he stood and made his way along the path, back toward the coffee shop. Yes, he could’ve used his wings to get there, but there was something nice about taking a walk and hoping that there would be answers at the end of it. He wanted to keep the hopeful feeling for as long as he could.

Perhaps he was also feeling slightly silly about meeting with Cass again, too. He had so clearly misinterpreted the human’s comments. He knew his human form wasn’t

unattractive, but the man had clearly been trying to help him, and he had mistaken it for flirtation. It was rather embarrassing.

Nevertheless, a little embarrassment was a small price to pay if this Cass could be of some assistance to him.

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It was raining again, which suited Cass's mood just fine.

He stood at the counter in the shop, which was blessedly empty. Steph and a few part-timers had opened up this morning, and he'd come in late and sent them all home an hour ago, assuring them he'd be fine until the after-work crew came on. He was glad for a little peace and quiet, and the smell of coffee and baked pastries was comforting, even if sometimes he felt like he was sweating baked goods from his pores after working in the shop all day.

He needed the comfort right now, and the quiet.

He'd left the... Soul? Ghost? Astral being? Well, whatever it was, he had left it with Aunt Ro. He couldn't think at home, with all that misery and doom everywhere. You got used to it after awhile, but it was still disconcerting, and it made Cass listless and weary.

He knew he needed to think, so he'd come to the shop. His mood had improved as soon as he'd left the house, but a few hours later and he was no closer to understanding any of it, which was troubling. Cass was not used to being unsure or confused. He usually saw things quite clearly, but this was beyond his knowledge. Aunt Ro had no ideas either, saying she had never seen such a thing before.

Afterlifers had five options. Well, most did, anyway. The underworld, or hell, wasn't usually an option—it was more of a mandate. Still, he knew there were some tricks to getting around it for those who were borderline hell-bound. Obviously they weren't going upstairs, or to heaven, which was an option for many souls.

There was Limbo, where quite a few souls took up residence while they made their final decision on afterlife placement. Limbo wasn't meant to be a permanent residence, but he knew some souls treated it that way.

Then there were the two other paths for afterlifers—reincarnation and ghosthood. This was where, sometimes, a borderline hell-bound soul could skirt the system and choose one of those options. Reincarnation was of course a more permanent decision, and Cass hoped those souls changed their ways enough to not get sent to the underworld.

Ghosthood, however, like Limbo, was meant to be temporary. It was a way for souls to work through trauma or unfinished business, or even just to keep an eye on loved ones until they too passed on. Cass had dealt with a hell-bound ghost once in his lifetime, and it was one time too many. It had been extremely unpleasant, and he'd eventually sent the soul on against its will. If it had been borderline hell-bound before ghosthood, it definitely deserved it after a few years as a ghost. The man had been petty, vengeful, and cruel, and he'd used his ghosthood to continue those traits.

The point was, however, that afterlifers chose to be ghosts, and they were capable of making that decision. The soul in his house was barely even a complete being, and he had no idea how that could happen. It was also dark, which is why he kept thinking of the underworld, even if he kept seeing glimpses of light amongst the darkness. But there was no way for a soul to choose ghosthood from hell. It simply wasn't possible. Those in the underworld stayed in the underworld.

So what could fragment and injure a ghost so thoroughly? Cass had no idea. It defied everything he knew about the universe, and Cass knew quite a bit thanks to his abilities and the teachings of those who came before him.

His rambling thoughts were interrupted by the bell on the door, and he looked up to see the gray angel—Kushiel, the angel had said—walk into the shop.

Well, finally.

Cass stood up and waited. He didn't want to muck this up a second time.

"Uh, hello. Cass?" Kushiell asked nervously.

"Yup," Cass replied, smiling. His smile slipped, though, when he thought about things. Could this angel have something to do with the damaged soul? Could he be responsible for its state of incompleteness?

If so, Cass didn't think he could help the angel, no matter what the messenger of god had told him. Anything that could hurt a being like that... Cass couldn't abide cruelty.

But then he looked again, and gray or not, the angel shined inside, bright as ever, those gold tendrils swirling inside him around a core of such light that Cass had to look away for a moment.

Kushiell faltered in his walk to the counter, and Cass realized he had been scowling. Shit. The two of them just seemed destined for awkward meetings, because now the angel seemed frozen in indecision.

"Can I help you with something?" Cass asked, softening his face.

"Umm... perhaps?" Kushiell replied unsurely.

He looked kind of like a kicked puppy, and Cass sighed. This was partly his fault, he knew it, and he felt like an ass. Not that his little human scowl should be enough to make any angel or demon nervous, especially if they were unaware of his gifts, but he had clearly made Kushiell feel very unsure of himself.

Cass knew he was super powerful, but he also knew he looked young and “cute” with his shorter stature, his messy hair, and his freckles. He liked being underestimated. It made it easier for people to talk to him, and in his line of business (both at the coffee shop and in his other role), he needed to be approachable.

He came out from behind the counter and noticed that Kushiell tucked his wings in closely, almost defensively, as Cass walked by him to the door. He turned the lock and flipped the sign to closed, then turned around, unsure how to proceed with a skittish angel.

He motioned to a table off to the side, and Kushiell went and sat, and Cass followed, being sure to give him space since he was obviously somewhat leery of Cass.

They sat for a moment before Kushiell said, “You called me angel.”

Cass couldn’t help smiling. “I did. I didn’t realize until my shop manager came out how it all sounded a bit like a pick up line. But that isn’t what I meant. I do know what you are.”

Kushiell looked up at him then, almost like he expected Cass to say something. He waited another moment, then he asked, “You are not surprised by my appearance?”

Ah, he must have gone full angel on Cass. Oops. Cass didn’t like to let afterlifers know he saw them in their true forms, so he just shrugged in response, replying, “I’ve seen lots of angels and demons, so no, you don’t surprise me.”

Kushiell looked surprised again, and a little bit of the kicked puppy look left his face. Cass did remember then that he was a gray angel, which he had never seen before. Perhaps Kushiell was used to a more extreme reaction for that. Angels were a bit of a stuffy bunch, and he couldn’t imagine being the odd man out with that crew.

“You are, I think, someone who is supposed to help me. Or perhaps you will know someone who can help me,” Kushiel said unsurely.

Cass looked at him. How much to share? He was used to hiding his abilities, not putting them out there. Still, this angel was so hesitant that they’d never get anywhere if they danced around each other.

“Gabriel showed up about a week ago and told me I’d help a gray angel with something. He didn’t specify what, exactly, so yes, I’m apparently the one to help you, although I have no idea what exactly I’m helping you with. You know how Gabriel can be, I’m sure,” Cass said, rolling his eyes with the last statement.

Kushiel chuckled, the unease slipping off him like it had never been there. The smiling, flirty angel who had first walked into his shop was back. Somehow Cass thought the unsure, hesitant persona was more accurate, but he would let Kushiel have his mask. After all, Cass wasn’t everything he seemed, either.

“Yes, I do know how Gabriel’s messages can go. I apologize for misinterpreting our first meeting. I am Kushiel, Rigid One of God, Angel of Punishment, and I need your help,” Kushiel stated.

Well fuck, an angel of punishment. Cass couldn’t help his frown, although he tried not to jump to conclusions. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder if Kushiel was somehow responsible for the state of the soul in his house.

“What can I help an Angel of Punishment with?” Cass asked, and he knew his voice held a level of coldness.

Kushiel didn’t seem surprised. In fact, he seemed to have been expecting Cass’s disdain, which didn’t sit well either.

This whole thing was already sideways and upside down and fucked up, and Cass knew he wasn't helping.

“Souls have been taken from hell. They are missing. I have been tasked with finding them. A seer told me to look here and that someone would assist me. I am sorry you have been tasked with that assistance,” Kushiel replied, his face neutral.

“Taken from hell?” Cass asked. “That shouldn't be possible. Souls cannot leave hell.”

Kushiel hummed in response, raising his hand and making a see-saw motion with it. “Technically, they can. If they are redeemed enough, if the light inside them grows bright enough, they can find redemption and be reborn to try again. It is rare, but it does happen. However, I am the only being who can help such souls. They reside on the Mountain of Erebus in hell. A week ago, when I went to the mountain, it was empty. That should not be possible. Souls cannot leave hell of their own accord, and there is no one else who should have the capability to move them from that place.”

Cass sensed a depth of sadness in Kushiel when he talked of the empty mountain. Still, he had to ask.

“What do you do with the souls in Mount Erebus?” he asked.

“They are fragments of what they once were—most do not even remember why they are in hell—but there is light within them. I try to grow that light. I help them pay the price necessary for redemption. It is a different process for every soul, but I have seen souls redeemed over the eons, and there is nothing greater than knowing that a soul who suffered in hell will have a new chance.” Kushiel smiled at the thought. “I often go to see the babies those souls reincarnated into. It is beautiful to see that second chance.”

Cass stared at him. Kushiel was radiant when he smiled, but it was quickly replaced

by a frown.

“Someone took them. Someone took them, and now they cannot be redeemed. I must find them,” Kushiel insisted, looking at Cass in desperation. “Will you help me?”

“Of course I will,” Cass replied. “Come with me.”

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Of course it wasn't quite that easy. Cass needed to call someone in to watch the shop, and there was a bit of a wait. Cass occupied himself by tidying up and apparently getting the shop ready for the after work rush. Kushiel offered to help, but Cass shooed him over to sit down, and so Kushiel could only pass the time by watching the man bustle about.

He didn't quite know what to make of Cass. The mortal hadn't even flinched or widened his eyes when Kushiel revealed his true form. Cass had obviously seen angels before, since Gabriel had given him a message, but there were still usually questions when anyone saw Kushiel.

Most angels did not have gray skin, black hair, and black wings, after all. Kushiel knew he defied expectations.

But Cass hadn't seem surprised. Perhaps he was a seer who had seen a vision of Kushiel, which he supposed would explain things. It was only when Kushiel gave his title that he felt disappointment from the mortal, and then the questions followed. Still, Kushiel had the sense that it was more out of a sense of protection for souls than it was because of Kushiel's appearance.

He wasn't used to anyone caring about souls in hell; certainly most of those in heaven looked on his job with a level of disdain—they did not think souls in hell were capable or worthy of redemption. Most demons didn't care one way or the other, and they often didn't see the goodness in the souls in their care.

Cass was different, though. He seemed almost protective over souls he knew nothing about. It was puzzling.

A purple haired woman finally arrived, and Cass thanked her profusely, to which she simply rolled her eyes and winked at him before telling the two of them to be on their way. It occurred to Kushiel that perhaps she thought they were undertaking some sort of romantic liaison. Kushiel blushed as Cass ushered him out the shop door, which only made the woman laugh and caused Cass to smirk.

Cass grew serious as they walked, however, simply commenting that their destination wasn't far. Indeed, it wasn't, and when they arrived at a pretty and well-kept Victorian home, Cass opened the door and ushered Kushiel through it.

Once inside the foyer, Cass stopped to stare at Kushiel, almost as if expecting some type of response, but Kushiel had no idea what he was looking for. There was a hallway ahead with doorways leading off of it and stairs to the right, but Kushiel neither saw nor felt anything of note.

Cass started to walk down the hall and then paused abruptly, but Kushiel saw no reason for the pause. After a moment, Cass resumed walking, and they turned into a nicely decorated living room. The furniture looked older, but in a pleasant, lived-in sort of way, and pictures decorated a fireplace and the walls.

Cass was staring at Kushiel expectantly again, but Kushiel had no idea why. He looked around again, but he saw nothing.

"Fuck," Cass mumbled. "I forgot about that."

Kushiel had no idea what he had forgotten about, but clearly Kushiel was missing something. "What is it?" he asked, looking at Cass.

It was like his voice was some type of trigger, because Cass's eyes widened, and then Kushiel felt something familiar twine around his legs. He bent down, placing his hands upon the ground.

He knew this feeling. He knew the weight and guilt and pain of every soul in his care. Every single one. And here was one his lost ones, somehow in this man's home, unseen but felt.

"Lost one, is that you?" he asked, but there was no answer, only a sort of pressing feeling, like the soul was getting closer to him.

"It is you, isn't it. Oh, little one, I have found you. I had thought you lost, but I have found you," he murmured, and he felt tears spring to his eyes. Here was one of the many that he was searching for.

He stood, and he felt the soul stay with him, like it was wrapped around him for comfort. He placed his hand where he felt like it had settled, gently petting the air where he felt sure the soul resided.

"I am here, lost one," he murmured. He did not know if it could hear or understand him, but he could not help offering comfort. The soul felt disjointed and broken, and no wonder. It had been torn from its home, even if that home had been one in hell. Still, souls in Erebus were left to an existence of quiet contemplation and actions of absolution. They were delicate things. They were not meant for topside. They were like children, babies even, and it was Kushiel's job to nurse them to a path that would lead to redemption.

Instead, someone had stolen them, broken them, and put them here.

It was an abomination.

"Did you do this?" Kushiel growled, looking at Cass.

"Me? What the fuck? How would I do that? Of course I didn't do that," Cass said, and his outrage calmed Kushiel. He looked to his side then for a moment, and then he

looked back at Kushiel.

“Are there more here?” Kushiel asked hopefully.

“No. Just this one. I don’t know where the other ones are. Have you seen any more?” Cass asked, but he wasn’t looking at Kushiel when he asked that question, and before Kushiel had time to respond, Cass looked back and said, “Only the one so far. I don’t know where the rest that you’re looking for are.”

“Can you see it?” Kushiel asked, a question he probably should have asked sooner.

“Yes, I can see it.” Cass shuddered then. “And I could feel it—such overwhelming pain and despair. It isn’t meant to be here. Although it’s... muted, now that you’re here. The sense of dread and doom isn’t permeating the house anymore.”

“No, it isn’t meant to be here, and I have no notion of how it came to be here, or how all the souls who could find redemption came to be taken from their home. I am glad if this soul’s pain is less now, though. Perhaps my presence is some comfort,” Kushiel said. He turned his attention to the soul he felt then. “Little one, I will take you home.”

Kushiel looked back at Cass, who was once again turned to look to his side. He blushed, but then he focused back on Kushiel. “So you can just take it back? Then I guess I’m supposed to help you find the rest of them?”

Cass looked to the side again and nodded his head, adding, “Yes, and probably figure out who fucked around with afterlife souls to begin with. That’s an issue that will need to be dealt with.”

“Who are you talking to?” Kushiel finally asked. He looked where Cass kept looking, but there was nothing there. The man obviously knew things, and he didn’t discount

the help that Cass could offer him, but he wondered if perhaps there was some type of split personality disorder or hallucinations or something beyond his knowledge going on here. It wasn't unheard of for seers to have visions manifest as hallucinations, and Kushiel wondered if perhaps that was the case. Maybe he shouldn't have drawn attention to the fact that he couldn't see whoever Cass was talking to, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Cass just sighed, though, not seeming at all upset at Kushiel's question or his inability to see whoever he was talking to. "It's my aunt," he replied, as if somehow that explained everything.

Kushiel nodded his head. Ok then. Hallucinations, obviously. At any rate, this hallucination seemed only helpful, so Kushiel wouldn't question Cass about it.

"I'll be back, and we can figure out a plan. Let me take this one home," Kushiel stated.

At Cass's nod, he folded his wings around himself, making sure to leave space where he felt the soul, and he transported to Erebus.

The burning was immediate and sharp, and he grunted a bit at the sudden onslaught. He usually never transported this far into hell—it was always a shock to his system—but he didn't think taking the scenic route through Limbo would be good for the lost soul, so he would deal with the pain.

He took a moment, deeply breathing, until the fire in his bones receded to the level he was used to. His skin felt too hot and tight, but it was discomfort now and not the pain of his arrival.

He also realized, quite belatedly, that the soul was not with him.

He blamed the pain for distracting him, because he should have realized it immediately. It wasn't just that he couldn't see the soul, because he hadn't been able to see it topside, either. He couldn't feel it anymore, either. The weight of it was no longer wrapped around him. He was alone once again on Erebus, the mountain still empty.

Fuck.

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“Well that didn’t work,” Aunt Ro commented, hands on her hips, staring at the soul who had retreated back to the corner once Kushiell had disappeared. “I’m not sure why an angel is expected to help, anyway,” she sniffed.

Aunt Ro was not a fan of angels or demons. Ghosts could see angels and demons, but they tended to steer clear of them. There was a general distrust of them that seemed to be built into ghosts. Angels and demons could not see ghosts, however, although they seemed unaware of that fact. It wasn’t his job to fill them in on it, either.

Usually Cass didn’t mind the separation, because there was no reason for interaction between ghosts and other afterlifers. Up until Gabriel’s visit, he had very little to do with afterlife politics, although he knew quite a bit about angels, demons, and the afterlife in general from his family’s teachings. Sure, demons and angels were always about, and they seemed drawn to him, even if they didn’t know why, but Cass didn’t share his abilities or get involved with their drama. Mostly, anyway.

Of course, things had been changing lately. Demons were tied to mortal souls, which had never occurred. He’d asked Aunt Ro about it, and he’d even summoned his great-grandfather to ask him about the threads he’d seen tying demons and mortal souls together, and even Grandpa had never heard of nor seen such a thing. So clearly the afterlife was shaking things up a bit.

Cass sighed, staring at the darkness that had slithered back to the corner. There was a ghost in his living room that he was pretty sure was one of Kushiell’s lost souls, only Kushiell couldn’t see it. Of course things couldn’t be even remotely simple.

“Are you even listening to me, Cassius?” Aunt Ro grumped.

“Clearly he’s helped already,” Cass replied. “The doom and despair are no longer wafting through the house, so whatever he did fixed that at least. It eased the soul somewhat. I’m afraid you’re going to have to put aside your prejudice for now, Aunt, because I’m supposed to help Kushiell, and these souls obviously belong to him somehow.”

“It doesn’t hurt that he’s easy on the eyes. Just your type, I bet,” Aunt Ro commented, causing him to blush again. He just rolled his eyes at his aunt in response. Leave it to her to both grump about an angel and try to set him up with the being in the same conversation.

He stared at the soul more closely. It looked... different? Maybe?

“Does it look the same to you?” Cass asked his aunt.

“You’re just trying to change the subject,” she murmured, but then she stared at the corner. “Hmm. Perhaps. It looks almost like it’s a little more formed. I think I can see a bit of a human shape now. It was just a whirling mess before.” Aunt Ro paused before she whispered, “It’s so sad, Cassius. How could anyone do that to a ghost?”

“I don’t think it was supposed to be a ghost. I think that’s part of the problem. If Kushiell is right, then these souls were dragged out of hell and somehow forced into being ghosts,” Kushiell answered.

“But... why?” Aunt Ro asked. “Why would someone want souls from hell here on Earth? It isn’t like it’s in any shape to influence others or cause problems.”

At that moment Kushiell appeared back in his living room looking pale and drawn. Yes, his skin was gray, but it seemed to have lost a bit of its vibrance.

“That did not go as planned,” he stated stiffly.

“No, we could see that. The soul is still here. It seems to look slightly better, though,” Cass assured him.

“Perhaps it has unfinished business on Earth, and taking care of that will enable it to move on?” Aunt Ro suggested.

Cass hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t think so,” he answered. Kushiel was looking at him strangely, and he remembered that he’d need to be a ghost translator for now. “My aunt wondered if perhaps the soul has unfinished business here on Earth that it could take care of and thus let it move on, but I’m not sure how we would even communicate with it to find that out. It isn’t coherent at all.”

“No, most of the souls in Erebus have been there for many decades or even centuries. No one would be left on Earth that they knew. They have lost all sense of who they were in life, but they are still able to speak and communicate. They are truly like children who need guidance,” Kushiel stated.

“Well that explains the lack of form and ability to communicate then,” Cass reasoned.

Kushiel tilted his head. “How so?”

“Ghosts are here to finish unresolved business, or watch over loved ones, or simply because they aren’t ready to leave the mortal realm. They are exactly who they were in life. If these souls have somehow lost the sense of who they were, then they wouldn’t be able to take on a full ghostly form. They would be confused at best, and panicked and broken at worst. Still, I wouldn’t expect them to be quite as fragmented as this one is,” Cass mused.

“Ghosts?” Kushiel asked, startled.

“THIS!” Aunt Ro ground out. “This right here is why we don’t like angels and

demons. I swear, it's like we aren't even afterlifers. They just forget about our very existence, like ghosts aren't mortal souls too," she fumed.

"Well, to be fair, they can't see you, Aunt Ro," Cass reminded her.

Kushiel was looking about the room confusedly. "Are there ghosts here?" he asked.

"Not the sharpest crayon in the box, is he?" she grumped. She got right up in the angel's space then, poking him in the chest. "Keep up, gray boy. Your lost soul is a ghost." She looked at Cass then. "You told him I'm here. Who does he think you're talking to?"

Cass tried not to get frustrated. "Aunt Ro, maybe you could take the soul into the guest room, yeah? It seems to have a bit more form now, and you were able to guide it before," Cass asked. He and Kushiel needed to talk, and he didn't need the distraction of his aunt and a lost soul.

She humphed at him, but she walked over and gently reached out toward the darkness, and then the two of them were gone.

Cass breathed a sigh of relief and sank onto the couch. He motioned for Kushiel to sit as well, and the angel perched on the ottoman in front of Cass, looking at him. He looked a little more lively now, his skin still gray but not so washed out, and the lines had faded from around his mouth. Cass felt better for it. Apparently the trip to hell had taken a lot out of him, and Cass was relieved to see him looking better.

They stared at each other for a minute, and Cass supposed he'd have to go first. He also supposed his usual mode of not sharing any details wasn't going to work here. He did, after all, receive a divine message to help Kushiel.

Even if he hadn't gotten the message, he still would have helped. He trusted Kushiel.

The angel was beautiful, and Cass didn't mean outwardly. (Well, not just outwardly. Who knew he'd have a thing for gray skin?) Kushiel shone inside, and Cass could see the goodness and the softness in him. He had the urge to wrap up Kushiel and protect him, which was sort of ridiculous. Cass was, after all, merely mortal, and Kushiel was an angel.

He'd also help him because there was something horribly wrong with what someone had done to that soul, and Kushiel was obviously trying to set things right, even if he didn't know how.

Well, that made two of them, because Cass had no idea what to do either. Hopefully they could muddle through together.

"Who did you think I was talking to?" Cass finally asked.

Kushiel actually blushed, which was kind of adorable. "Ugh, well, you seem to have visions or be an oracle, so..." he started, then he rubbed the back of his neck in an uncomfortable gesture. "I guess I thought perhaps it was a hallucination? Or a form of vision for you?"

Kushiel looked at him and actually seemed to shrink back a bit, as if waiting for Cass to mock him or kick him out.

Cass laughed instead. "Oh, Aunt Ro would have gone bonkers if she heard that. I'm so glad I sent her upstairs with your lost soul," he chuckled. "Most ghosts aren't overly fond of angels or demons."

"Your aunt is a ghost? And my lost soul is a ghost?" Kushiel asked, almost as if he was checking to be sure.

"Yes," Cass explained patiently.

“But I can’t see them,” Kushiell stated.

“Nope. Angels and demons cannot see ghosts,” Cass answered. Poor Kushiell looked so utterly startled and unsure that Cass had the urge to pat his knee in reassurance.

“But of course we can,” he countered.

“Really? Can you? When have you seen one, then?” Cass asked. And then he waited, watching Kushiell puzzle it out.

Cass didn’t blame Kushiell. All angels and demons thought they could see ghosts, yet they never questioned why they never actually saw any ghosts. It was a weird paradox that Cass couldn’t quite figure out.

“Well, I don’t suppose... I’m not sure, actually,” Kushiell admitted, looking at Cass in shock. “None of us can see them?”

“Nope,” Cass answered again, letting it sink in.

“But... why not?” Kushiell asked.

“I have no idea, but that’s the way it’s always been. You all know there’s an afterlife ghost department, but you all forget about it all the time. It’s like a mental block for angels and demons. Honestly, it isn’t really my problem. I can see ghosts, and my job is to help them if I can. Of course I’ll help any afterlifer that needs assistance, but the ghosthood department is really my specialty.” Cass shrugged in response, while Kushiell just sat there looking rather stunned.

“We can’t see ghosts,” he muttered.

“Nope,” Cass confirmed yet again.

“So someone was really and truly trying to hide them from me. But why?” Kushiel asked, looking at Cass like he might have the answers.

“I don’t know. But together we’ll find out,” Cass promised.

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Kushiel was... Well, he didn't know what he was. Confused? He felt a bit like a lost soul himself.

Angels and demons could not see the mortal souls who chose to be ghosts.

It didn't make any sense.

Yet the more Kushiel thought about it, the more it did make sense. He had never seen a ghost in his time topside. Granted, most angels and demons didn't spend a ton of time topside, but those who did never mentioned ghosts.

The leadership team controlled every aspect of, well, everything, although they had been getting better as of late. But there were constantly memos about souls and afterlife placements and reincarnation numbers. Yet Kushiel could not ever, not even once, remember anything about ghosts.

The leadership team loved numbers. Each ghost would have been assigned a ticket and probably a time limit on Earth, and yet none of that was the case as far as Kushiel knew. Yes, there were meetings every few decades between departments, and members of the ghosthood department were there, yet Kushiel couldn't ever remember them adding anything. He didn't even remember them talking. No one asked them questions. They didn't report numbers or data or anything else.

A few centuries ago when the leadership team had insisted more souls were needed for the growing population, no one had thought to suggest reincarnating ghosts. It hadn't even been brought up. Why not? It would have made the most sense.

It was odd.

Kushiel didn't understand any of this.

He felt a hand gently rest on his, and he couldn't help his flinch, making Cass pull back.

Shit.

He was immediately embarrassed. He wasn't in heaven or hell. Touch didn't hurt his skin here on Earth, but it had been a spontaneous reaction, and he could barely look up to see the hurt or anger in Cass's face. The man had been beyond patient and kind with him, and here he was mucking things up again.

"Hey," Cass's soft voice said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Sorry. I was just thinking," Kushiel muttered, mortified by his reaction. He finally looked up, and Cass's face was soft and kind. It made his eyes feel a little wet, and he didn't even know why.

He cleared his throat. "I, um, I don't know anything about ghosts. Which is odd when I think about it. Even the leadership team doesn't really deal with ghosts, and they have their hands in everything."

"Well, they wouldn't have anything to do with ghosts," Cass stated, like it was obvious.

Kushiel felt a bit stupid, but his lost souls were too important for him to not ask questions. "Why not?"

"Who makes up the leadership team?" Cass asked.

“Well, I don’t actually know any of their names. Actually, I’m not even sure they have names,” Kushiel pondered.

Cass just laughed. “Yes, that’s probably true. But who are they?”

It hit Kushiel then. Of course. “Angels and demons.”

“Right,” Cass replied. “Angels and demons, none of which can see ghosts. So they can’t keep track of them, or try to influence them, or try to send them on to the afterlife.”

“But...” Kushiel paused, thinking. “We have a reincarnation team.”

“Made up of angels and demons, I’m sure,” Cass responded.

“Just angels, I think,” Kushiel responded. “But we also have a ghosthood team.”

“And who is on that?” Cass asked curiously.

“I... I don’t know,” Kushiel responded, suddenly realizing that fact. They were always hooded and wore gray, and they didn’t really interact, and Kushiel suddenly had no idea if they were angels or demons... or something else entirely. But what else? Mortal souls were not allowed in the afterlife.

Well, except apparently Michael was.

“Would ghosts be in the afterlife?” Kushiel asked. “Is that what they are?”

“I’m not sure,” Cass shrugged. “Ghosts tend to be ghosts because they want to stay on the mortal plane of existence and not be part of the afterlife. But I suppose anything is possible. If they are angels or demons then they aren’t typical, because

you lot cannot see ghosts.”

Kushiel absorbed that. So Cass didn't quite know everything, but he certainly knew a lot. More than Kushiel, apparently, at least when it came to being topside. Since that's where Kushiel's current work was, he was glad to have Cass helping him.

“Thank you,” Kushiel said sincerely. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Of course,” Cass replied. “I would help whether or not I got a divine message from Gabriel. A ghost in that kind of shape... Well, how could I not help?”

Kushiel nodded, and the two sat for a moment. Kushiel wasn't sure what else to say. He didn't know what to do next. He supposed he could go do some research in heaven or in hell, but he honestly wasn't looking forward to the pain of going back to either one. He also wasn't sure how far he would get, since whoever did this wouldn't be stepping up to explain, and he doubted anyone else had any idea of what happened.

Cass yawned, and Kushiel looked out the window and realized quite suddenly that it was dark out. Cass followed his gaze and nodded, like he was acknowledging how late it was. Kushiel felt a little stupid for overstaying his welcome, but at least he would get to see Cass again. After all, they'd be working together. He was cheered immensely by the idea that this wasn't goodbye. He stood up, ready to take his leave, and Cass stood up too.

“Well—” Kushiel started, but Cass interrupted him.

“The guest room closest to mine is made up, so we'll be sharing a bathroom, if you don't mind. Not that you need to shower or anything,” Cass laughed, turning and starting to walk towards the stairs. “I know angels and demons have fun powers, but hot, steamy showers are pretty amazing, and even you lot ought to enjoy them now

and again,” he called over his shoulder. “And we didn’t really eat dinner, because I was snacking at the shop and ate a late lunch, but I can cook something if you’re hungry.”

Kushiel muttered a “No thanks” to food then followed Cass, feeling vaguely flabbergasted. He was staying over? Why was he staying over?

“I have great towels, too. Soft and plush. Bath sheets, they call them. There’s actually a tub with jets if you really want to enjoy the pleasures of mortal flesh,” Cass joked, starting up the stairs.

Kushiel followed, and he was glad that Cass wasn’t facing him, because he blushed at the last line. Pleasure of the mortal flesh made him think of something other than hot baths, and following Cass up the steps and seeing a view of his backside did not help matters.

Cassius had a lovely backside.

Not that Kushiel should be thinking about such things. And that wasn’t because he was an angel—he knew some angels who partook of pleasure more exuberantly than some demons. Not that he was totally angelic anymore, anyway. It was just that he had a job to do.

It had also been a really long time since he’d partaken in any sort of pleasures. Angels certainly weren’t approaching him, and demons tended to think that angels were stuffy. Of course he had demon friends, but he wouldn’t risk their friendship with anything that might make things... awkward.

He almost bumped into Cass, who had stopped near the end of the upstairs hallway. Cass turned to look at him, and Kushiel couldn’t help it, he blushed again.

Cass didn't say anything, though, he just waved his arm towards the open doorway.

Kushiel entered and noted a four poster bed with a light blue, plush comforter, a dresser, a nightstand, and a rather soft looking rug. There were two doors in the room as well, one which probably led to a closet, and another which must lead to the shared bathroom.

Kushiel looked at Cass, who smiled softly at him from just inside the doorway. "I know you can just magic up some sweats or something to sleep in, but you're welcome to anything I have, although my pants will probably be a bit short on you. Help yourself to any food or drink downstairs as well if you want something."

Cass waited a moment, then he turned to go, but Kushiel was suddenly a little desperate to not lose sight of him.

"What about the soul? The ghost, I mean?" Kushiel asked, realizing as he said it that it was a question he probably should have asked sooner.

"Ah. It's here already," Cass said. "It came in as soon as you entered the room. Does that bother you?"

"No. Not at all. I think I will rest easier knowing that it is here with me. Perhaps I am familiar." Kushiel hoped so, at least.

Cass smiled again, and Kushiel thought how sweet and kind that smile was.

"Thank you," Kushiel murmured.

"You're welcome. I'm right next door if you need me," Cass answered, and then he was gone, the door shutting behind him.

Kushiel sat on the bed, and it was amazingly soft. He laid on it then, wondering when the last time he had actually rested was. Not since he had found the mountain empty, and he wasn't sure how long before that.

He felt the presence of the soul next to him, and the weight of it was familiar and comforting. "I will not fail you, lost one," he murmured.

He knew he needed to think of a plan of action, but his thoughts were distracted by the thoughtfulness and kindness of Cass. The bed was soft, the weight of the lost soul was like a warm presence curled up next to him, and he felt more at peace than he had since Erebus. He closed his eyes, determined to think of what to do next, only the darkness behind his eyelids lulled him into rest.

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Cassius stared at the door to the guest room that he'd just shut. He was strangely hesitant to walk away and head to his own room, even though exhaustion was pulling at him. He had been up very early and it had been a long day.

There was just something about Kushiell that tugged at him.

Cass had known a lot of demons and angels. Granted, he probably knew more demons than angels. Demons were always mucking about in this town; Cass thought of them like toddlers who were running around without parental supervision and causing minor messes. Sure, they might color all over the walls and leave their toys all over the place, but they rarely caused catastrophic damage, and they were kind of cute in their exuberance.

Still, he'd met his fair share of angels over the years as well. As a whole, afterlifers tended to be confident and self-assured. At their first meeting, Kushiell had seemed to be a swaggering afterlifer just like all the rest. He'd mistaken Cass's offer to help for flirting—which, ok, Cass could admit it had sounded that way when he looked back.

Yet the more he got to know Kushiell, the more he saw something else. There was a strange nervousness and lack of confidence in the angel. Yes, Cass knew that he looked different from most angels with his black wings, his dark hair, and his gray skin. He also recognized that most angels were not able to enter hell, and yet Kushiell could.

He had never met an angel or demon with self-esteem issues, but he could understand where perhaps Kushiell was the exception. Angels in particular seemed like they wouldn't welcome much in the way of differences, although the shining light of

Kushiel's soul should be clear to anyone. How could they not flock to him with all that brightness inside?

Still, there was more to it than feeling self-conscious about his appearance. Kushiel jerked away from touch, and that more than anything pinged alarm bells in Cass's head. It was like Kushiel expected Cass's anger in response to his jerking away, too.

Then there were the many thank-yous. Cass wasn't really used to getting thanked for his assistance, but Kushiel seemed not just grateful—he seemed almost surprised by Cass's assistance.

It hurt Cass's heart to think of it, but had the angel been mistreated? Cass felt anger flood through him at the thought. Kushiel obviously cared about his job and about souls, and his own soul was a thing of beauty. To think that someone would try to dim his light... It was deplorable.

Cass didn't know everything about afterlifers, but he'd never heard of something like abuse happening. Sure, there were personality differences, and angels and demons weren't always besties, but they just avoided each other in that case.

Maybe Cass was reading too much into it, but there was definitely more to Kushiel than he could see. Perhaps he would seek some answers about the angel as well as looking for the lost souls. As much as those souls needed help, Kushiel did as well.

Cass was only human, and he knew it, but he felt protective of the angel. It was silly and slightly ridiculous, but he wouldn't let anything bad happen to Kushiel on his watch. He promised himself that.

“Are you just going to stand there like a creeper?” Aunt Ro asked, making him jump in surprise.

“Damn it, Aunt Ro, what have I told you about sneaking up on me?” Cass grumbled quietly.

“Well, you’re the one who’s standing here staring at a closed door. Not my fault you’re not paying attention,” she huffed. “You know, I bet he would love a little company,” she suggested.

Cass looked over to see her wiggle her eyebrows.

“Seriously, Aunt Ro? Did you stick around just to get involved in everyone’s sex life? You don’t even like angels,” he grumped.

“Well, you clearly do like him,” she reasoned. “And it’s been quite awhile since you’ve seen anyone. You know I only get involved in the love lives of family members. I only want you all to be happy. And fulfilled. ”

“Aunt Ro!” he admonished, still whispering. “That sounds vaguely incestuous. And it’s really none of your business.”

She just chuckled, then she peeked her head through the door, which Cass knew she hated to do. Aunt Ro liked to pretend she was corporeal, although Cass had no idea why.

“Aww, that’s kind of cute,” she said when she pulled her head back into the hallway.

Cass was almost afraid to ask what she meant, and he looked at the door and frowned. It would be ridiculous to open the door and check on Kushiell.

Aunt Ro sighed. “What has your head working so hard?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Something just isn’t right, Aunt Ro. He’s not like other angels, or

even other demons,” he replied.

“Hmm. Perhaps not. He does seem almost nice,” she answered.

Cass just rolled his eyes. “Most angels and demons are nice, Aunt Ro. That isn’t what I meant. He’s a puzzle, that’s all.”

“He’s like a lost puppy dog, is what you mean. You’ve never been able to resist strays, Cass. I’m guessing this is no different,” Aunt Ro huffed.

Cass sighed at her. “Can you do me a favor?” he asked, ready to move on from this whole conversation.

“Yes, yes, I can already guess. I’ll look around for more lost souls and see what the scoop is on the astral plane. Perhaps I’ll ask around about your angel as well,” she answered.

Before Cass could answer, she was gone, and Cass was left standing outside Kushiel’s door. And yes, he did have to admit Aunt Ro may have been right, he probably was acting a bit like a creeper. Kushiel was probably wondering why he was standing out here talking to himself, since afterlifers did have excellent hearing, and Cass figured he ought to open the door and explain. Plus, he could check on the ghost again, too.

Never mind that both those things were just excuses, because Cass really had the urge to check in on Kushiel (and perhaps see what was so cute, according to Aunt Ro). He stopped worrying over it and lightly tapped his nails against the door before opening it.

Kushiel was laying on the bed on his side, the ghost curled up next to him like a pet might curl up next to their human. Cass could see from the doorway that his eyes

were shut, and although he told himself he ought to close the door and leave if Kushiel was sleeping, he walked closer instead.

Kushiel's face was soft and peaceful in rest, and Cass realized how strained it had been when the angel had been awake. The ghost looked more formed, although it did really resemble a large dog as opposed to a human, and its features still weren't clear.

Cass smiled a little, because it was kind of an adorable sight. Aunt Ro had been right about that.

The ghost seemed to uncurl a bit, and he watched as it pressed closer to Kushiel still. Then... he had to blink, because he wasn't even sure he saw what he thought he saw. It was like some of Kushiel's light was sucked up into the ghost. It happened so fast that Cass couldn't have done anything even if he wanted to.

He looked up at Kushiel's face, which frowned a little as if he was uncomfortable, but then his features evened out again in rest. He looked back at the ghost, and yes, it definitely had more form. More form and more light.

Kushiel's soul glowed just as brightly, even if it had seemed to dim for a moment, so he seemed no worse off after whatever had just occurred. The gold threads still hovered around his soul, too—they were barely visible, and Cass watched as one reached out. He didn't know what was happening, but it very clearly avoided the ghost as it swept out through the air. Cass froze in surprise as he realized exactly where the gold thread was going.

He stayed still as it reached him, where it gently hovered in the air in front of him, and Cass thought of a puppy sniffing at his hand. He had a flash of insight then, and he couldn't help his slight movement in shock. The thread spiraled back into Kushiel at the movement, and Cass stayed still, waiting to see if anything else would happen, but the ghost and the angel seemed to be peacefully resting.

Cass walked out of the room, his head spinning, and gently shut the door behind him. He walked to his own room and got ready for bed, washing up and changing on autopilot, his head full of thoughts.

Because he'd seen brightly shining golden colored threads before, hadn't he? Between demons and humans. Michael and Ari were a prime example. It wasn't simply a thread between them, though, it was more like a thick rope made of thousands of threads. It was an irrevocable tying together of two souls. He'd seen it again when he'd looked very closely at the guy who had been possessed, although it had been harder to see when two souls resided in the same body.

He'd seen lots of demons and angels, and he'd never noticed those gold threads unless the afterlifer was tied to a mortal soul, making them both immortal and tied together in love for eternity. Did this mean that Kushiel was going to be tied to a human?

He pulled the covers back and sat on his bed, almost unaware of how he'd even made it that far. As he laid down and settled under his blankets, he couldn't help the pulse of hope that he felt.

The gold thread had reached out toward him, after all. Did that mean that Kushiel and he were supposed to be together? Cass could admit to himself that the idea thrilled him. After all, humans and demons who were tied together were deliriously happy.

But he had no idea how the nervous angel would take the news. Did he want to be tied to a human? Cass also had no idea if the gold thread was seeking him, or perhaps it was just poking about and was seeking someone else.

It hurt a bit to think about Kushiel bonding to someone else.

Cass sighed and rolled over in bed. It did no use worrying over it now. He supposed

he would find out sooner or later, and in the meantime, they had work to do, and he couldn't do it if he was exhausted. He closed his eyes, slipping into sleep.

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Kushiel woke, and for a moment he lay in the soft bed, just content to exist. His body didn't hurt or ache, he wasn't burning or freezing, and he felt calm and at peace, although he wasn't sure why. He felt the soul next to him, and the weight of its guilt seemed less than before, which made him feel a sense of accomplishment, even though he'd done nothing but sleep.

It wasn't long, however, before his thoughts took a turn. There were still other lost souls out there, and there was someone plotting against him. He couldn't conceive of how they had even accomplished the task; how had they removed so many souls from hell? He also couldn't begin to fathom the motivation behind it all. He knew he wasn't well-liked amongst angels, but for them to do that to so many souls? It spoke of a level of hatred that Kushiel couldn't conceive of. He had thwarted the plans of an archangel to separate soulmates, but that archangel was no more. Perhaps there was someone who took issue with Kushiel's part in that. If they wanted to go after him, he could deal with that, but it wasn't fair to hurt the innocent.

Or perhaps it was just angelic snobbery. Most angels would argue that the souls in Erebus weren't innocent. Yes, at one point in a mortal existence they had done something terrible. Kushiel did not excuse horrible behavior, but he also didn't think it was beyond fixing.

He believed in redemption. He believed in finding the good in others and helping it to grow. He believed in the ability of change.

It was why he had helped the demons and their soulmates. That was surely one of the biggest changes the afterlife had ever seen, but those demons deserved happiness. They were lucky to have found it, and Kushiel would never begrudge another's

happiness and peace.

He thought then of Cassius, and he realized that he could smell coffee and bacon. He should go and see what the human needed from him, since clearly he was awake and moving around. Kushiel felt a little guilty for sleeping past when Cass had woken.

He decided to leave himself in his angelic form. Cassius hadn't seemed surprised when he'd seen Kushiel's form at first, but he didn't want Cassius mistaking him for something he wasn't. Kushiel was self-aware enough to realize that he liked the human, and he would rather scare him off now as opposed to later.

He made his way downstairs, white pants and a white shirt on, even though he didn't always wear a shirt in his angelic form. He followed his nose to the kitchen, where Cass was bustling about.

"Have a seat. I'm fixing breakfast," Cass ordered, not looking up from the stove, and Kushiel did so before he realized he ought to have offered to help.

"Um, would you like some help?" Kushiel asked. Better late than never.

Cass looked up then and smiled softly. There was no surprise or hesitation in the look. Kushiel really didn't understand it.

"Thank you, but it's almost done," Cass said, turning around after that and reaching for two plates.

Cass deftly served them both breakfast, which included eggs, bacon, some type of pastry that was deliciously decadent, juice, and coffee. They ate at the kitchen table sitting next to one another, and Kushiel couldn't help it if he kept stealing glances at the man.

Cass's brown hair was tousled and messy, like he hadn't bothered to comb it after waking up. He was wearing low slung sweatpants and a loose t-shirt, and it was worn enough at the collar that Kushiell could occasionally glance his shoulder and a bit of his chest. There were a few light freckles there too. Kushiell wondered where else Cass had freckles, and then he blushed at the thought. Cass looked over at that moment, and he smiled at Kushiell.

His smile was radiant, and it took Kushiell's breath away. He had never had such pleasure and happiness aimed at him, and he had no idea what he had done to deserve it from this man.

Kushiell turned back to his food, embarrassed and a little confused at the attention. They finished eating in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable or awkward. Only when they were done did Kushiell speak up.

"Thank you. I cannot ever remember a meal being cooked for me, and it was truly delicious," Kushiell stated, and he was concerned to see a look of sadness pass across Cass's face. He tried to think why, but he couldn't come up with a reason. He hadn't offended him somehow, had he? He didn't visit topside that much, but he thought thanking someone was normal. He hoped he hadn't done something odd, and he felt self-conscious.

Cass interrupted that train of thought, though. "You're welcome. I'll be happy to cook for you anytime."

Kushiell blushed again, and Cass got up and gathered their plates. Kushiell realized he should have done that, but by the time he had that thought, Cass was across the island, leaning on it and staring at Kushiell.

"The ghost is looking better. Can you feel a difference?" Cass asked.

Kushiel took a breath, glad Cass wasn't upset with his lack of human manners. "Yes, it does feel lighter, although it's hard to be sure without being able to see or hear it."

"It still isn't talking," Cass replied. "But I do have some questions, if that's ok."

Kushiel steeled himself for some uncomfortable queries about his appearance, but Cass didn't ask about that.

"Tell me about your job," Cass said, surprising Kushiel.

He felt himself relax. That was easy enough.

"Of course. Well, some of the souls in Limbo don't feel ready to go to heaven. They feel guilt or shame over their actions on earth, whether they ought to or not. They need to work through those things before they can move on. I help them do that," Kushiel shrugged. "I'm like an afterlife therapist," he added, chuckling. He did often feel that way when he was in Limbo.

Cass looked thoughtful, and then he asked, "That isn't all there is to it, though, is there?"

Kushiel felt uncomfortable. He didn't like talking about this part of his job, but he wouldn't hide it from Cassius. That just felt wrong.

"No, sometimes they require mortification of the flesh, or physical punishments," Kushiel answered hesitantly, waiting to see Cass's reaction, but the human only waited patiently, staring at Kushiel. "I don't enjoy causing pain, but I do what's necessary to help them move on, and sometimes they need to feel their emotional pain in a physical manner," he added.

The memory popped into his head of the last time he had punished someone in

Limbo. The man had been dealing with such guilt, and he had demanded flagellation. He had chosen a whip, and Kushiel remembered vividly the feeling of the lash cutting into his skin—the bright flash of pain, followed by the sting and heat.

He had borne those marks afterwards for days, although he could have healed them. To heal them felt like cheating, though. If a soul in his care suffered, then so did he. He could not ask of others what he could not bear himself; it was not his way.

Kushiel came back to himself, and Cass was looking at him strangely, almost like the man could see his very thoughts. Kushiel looked down, feeling foolish for getting lost in memories. He rarely thought of the punishments he inflicted; it was far easier not to remember such things.

“It hurts you too, doesn’t it?” Cass asked softly.

Kushiel looked up, shocked at the question. No one had ever thought to ask him such a thing. Cass was staring at him calmly, however, waiting for his answer.

“A price must be paid, and I will help pay if I can. It is my job,” Kushiel answered.

Cass continued to look at him, and Kushiel had to make the effort not to fidget. It was like the human was looking inside him, and it was disconcerting. He knew he was... tarnished. He didn’t wish others to see it as well, but he felt like he could hide nothing from Cassius.

“What about the souls on Erebus?” Cass asked gently.

“Ah. Yes. The ones that are lost. They are not evil, you know. They made mistakes, sometimes horrible ones, in their mortal life. But there is light within them still. By the time they reach Erebus, they are beyond even knowing what they have done. They are a bundle of guilt, shame, and grief, but they do not know why. It is my job

to help them break through the darkness, to help their light grow. Eventually, with enough time, they will reach a balance between the darkness and the light, and then they are ready for reincarnation. Sometimes it takes decades or even centuries, but I have sent many souls on,” Kushiel answered.

“That must be amazing, to see them have a new chance at life,” Cass ventured.

“It is. It is a gift,” Kushiel agreed, feeling joyful that Cass recognized it that way. “Many angels and demons don’t understand how important it is, how each soul has worth and deserves a chance.”

Cass smiled softly, and he slid his hand forward, almost like he was going to touch Kushiel, but he stopped before he reached him. Kushiel fought off his disappointment. Of course, he had flinched from Cass last time, so it reasoned that the man would not touch him. Cass was too kind to make someone uncomfortable.

“Kushiel,” Cass murmured, drawing Kushiel’s attention away from their hands, so close but not touching, and back up to Cass’s face. “How do you help the souls in Erebus?”

Kushiel did not want to answer the question, but Cass was helping him, and Kushiel had no idea what information would be helpful and what wouldn’t.

“I... Well, I nurture them. I sit with them, and I support them.” Kushiel paused, knowing he wasn’t being specific enough. Finally, he admitted, “I give them some of my light and take some of their darkness. I take the pain they are willing to part with and leave hope in its place.”

Kushiel expected disgust. His soul was darkened, after all, as was evidenced by his outward appearance. Yet Cass nodded his head, like he had expected that response, and then the man walked over and started cleaning up the breakfast dishes.

It was baffling.

Kushiel opened his mouth, unsure what he was going to say, then closed it again. Perhaps Cass didn't understand.

"I am... tainted," Kushiel finally admitted.

Cass wheeled around at Kushiel's words. He had a fork in his hand, and he pointed it at Kushiel. Kushiel had a flash of regret, but perhaps it was for the best if Cass knew exactly who he was dealing with.

"That's just bullshit. You are not tainted," Cass protested, surprising Kushiel. "You help souls find redemption. Your soul only shines brighter for the selflessness in your actions. You care about every soul in your charge, and you help anyone who needs it. Never be ashamed of that, Kushiel, and fuck anyone who makes you feel bad for it," Cass declared.

Kushiel almost smiled. Cass was so passionate, even if he wasn't quite correct about Kushiel.

It was like Cass heard his thoughts, though, because he said, "You may not believe me yet, but I will make you believe it eventually. You shine, Kushiel, more brightly than any other angels, and anyone who doesn't see that is a fool. You are beautiful, inside and out."

Kushiel felt tears come to his eyes, and he had to blink them away. He could only murmur, "Thank you."

"Obviously some afterlifers have made you doubt your worth. I'm sorry for that, and it isn't right. You're beautiful, Kushiel," Cass reiterated. "And we will find your lost souls and whatever asshole decided to turn them into ghosts and take them from

you.”

Kushiel felt like discussing that was the safer bet, so he followed that train of thought. “Yes, not all angels might understand or respect my work, but I cannot think of any angel who has such malice to take so many souls from Erebus and harm them in such a way simply to punish me.”

Cass hmm’d softly, clearly thinking. He turned and finished putting things away before looking back at Kushiel.

“I see two problems there,” Cass admitted. “First of all, you assume it’s about you. There might be a host of reasons why someone wouldn’t want souls to be reincarnated, most of which we probably can’t even fathom. I don’t think this is centered on you. I’m not sure why, but that isn’t the feeling I get.”

“You think an angel was targeting the souls themselves?” Kushiel questioned, perplexed. It wasn’t that he doubted Cass, it was just that he couldn’t fathom anyone not wanting to see souls redeemed.

“That is where the other problem lies,” Cass stated. “You assume it’s an angel. But it couldn’t be an angel, could it?” Cass asked.

Kushiel blinked at Cass. “It makes sense that it’s an angel. They would be the ones with an issue with me. Or, if it is about the souls, perhaps they don’t feel the souls are worthy of leaving hell.”

“Yes, but that’s just it,” Cass reasoned. “They were in hell. As far as we know, you are the only angel who can enter hell. An angel couldn’t have taken the souls from Erebus, because they couldn’t have gone to Erebus at all.”

Kushiel was shocked, and the pain of betrayal hit him. “It was a demon who took the

souls,” he realized. He had thought of the demons as his brethren for so long, but Cass’s logic was undeniable.

Cass nodded. “Yes. We aren’t looking for a rogue angel. We’re looking for a rogue demon.”

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Kushiel had looked totally shocked that it could be a demon responsible. Cass thought that was pretty telling for how he had been treated by angels as opposed to by demons. People didn't tend to think the worst of their own people, yet Kushiel clearly did.

Cass had excused himself at that point to get ready for the day, and Kushiel had seemed to need the time to process, anyway. Cass needed his own time to think, too.

He didn't usually get visions when he was talking to someone, but he was positive he had seen one of the angel's memories when Kushiel had been talking.

Kushiel had a whip in his hand and a man kneeling in front of him, and each time Kushiel swung the whip onto the man's back, the man flinched in pain. However, instead of the marks appearing on the man's back, they appeared on Kushiel's back, which was a bloody, marked-up mess. Yet the angel hadn't flinched once, though his face had been carved in pain.

Kushiel helped souls find forgiveness by taking part of their pain onto himself. It was so damn noble and generous that Cass thought he fell a little in love just knowing about it.

Then Kushiel had said that he was "tainted," and Cass might have gotten a bit passionate. He hoped he hadn't scared his shy, nervous angel, but it had hurt to realize that Kushiel thought that of himself. He was better than every other demon and angel Cass had ever met. Kushiel was beautiful, and Cass would make him see it.

Cass finished getting ready—he'd taken a quick shower and gotten dressed, because

he still had a coffee shop to run. He needed to talk to Steph about hiring someone else. She would pick up the slack over the next week or so while he dealt with all of this, and she didn't mind the overtime, but they really needed a better system in case both of them were ever unavailable. She'd opened the shop this morning, and they had a college kid who was competent enough to close later, but Cass still had to do some paperwork and payroll to do today.

He finished trying to tame his hair—maybe time for a haircut?—and headed back downstairs to the kitchen. Cass squinted a little and saw that Kushiel had his human form on for the public. His angel was wearing white, loose pants and a dark gray sweater, which looked totally sexy against the angel's light gray skin. Cass had the urge to run his hands through that dark hair, but he resisted. Barely.

“Very sexy outfit,” Cass winked. Kushiel seemed shocked, and then that adorable pink tinge spread over his gray skin.

Fuck. Cass was so in over his head. Everything he learned about Kushiel only made him more attractive.

“You really don't mind coming to the coffee shop? It would be fine if you wanted to stay here and relax. Although I would love to have your company,” Cass added. He didn't want Kushiel to think he wasn't welcome.

“I would be glad if I could be of assistance,” Kushiel said, and Cass took him at face value, leading the way out of the house.

It was beautiful out—a sunny and warm day, and perfect for a walk to the shop. Kushiel kept pace with him, but he kept looking curiously at Cass.

“What is it?” Cass asked. “You can ask me anything. Something is obviously niggling away at you. I promise you I'm not offended easily, and I'm happy to

share.”

Cass realized that was true. He wanted Kushiel to know him. The real him, including the things he didn't normally tell others. Perhaps it was only fair if he opened up and shared his own secrets, since Kushiel's secrets were shared with him through his visions.

“Is the lost soul still with us?” Kushiel asked, although Cass felt like he was starting with an easy question.

“Nope. The ghost stayed at my house. Aunt Ro will check on them, I'm sure, and she'll also do some research and fill us in on anything she hears from any other ghosts. So far I haven't seen any other ghosts in that kind of shape, though,” Cass answered. “What else are you curious about?”

Kushiel hesitated, but then he asked, “How does it work? You and the whole ghost thing? Could you always see them?”

“Yes, as long as I can remember. It's been passed down in my family for as long as we've had written or word of mouth record. There are always one or two of us each generation who have the vision and who can commune with ghosts and other afterlifers. We generally stick to ghosts, though, since we avoid the attention of afterlife management that way,” Cass explained.

“Are they... everywhere?” Kushiel whispered, and Cass had to suppress a laugh when Kushiel looked around suspiciously.

“No, not everywhere. They tend to avoid my home, because most of them know, or hear from other ghosts, that it's my private space. They do flock to the coffee shop, but even then, I probably only see a couple ghosts each day. Of course, there are always some wandering around town and such, but I don't approach them if they

don't approach me. They don't always need help. Sometimes they just don't want to leave the mortal plane, maybe because they're waiting for someone else to pass or they just want to watch over their family," Cass answered.

"Ah. Well that's good to know. You mentioned 'the vision'?" Kushiel questioned.

"Yes. I can see angels and demons in their true forms. I could see you before you revealed yourself," Cass admitted, watching Kushiel's face. He didn't seem upset, though, so Cass continued explaining. "I can see angels and demons when they're cloaked as well."

"So you always saw my angelic form?" Kushiel asked, clearly surprised.

"Yup. It's what I see now, actually. It takes effort for me to see what everyone else sees," Cass admitted. He couldn't help tacking on, "And your angelic form is beautiful."

Kushiel blushed again. Cass was getting kind of addicted to making that happen.

"I also have visions," Cass admitted. He figured he might as well get it all out there. "They can be of the past, present, or future. I also do, on occasion, serve as an oracle and speak directly with afterlifers that are not topside. That's far more complex, though, and not something that happens often."

They made it to the coffee shop entrance as Cass finished, and he turned and looked at Kushiel, who seemed to be taking it all in. Cass couldn't help adding, "I might see things about you. I don't mean to invade your privacy or intrude, but the visions are often outside of my control. I'm sorry about that."

Kushiel looked surprised at the apology. "I do not mind if you see anything about me, Cassius. I would not hide anything from you. You are... kind," he murmured.

Cass smiled and opened the coffee shop door, because otherwise he was gonna give Kushiel a hug, and he didn't know if the angel would welcome it. He wanted to ask about his apparent aversion to touch, but they were at the shop now and that conversation was best left for later.

They walked in, and Cass saw Paz and Trent sitting at a corner table, chatting and drinking their coffees. He waved at them, and Paz waved back cheerily, calling out good morning. Even though it wasn't terribly early, Trent sort of grunted. He must not have had enough coffee yet.

He bypassed the line and waved to Steph and Sam, who were both bustling about. Steph waved him to the back, indicating she didn't need his help. When they entered the back room, Kushiel placed a hand on his arm, stopping him short. His hand was warm and sent tingles running through Cass, but he made sure not to show any indication of surprise. He liked that Kushiel had reached out to him, and he didn't want to startle the angel

Cass looked at Kushiel, who was staring at him with concern. "That was a demon," Kushiel said. He was obviously talking about Paz.

"Yup. That's Paz—he's a possession demon, although I don't know if that's his title anymore. He and Trent are... matched up," Cass stated, not sure how much Kushiel knew of soulmates.

Kushiel's hand fell away and his face looked shocked.

"He's really a very nice demon," Cass assured Kushiel, not sure what had surprised the angel. He had the urge to comfort Kushiel, although he didn't know what had upset him.

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure he is. Most demons are pleasant, although they can cause trouble

topside. If he is mated to the human, though, then he wouldn't cause any issues," Kushiel responded.

There was still something off about Kushiel's response, but Cass didn't know what it was. Before he could inquire further, Aunt Ro popped in.

"Well it's about time you got to work," she complained.

Cass sighed. "Kushiel, Aunt Ro is here. Hopefully with some information for us."

"Nothing of much use, I'm afraid," she replied. "No one has seen any ghosts like the lost soul, although everyone agrees that there is some level of disturbance on the astral plane. The further I went from Paradise Falls, the less the disturbance was felt, so they're probably around here somewhere. I cannot fathom where they are, though. They're so lost and confused that they'd just be wondering about," she grumbled.

Cass filled Kushiel in, and the angel looked thoughtful. "Can ghosts be... held? Or trapped?" he asked.

Aunt Ro gasped in outrage, but Cass sent her a look and cut her off before she could start ranting. "Calm down Aunt Ro. He isn't asking because he wants to trap any; he's asking because that would make the most sense for where the souls are. You're right that they would be wandering around lost and confused, unless someone had... stored them somewhere. That would explain the disturbance on the astral plane as well."

"Who would do such a horrible thing?" she gasped.

"I don't know who would do it," Cass answered her. "But Kushiel and I aim to find out, and we'll start looking for the ghosts as well. If the despair and pain I felt from one ghost was so obvious, I'd think we'll be able to feel many ghosts. Paradise Falls

isn't huge, but there are plenty of forested areas and buildings in the vicinity to make it a pretty big area to search."

"If they can be trapped, perhaps their despair can also be contained," Kushiel ventured, and Cass nodded his head in response.

"Yes, that is possible, and that will only make things harder," Cass sighed. "Aunt Ro, if you could check on the ghost at my house I'd appreciate it. Otherwise, if you can try to narrow down a specific area for us to search, that would definitely be helpful."

She looked doubtful, but Aunt Ro gave him a nod before she disappeared.

"She's gone," Cass told Kushiel. "This does make our job harder. And in the meantime, I do have a shop to run," he grumbled.

"How may I be of assistance?" Kushiel asked.

Cass almost told him not to worry about it, but he looked at Kushiel, and he knew the angel wouldn't be able to sit and relax while Cass worked. Plus, having the help wouldn't be unwelcome.

"How are you with numbers?" Cass asked, and Kushiel's smile in response was answer enough. Perhaps getting payroll and scheduling done wouldn't be as awful as usual.

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Kushiel stared at Cassius, whose head was bent over a schedule, checking the coverage for the next week. His brown hair was tousled as he continually ran his hand through it while he worked, and Kushiel found the habit rather endearing.

Kushiel's hand still felt warm from where he'd touched Cass, although he knew that was in his head. He itched to touch the human again. Cass's skin had been warm and soft, and Kushiel had felt a pulse of... something when he'd laid his hand on Cass's bare skin.

Desire. He had felt a pulse of desire. He couldn't lie to himself about that.

There was something amazingly attractive about knowing that someone saw you for who and what you were and still accepted you. Cass had only ever shown him acceptance and kindness, despite his shortcomings.

It was almost a relief knowing that he didn't need to hide the darker parts of his job from the human. Cass hadn't rejected Kushiel because of his fallen status or the darkness that surely resided within him. After all, Kushiel's skin was gray and his hair and wings were black. He was no shining angel, yet Cass was so wonderful to him.

Yes, the demons treated him equally, but he was always conscious of a divide between them, even if they never acted like there was. He wasn't a demon, although sometimes he thought his life would be easier if he was.

Seeing a lesser demon out front with a human had driven that point even further home, and Kushiel could admit the dark emotion of envy had entered his heart. The

lesser demon apparently had a soulmate—surely that’s what Cass meant when he said they were “matched up”—and Kushiel couldn’t help the jealousy that burst through him.

He had no doubt that Paz was a wonderful lesser demon, and he knew he was not deserving of such a blessing as a soulmate, but he envied the demons who had one. He wished for such a connection, which was silly. Angels did not have soulmates. He didn’t know why, but they didn’t, and surely if one was going to get a soulmate, it wouldn’t be him. There were far purer souls than his.

Kushiel couldn’t help the sigh that escaped him, and Cass looked up at him.

“Almost done. Thank you so much for your help with payroll and the budget sheets. I guess you’re good at balancing things out,” Cass smiled.

Kushiel chuckled at that. “I suppose that is one way to look at it.”

Cass chuckled too, but then he sort of stared at Kushiel with a slight frown. “What is it?” Kushiel asked.

Cass looked like he was about to ask something, but at that moment, he suddenly reared back and looked over to Kushiel’s left, then he flinched like he was being yelled at. Kushiel wondered if his aunt was back.

“Whoa, slow down,” Cass said calmly, then he winced again. He nodded a few times, looked at Kushiel apologetically, then nodded some more at the apparent ghost.

“Yes, yes, I understand... Well of course I can see that it’s unfair... I don’t know that I’d use the word “murder”...” Cass replied to... whoever, because it didn’t sound like it was his aunt.

Cass flinched again after that, and Kushiel figured the ghost must have disagreed. It was almost comical watching the exchange, even though he only got one side of it. Cass had been really good about translating for Kushiel so far, but this seemed to be a high strung ghost from Cass's constant flinching.

"No, no, I don't think haunting someone is really the solution... Well, yes, I see how upsetting that would be... But she wasn't actually the one who killed you, was she?"

That last question was apparently the wrong thing to ask, because Cass flinched, then he looked at Kushiel and rolled his eyes. After about a minute he seemed to reach the end of his patience.

"Listen up. Nope! No interrupting. I understand you're upset, but people move on with their lives, and as painful as it is that your best friend hooked up with your boyfriend, that does not mean that she orchestrated your death."

The ghost must have done some more yelling then based on Cass's long suffering sigh. After another minute he firmly stated, "Enough. You're done. I will pass your concerns along to the appropriate channels, but if I hear about you harassing either your friend or your boyfriend over this, I will send you to the afterlife. Are we clear? Good. Now you are hereby unwelcome from my shop," Cass stated firmly.

Cass breathed a sigh of relief then, looking over at Kushiel. "Sorry about that. No time for translations with that one. She was obviously... distraught."

Kushiel couldn't help the laugh that escaped him, and Cass smiled in response. "Distraught seems like an understatement based on the number of times you flinched," Kushiel joked.

"Yeah. Some people stick around to be ghosts, but they don't realize that means they don't get away from the drama that plagued them in life. Based on some of that

ghost's ranting, it sounds like she and the boyfriend were having a tough time anyway, which is probably why she isn't mad at him. She didn't expect that of her friend, I think, and that's why she's so upset. But some people deal with grief in funny ways." Cass shrugged.

"Yes, all the human emotions can cause difficult responses," Kushiell agreed.

Cass nodded in agreement, then stated, "True. Still, I highly doubt anyone murdered her—it sounds like she was in some kind of accident, but I'll have someone look into it anyway just in case. Maybe the ghost is projecting onto her best friend but someone really did harm her. Do you mind if I text my contact now to see if they're available?"

"Of course not," Kushiell responded. "It isn't like we have any leads on the lost souls, as much as it pains me to admit it."

Cass nodded, adding, "Yes, I was hoping we'd have something from Aunt Ro by now. The good news is that after this I can devote myself entirely to you, because the shop will be caught up."

As he picked up his phone and started typing a text, Kushiell had to suppress a shiver. He knew Cass didn't mean that to sound the way it did, but the idea of Cass devoting himself entirely to Kushiell was... alluring.

Kushiell thought of Cass's hand on his arm, the warmth of his flesh, the touch both firm and yet gentle somehow at the same time. He thought of that hand traveling up his arm, sliding over his shoulder, and coming up to rest against his face, perhaps gently cradling his cheek. He closed his eyes, and it was like he could feel Cass's skin against his, and could he be blamed if he thought of Cass then leaning forward and pressing his lips against Kushiell's? It would be gentle at first, his lips pressing firmly...

“Kushiel?” Cass asked.

Kushiel started, his eyes flying open. His hand was on his lips, and he jerkily put his arm down, sitting up straighter in his chair. He almost scoffed at himself; he was the Rigid One of God, for heaven’s sake, and here he was getting lost in daydreams like some fledgling angel. They had a mystery to solve and a ghost to help.

“I apologize,” Kushiel said stiffly. “I was... distracted.”

“That’s alright, no worries. They’ll be here in like twenty minutes as long as you don’t mind waiting.”

“Of course not,” Kushiel answered.

There was a moment of silence then, and Cass was staring at him. Kushiel was desperate to change the subject before Cass asked what he was distracted by. He certainly didn’t want to lie to Cass, but admitting what he was thinking would be... mortifying. Whatever would Cass want with someone like him?

Kushiel cleared his throat, derailing his train of thought, and he asked, “Before we were interrupted, were you going to ask me something?”

“Ah, yeah, I was,” Cass murmured before looking down.

Kushiel didn’t like seeing him hesitant. Cass was confident and in charge. He said that Kushiel was beautiful, but Cass was truly the beautiful one. He was kind and sweet and competent, and he was powerful and intelligent. Kushiel had no desire to cause him to feel unsure of himself.

“I will tell you anything I can, Cassius. I promise,” Kushiel assured him.

“Yes, well, ah, it’s just that it’s maybe a little personal,” Cass responded. “I don’t want to trample over any boundaries you might have.”

“I would have no boundaries with you, Cass,” Kushiel responded. He blushed after he said it, because he realized that he meant it, and he meant it in more ways than Cass could even guess.

Cass smiled at him gently, making Kushiel feel even more... he didn’t even know what to call it. Uncomfortable wasn’t the right word. It was a nice feeling, but also a scary one. It was like a mix of nervous and happy, and it was strange.

Kushiel cleared his throat then, simply saying, “I will not lie to you. I will tell you if I cannot answer or if I am uncomfortable. You may ask me anything, Cassius.”

“I wondered... well, you shy away from touch. I’m not offended or anything,” Cass rushed to add, probably because Kushiel felt mortified again, and Cass must have noticed. “It’s perfectly fine, but I just wondered why you didn’t like to be touched,” Cass added.

Kushiel took a deep breath. “I did not mind your touch earlier, Cassius. I... enjoyed it,” Kushiel assured him. Cass smiled, but he let Kushiel sort out his thoughts and waited for him to continue speaking. He probably knew there was more to it, and there was. Kushiel had promised no boundaries.

“It is... painful for me,” Kushiel started, and Cass looked appalled at that, so Kushiel rushed to reassure him. “Not your touch. Your touch is not painful. You may touch me anytime you like,” he rushed out, then he wanted to bang his head against a wall, because he just kept saying suggestive things without even meaning to.

“I’m sorry. I’m mucking this all up,” he grumbled.

Cass reached slowly over, resting a hand gently on his arm. “It’s okay, Kushiel. Take your time. Anything you want to tell me, I’ll be happy to hear,” Cass assured him.

Kushiel barely moved. It was like a beautiful and rare butterfly had landed on his arm, and he was afraid if he even twitched Cass’s hand would take flight, and he would lose that gentle touch against his skin. He realized he was staring at Cass’s hand and looked up, but Cass was again just smiling softly at him,

What had he done to deserve to be in this man’s presence? Cass was so thoughtful and lovely, and it took Kushiel’s breath away for a moment. He would tell Cass anything he wanted to know. Hopefully it would not make him draw away.

“Hell... it burns. Not for demons, I don’t think, but I am not a demon. At first, it was excruciating, but I had a job to do, and I did it. My body was like one giant nerve ending of pain when I was there, although it grew less and less as the centuries wore on. To be touched in hell is not comfortable. Then there is heaven. As the centuries drew on, hell became less uncomfortable, but heaven became colder and colder. To be touched in heaven is like dipping my skin into a bucket of ice water, only colder. It feels like my skin will shatter like a hollow ice cube. So over time I became less likely to seek out touch, and honestly, others became less likely to touch me. I think they all saw my lowered status, and they drew away.”

Cass squeezed his arm at that, but he stayed silent and let Kushiel continue on. “In Limbo and here on Earth, touch is not painful, but I was never one to venture topside that often. I had so much work to do in Limbo and on Erebus,” Kushiel finished.

“But it can be painful in Limbo, can’t it?” Cass murmured, squeezing Kushiel’s arm again lightly. “When you are punishing a soul who seeks redemption, it’s painful then, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Kushiel admitted.

At that moment Steph yelled out Cassius's name, and Cass looked apologetically at Kushiel. "I think my contact is here. We'll chat more later, ok?" he asked.

"Of course, Cassius. Work comes first," Kushiel agreed, standing up and heading out of the back room and toward the shop to meet Cassius' contact.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

Cass tried to get his head back onto troublesome ghosts and off the beautiful, heartbreaking angel he was following behind.

So much pain. Cass fought off his indignation. He didn't get involved in afterlife politics. He knew plenty about the afterlife from his teachings growing up, and the information had been passed down through the generations that everyone wanted to avoid the "leadership team" at all costs, and so they dealt with ghosts and tried to stay off the radar for demons and angels. Of course they offered help, but his family didn't give details about themselves or get too involved in demonic or angelic affairs.

Still, he had the urge to find his way to some higher level angel and give them a piece of his mind. Kushiel was selfless and cared so much that he was literally willing to sacrifice pieces of himself to help those in need, and yet he was ostracized for it. Not only that, but he felt actual pain in both heaven and hell. What kind of bullshit was that? No wonder Kushiel felt so alone and so unworthy.

Cass vowed to change that. Kushiel was beyond worthy, and Cass would make him see that.

They had reached the front of the store, and his thoughts were interrupted when he heard Ari call out, "Bruh! You found Cassius! Michael said he thought maybe our coffee shop dude could help you find who you were looking for!"

"Let's take this to a table, yes?" Cass said, shooing them all over to one that was in a corner where sound didn't carry very well. Not that such a thing would really matter with Ari—the demon was exuberant.

They all made their way over and took seats, and Cass wasn't surprised to see Michael practically sitting on Ari's lap after Ari dragged him closer. Michael looked quite pleased to be dragged so close, too. It made Cass realize that Kushiel was kind of like Michael in some ways. Michael didn't seem to initiate touch or affection that often with Ari, yet it was obvious that he loved it when Ari did it.

It was something to think about. He thought Kushiel could definitely use some affection, and clearly he would need to take the initiative, because Kushiel certainly wouldn't. Did Cassius also secretly hope that the affection would not be entirely platonic? Yes, yes he did. He would respect Kushiel's boundaries, of course, but he had a feeling that Kushiel would welcome more intimate touch.

Cass tried not to think about soulmates and possibilities, but that was hard with Michael and Ari sitting in front of him, the two of them tied so clearly together.

"Are you able to help Kushiel find who he's looking for?" Michael asked. "Ari and I know about the situation, but Ari's vision was really limited. We've been trying to help as best we can, but you seem to know a lot, so we hoped you could help."

"Yes, Cassius has provided assistance," Kushiel stated. He didn't elaborate, although Michael was clearly waiting for more information.

"I'm actually here to ask you to look into a recent death if possible. There are people who are concerned, and I promised to pass it along. I knew I could trust you to see if there was more to it," Cassius stated. He then filled in Michael and Ari on the girl who had passed, asking them to make sure it was an accident.

"Bruh, my little s'more and I got you covered," Ari said when Cass was done. "But dudes, what about all this lost soul stuff? Any progress?"

"Yes, we are looking into it. Apparently they are hidden from my view, but I have

every confidence that Cassius will help me,” Kushiel stated.

Cass noticed that he avoided giving them too much information about him, which he appreciated. Really, at this point, he thought it would be ok, but he was still thankful that Kushiel was respecting his privacy.

Ari seemed like he was gonna ask more, but Michael sort of elbowed him and said, “Ok. You guys know where we are if you need help. We’ll be on our way. Keep us posted.”

“I shall. Thank you both,” Kushiel nodded.

Michael and Ari got up and started walking out then, but when they got to the door, Michael paused and turned around. “Oh yeah. I almost forgot. Grams asked after you just the other day. She wanted to know if you liked her gift.”

“Oh,” Kushiel stated, clearly surprised. “Yes, tell her thank you, although it hasn’t really been chilly.”

“Yeah, true,” Michael laughed. “Well, you guys enjoy your afternoon!”

They left at that, and Cass looked at Kushiel, who seemed oblivious to the importance of what had just occurred.

“Kushiel?” Cass asked, trying to remain calm.

“Yes? What is it?” Kushiel responded, obviously catching on to the fact that Cass was a little out of sorts.

Cass took a deep breath before he said, “Did Grams, the woman who raised Michael, give you a gift?”

“Yes, she did. A white scarf,” Kushiel answered, clearly perplexed.

“Where is it?” Cass asked, almost holding his breath. He had completely forgotten about his vision of a white scarf until Kushiel mentioned it, and he had no idea if his vision had been a warning about the scarf or a premonition that Kushiel was supposed to wear it.

“I have it with me. Well, sort of. It is where I keep things, like a change of clothes. A magical space, I guess? I’m not sure how to explain. I simply will it into being here and will it back into being stored,” Kushiel explained.

Cass took another deep breath.

“What is wrong, Cassius? I can tell you are... agitated, but I’m not sure why. It is just a white scarf,” Kushiel murmured.

Cass took a slow blink at that. “Kushiel, I don’t blame you, because really, Michael or even Arioach should have had more sense about this...” Cass trailed off, shaking his head in disbelief.

“What?” Kushiel asked.

“Do you know who Grams is, Kushiel? She is Lilith, and she gave you a scarf. She probably knit the damn thing, if I’m guessing. And they didn’t think that perhaps that was, I don’t know, really important? Lilith doesn’t just do things on whims. Then a bunch of souls go missing and no one thinks anything of a knit white scarf gifted to you by Lilith?” Cass groused.

Kushiel blinked at him, then he asked, “Are you thinking she somehow had something to do with the lost souls? You said it was a demon, but she isn’t quite a demon.”

“No, I don’t think she had anything to do with it. Can you take the scarf out?” Cass asked.

Kushiel reached down, and then a large, fluffy, shining white scarf was being pulled out of Kushiel’s lap under the table. Yes, Cass supposed he should have thought about the fact that they were in his shop.

Kushiel readily handed it over, and Cass took it. It was incredibly soft, and it shone. “It matches you,” Cass murmured, running his hands along the soft material. He had no idea what it was, because it certainly wasn’t animal fiber.

“Not quite matching,” Kushiel laughed uncomfortably. “It is blindingly white. I am more of a gray hue.”

Cass looked up then. “Your soul, Kushiel. It matches your soul.”

Kushiel looked shocked, but Cass couldn’t help looking back down at the scarf. He could see things, see inside things, see true forms, and yet there was something about this scarf that he couldn’t quite grasp. It was like... it was like he was looking into a mirror, only it was really dirty so he couldn’t quite see the reflection in it. He had the urge to wipe away the haze, but of course there was no haze, just this strange material that was bright and shining. He supposed it looked like a normal knit scarf to everyone else, but it wasn’t.

Before Kushiel could stop him, he wrapped the scarf around his neck. He trusted Lilith—he had only ever had good interactions with her, and his family respected her—but he wouldn’t take a chance with Kushiel.

He waited. He looked around. He looked down at the scarf. Nothing happened.

“It looks lovely on you,” Kushiel stated.

“I think I’ll wear it for the walk back,” Cass stated. He didn’t sense anything malicious, and nothing had gone wrong, but better safe than sorry.

“Perhaps I was meant to give the gift to you,” Kushiel smiled, and he reached out to run his hand along the scarf.

Cass fought off the urge to grab Kushiel’s hand and hold it. Baby steps. His angel was... shy. Hesitant. Cass wouldn’t scare him off, so he simply smiled back, pushing his chair back and getting up. Kushiel followed suit.

They walked over to Steph and made their goodbyes, and Cass made sure again that everything was set with the shop.

“I told you, I have it. Stop worrying,” she grumbled at him. “Although I do think I found a guy who would work as another manager. He’s really good with numbers. I’m going to call him for an interview if that sounds good to you.”

“Yes, please, especially if he’ll do some of the paperwork,” Cass told her. “If it goes well, let me know what kind of salary he’s looking for, and I can set up a meeting with him. I trust you to do the initial interview, though.”

“Thanks, Cass. You two have fun and enjoy a few days off,” she winked.

Cass laughed at her, and he couldn’t help being entertained at the blush that stained Kushiel’s cheeks. Yes, Steph obviously thought he was taking some time off for a little fun. He didn’t correct her.

They made their way out the door, and they walked for a few minutes in companionable silence. Cass looked around and kept constant stock of how he felt, but absolutely nothing was different with the scarf on. He looked over at Kushiel and looked more closely. The angel was as blindingly bright as usual, and those gold

threads were still on, or in, his soul. Were there more? Were they reaching out a little closer to Cass?

He wasn't sure if that was actually the case or if it was wishful thinking on his part.

"Do you sense anything? Any of the pain or misery that you felt from the other lost soul?" Kushiel asked, reminding Cass that they did indeed have a job to do.

"No, I don't," Cass answered. "Tell me about them. The souls."

Kushiel talked to him for the entire walk back, giving details about a few of the lost souls they were looking for. He talked not just about their grief and pain, but about their personalities. Cass had a hard time thinking of someone with no memory of who they were as having a personality, but obviously they did. Kushiel described them, including which ones were snarky and which were soft spoken and which were imaginative and creative.

It made Cass think of all the facets that made up someone's personality, all those little foibles and traits that made each person who they were outside of their memories and experiences. It was an interesting thought.

Before he knew it they were back at his house.

Cass sighed at the door. "I'm not sure what this scarf is supposed to do, but I don't think it means you harm. It wasn't meant for me, either. Lilith meant it for you, although I'm not sure why or what it will do," Cass admitted, unwinding it from around his neck and wrapping it around Kushiel's carefully.

He watched the angel closely to make sure he was alright, but aside from a slight shiver when Cass wrapped it around his neck, Kushiel didn't react to the scarf.

“Does it feel ok?” Cass checked.

“Yes. It feels like a scarf, I suppose. I don’t notice anything. Did you really think it might do me harm? And yet you put it on yourself?” Kushiell asked.

“Better safe than sorry,” Cass mumbled, and then he opened the door and motioned Kushiell inside, hoping to avoid worrying Kushiell about what he had done. He didn’t really think Lilith would hurt them, after all.

Only when Kushiell stepped into the house, he stopped short ahead of Cass, gasping.

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Kushiel barely had time to worry over the fact that Cassius had put himself in danger for him, which was simply not acceptable.

He was mulling over how to let Cass know that he shouldn't ever put himself in danger, real or imagined, for Kushiel, when he walked into the house.

Only it wasn't empty. There was a curvy woman with curly brown hair and an old-fashioned dress standing in the hallway. He gasped, and Cass came charging in, gently taking Kushiel's shoulder and spinning him so they faced each other. Kushiel couldn't help the little shudder that went through him; the hallway wasn't that wide, and their bodies were so close to each other. Cass was looking at Kushiel carefully, and he reached a hand up to cup his face.

"Are you alright? Is something wrong?" Cass demanded.

"He looks perfectly fine, Cass. Really, must you grope him in the hallway while I'm here?" the woman huffed.

Cass just ignored her though, staring at Kushiel and waiting for an answer. Kushiel couldn't help turning to look at her, though, even though it very sadly made Cass's hand fall away from his face.

He watched her carefully as he leaned closer to Cass, whispering, "There's a strange woman in your hallway, Cassius."

"Hmph. Strange woman. I am certainly not a strange woman. I'm quite normal, thank you very much," she huffed. "He's the one who's strange."

Cass finally turned to look over at her, hissing, “Aunt Ro.”

“This is Aunt Ro?” Kushiell asked, mystified.

Both Cass and Aunt Ro looked at him in shock then. “He can see me?” she exclaimed. “He shouldn’t be able to see me! He’s an angel!”

“You can see her?” Cass asked. “She isn’t sure why that’s possible, so I’m guessing she didn’t do anything to make it happen.”

“Well, I should certainly think I wouldn’t do anything to be seen by an angel!” she sputtered, putting her hands on her hips. “They’re the stuck up ones, after all. If I was gonna be seen by anyone it would at least be demons!”

Kushiell chuckled a little at that, because he didn’t disagree with her. Also, he was kind of in shock that he could even see her, and a little nervous laughter eased the tension in him a bit.

Only Cass and Aunt Ro were really staring at him, both of them slightly open mouthed.

“Oh my goodness, can he hear me too?” Aunt Ro whispered dramatically.

Cass placed a hand on his arm, and Kushiell turned to look at him, answering the unspoken question that was in Cass’s face.

“Yes, I can hear her too,” he confirmed.

“Well that’s inconvenient,” muttered Aunt Ro. “Does this mean that all afterlifers can see me now? Is it just me? Or is it all ghosts? This will definitely put a hitch in things if upper management gets an eye on us. I am not cut out for paperwork, Cass. You

had better fix this,” she grouched, then she turned and walked down the hallway and into the living room.

Kushiel started to follow her, but Cass gently held him back, causing Kushiel to look at him.

“Are you alright? Do you feel alright?” Cass asked.

“I feel fine. Confused, perhaps, but totally fine otherwise,” Kushiel confirmed.

Cass let him go then and led the way into the living room, where Kushiel gave a start again, because Aunt Ro had changed. Her hair was in some type of updo and her dress was still old-fashioned, but it was fancier and had large blue flowers on it now.

“You look different,” Kushiel stated.

“Well give this one a medal,” she huffed.

“Aunt Ro, be nice,” Cass chastised. “He can hear you. Mind your manners. I know you have them, because you certainly taught me how to behave.”

She only huffed in response, but Kushiel figured if she disagreed she’d have said so. She didn’t seem the type to hold her tongue if she thought she was right.

“Kushiel, take off your scarf,” Cass ordered.

Ah. Yes, Kushiel supposed that made sense. He unwound it from around his neck and held it in his hands, and he still saw Aunt Ro. He handed it over to Cass, and suddenly the space where Aunt Ro had been was empty.

He looked at Cass and nodded, and Cass handed him back the scarf. As soon as he

had it back in his hands, Aunt Ro was back, and she was apparently mid-tirade.

“...while you two are busy playing with outerwear!” she complained.

“Yes, it must be the scarf,” Kushiel confirmed, looking over at Cass. “I can hear and see her again, and I could do neither without it.”

“Hmph,” she muttered.

Cass looked at Aunt Ro. “No panicking necessary. It’s just Kushiel who can see you, and only with the scarf. Nice touch on the dahlias, by the way.”

Kushiel looked at Cass in confusion, and he just laughed.

“Dahlias mean discovery. They also mean balance and being true, although that isn’t what my message was,” Aunt Ro conceded. She then asked, “Where did he get such a thing, anyway? If someone is out there giving talismans to afterlifers so they can see us... Well, we ought to do something about that.”

“You mean I ought to do something about that,” Cass grumped.

“Well I can’t be seen by just any riff raff, Cassius. I’ll not have some two-bit charlatan blowing my cover,” she scoffed.

“I would love to see you tell Lilith that she’s some ‘two bit charlatan,’” Cass laughed, adding, “Besides, this isn’t some Mission Impossible thing—you don’t have a cover, Aunt Ro.”

“I do plenty of undercover work, young man,” she defended. “But yes, I suppose if Lilith gave it to him then perhaps there is a reason, and I trust she isn’t doing such things for just anyone.”

Cass looked at Kushiel and whispered, “She knows better than to go up against Lilith. Even she isn’t that dumb.”

Kushiel wasn’t sure why he whispered, because clearly Aunt Ro was standing right there and could still hear him. She just gave Cass a dirty look, though. It was interesting to see the two family members interact, and although they grumped at one another, Kushiel could clearly see that they cared deeply for each other. It was heartwarming. Kushiel thought that was what it must be like to be a part of a family, but he also thought he might need to get them back on track or else they’d tease each other all afternoon.

“This ought to make things easier in our search, I would think,” Kushiel stated, bringing up the task they had ahead of them. “I won’t be such a burden now that I can also see the spirits.”

“K, you have never been a burden, and I can promise that you never will be,” Cass insisted.

“K? Like ok?” Kushiel asked, getting stuck on that one word, because it was easier than focusing on the rest of his statement, which made that fluttery feeling come back.

Cass laughed. “No. K. Like the letter k. Short for Kushiel. I mean, I could go with Kush, but you don’t strike me as a Kush. And using the last part of your name doesn’t really work either. But the first initial works for a shortened version, no? I can stick with Kushiel if you don’t like it.”

“Ah, so we’re at the nicknames stage, are we?” Aunt Ro asked, and Kushiel felt like he couldn’t keep up with her, because where she had been glowering and seemed predisposed to strongly dislike him before, she was now smirking at him and looking rather pleased. She even sidled a little closer and winked at him, which made him

look over to Cass for guidance.

“Aunt Ro, leave him alone,” Cass grumbled. “We have work to do.”

He gestured Kushiel over to the couch, and after Kushiel sat, Cass sat next to him. Their legs were almost touching, and Kushiel tried very hard not to be distracted by that fact.

“Hmm, perhaps the other meanings for dahlias are appropriate after all,” she murmured, and Kushiel felt a bit like an unsuspecting worm who was about to be snatched by a bird. She was smiling at him, and it was... disconcerting. He had dealt with demons who were less frightening than her.

“Keep your machinations to yourself, Aunt,” Cass scolded her. “Be useful and go get the other ghost.”

Aunt Ro huffed at Cass, but she flounced off into the other room. Kushiel still felt clueless and confused, because he had no idea what plans Aunt Ro might have for him. He was distracted from asking when Cass cleared his throat and laid a hand on Kushiel’s knee.

Kushiel needed to get himself under control. His reaction to Cass was not appropriate. The man was kind and sweet and treated everyone with respect, and Kushiel would not sully that with his baser... desires.

He was not worthy of someone such as Cass. He only needed to remember that to quell the fluttering inside him. He would protect Cass and find the lost souls; that was his job.

“You alright, K?” Cass asked, looking at Kushiel closely.

Luckily, Kushiel was saved from answering, because Aunt Ro came back in at that moment, although the pesky flutterings returned at Cass's use of the nickname. Kushiel had never had a nickname before. He was distracted quickly enough when he saw what Aunt Ro returned with, though.

It was... Well, Kushiel couldn't rightly say what it was. It was a shadow, like a figure seen in a totally dark room. It was low to the ground, like it was crawling. He could vaguely make out four limbs, a body, and a face, but any distinct features were completely missing.

The ghost came straight to him and crawled up next to him, and when it was resting against his side, he felt the lost soul that he knew.

Outrage flowed through Kushiel again. Someone had done this to all the souls on Erebus. This shadow had once been a complete soul; they had been able to speak and they had features, even though most souls in Erebus weren't clearly one gender and didn't have distinctive features. They retained a general human form, their ability to communicate, and essential facets of their personalities, but much else from their earthly forms was lost.

The souls didn't have names anymore on Erebus, but Kushiel often thought of them by nicknames. He had nicknamed this one Professor, because this soul had been one who had talked often and extensively with him, and they had struggled with the nature of good and evil. They had reveled in conversation and philosophizing, and Kushiel had felt they were close to being ready for reincarnation; their light had been growing brighter and brighter in recent months.

Now they were a hollowed out shell of what they had once been. Kushiel pushed his love and forgiveness into the ghost, and he felt a stab of pain inside himself at the action, but it didn't matter. He couldn't not help, and he continued to pour himself into the ghost despite the agony it caused.

Through the haze of pain, he heard Cass gasp and felt his hand grip Kushiell's leg even more tightly. Kushiell held onto that feeling, letting the peace that was Cass's soul ease his pain.

"Heavens," Aunt Ro gasped.

"You see it too?" Cass asked, but the voices sounded far away.

He felt hands pulling him away from the ghost, and though his vision was slightly dim, he thought Aunt Ro was taking the hand of the lost soul in her own and leading it away.

Then somehow Kushiell's head was laying in Cass's lap, because Kushiell was looking up into his face, which looked almost... loving.

And that was the last thought Kushiell had before darkness claimed him.

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Cassius gently smoothed Kushiel's dark hair away from his face.

"Will he be alright?" Aunt Ro asked, wringing her hands.

"I think so," Cassius whispered. "He seems brighter again, doesn't he?"

Aunt Ro hummed in agreement, and Cass continued to gently pet Kushiel's head. His hair was soft and silky, and Kushiel's head was a comforting weight in his lap. He smoothed his other hand down Kushiel's chest, where his light was strongest when Cassius looked for it. He focused in, sharpening his vision, and he watched as one of those tiny gold threads reached up and touched his wrist. He breathed in sharply, and Aunt Ro, who had been pacing, stopped and ran over.

"What is it? Is he alright?" she demanded.

Cass didn't answer; he just watched in awe as the tiny gold thread twined around his wrist. He felt himself tearing up a bit. So his hopes hadn't been unfounded. Kushiel was his mate. That was all this could mean, wasn't it?

Yes, there was only one thread, and Cass knew as soon as he let his focus slip he wouldn't be able to see it anymore, but surely it wouldn't have connected to him if they weren't mates. It was thin and weak, and he worried that any wrong action could snap it, but it was a beginning. It was hope.

He had known how much he felt for Kushiel, and this only made him realize how much he wanted the angel to be his. He could admit now that he loved all that Kushiel was, and maybe he had from that first sight of the angel's blindingly bright

soul. The selflessness, the humility, the caring, even the slightly formal awkwardness—Kushiel was perfect. Yes, he was shy and unsure of himself, but Cass would only be too happy to build him up.

“What’s the matter? Is he dying?” Aunt Ro shrieked, seeing the tears in Cass’s eyes. Kushiel’s face winced in pain at the noise.

“Lower your voice, Aunt. He isn’t dying. I mean, technically, I don’t think he can die? I don’t know. But at any rate, he’ll be alright. Don’t you see it?” he asked her.

“Well, yes, I can see his light. He really is one of the brightest angels I’ve ever seen, but you know your sight has always been better than mine. You are the most gifted amongst our line in ages, Cass. Perhaps those in charge knew you would need to see more than those who had gone before,” she mused.

“I thought we avoided those in charge,” Cass responded, still staring down in awe at the gold thread. It seemed that Aunt Ro couldn’t see, but he didn’t puzzle over that too much. He did have the best sight in generations, but even so, he knew he’d have to stop looking so hard soon, because it was a strain. Still, he couldn’t help marveling at the connection between them for a few more moments.

“No, Cassius. We avoid upper management, but they’re not actually in charge, although don’t tell them that. There are those above them, and I think there’s a greater plan at play.” She paused, then she murmured, “He did what I think he did, didn’t he?”

It was a confusing statement, but Cass knew what she was getting at. “Yes, Aunt. He pushed his light, his very being, into the ghost. He gave a part of himself over to heal the lost soul. I think it’s what he always does. I think it’s how he rehabilitates souls and enables them to be reincarnated. But I think it’s usually a much slower process.”

“But, Cassius, it doesn’t work that way. Souls don’t... refill. It isn’t like Kushiell is a cup of water that can be refilled. If he dumps all his water into other souls, he’ll be empty,” she insisted, taking the metaphor a bit too far.

“I don’t know, Aunt. Perhaps his soul is just that bright. Perhaps he has that much to give. Or perhaps he somehow is able to refill the light within his own soul. I couldn’t say, but all I know is that he glows just as brightly as he did before, and yet we both saw his light pouring into the ghost.”

Cass looked at his aunt then, and she just nodded in response.

“But why is his skin gray and his hair dark? He glows more brightly than other angels, and they don’t have those markings. That doesn’t seem fair,” she muttered.

“I think it’s because of his visits to hell. Our surroundings influence us—maybe it’s the equivalent to human’s getting a tan when they spend a lot of time in the sun. It’s just a shame that apparently other angels judge him for it,” Cass grumbled. It really did upset him to think about.

“Well those small-minded, idiotic, harp-playing snobs are merely candles to his sunshine. That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard. Are you really telling me he’s judged for his appearance?” she huffed.

Cass just shot his aunt a look, and she nodded in response.

“Yes, I suppose that is exactly what would happen,” she sighed, sitting down beside them. “Cass, we can’t let him be hurt. He would give himself up entirely, and he’s too good for such a thing.”

Cass smirked at her. “No longer suspicious of him?” he mocked.

She only huffed. They had both seen what he did, after all. They had both seen the ghost take form and shape in front of them, being fed from Kushiel's light. He didn't know how much further Kushiel would have gone, but he could tell it had pained the angel greatly to do what he did.

Cass wouldn't let Kushiel hurt himself. There had to be a better way, and together they would find it. Otherwise Kushiel would drain himself entirely in order to help others.

Cass knew his aunt was right; souls were not like a cup that you could empty and fill, and yet somehow Kushiel's soul had dimmed and then brightened again, like that was exactly what he did. It was like he had an endless well of light somewhere that he could draw from, and yet Cass couldn't imagine how that was possible.

He was also afraid for Kushiel, because if Kushiel emptied himself too quickly, which had clearly been what he was doing here, what would happen? If the metaphorical cup was empty, could it be refilled? Or would it shatter, and Kushiel would be no more?

Cass had no intention of finding out the answer to that question, that was for sure.

Kushiel stirred slightly in his arms, and Cass gently pulled his hand back, making sure the gold thread stayed attached. He let his extra sight go then and simply focused on Kushiel's face, which was creased and confused-looking, but his eyes were fluttering like he was finally waking up.

Kushiel opened his eyes, and Cass smiled lovingly at him. Kushiel's hand reached up and gently touched Cass's face, fingers trailing across his cheek.

"Am I dreaming?" he whispered.

“After the nightmare you put us through, I’d say not. Young man, you simply cannot risk yourself like that again,” Aunt Ro lectured.

Kushiel’s hand fell away, and he looked over at Aunt Ro, muttering, “Definitely not a dream then. And I haven’t been a young man in... well, ever.”

“Hmph. Well when you make stupid decisions you might as well be a young man. What did you think you were doing, hmm? You going to waste all your energy on one ghost? How many other ghosts are out there who probably need your help? You can’t give everything you have to one ghost. There’s too much work to be done. You have to take care of yourself first, Kushiel, and what you did was not taking care of yourself first,” she chastised.

Kushiel looked up at Cass then, a tiny frown on his face. “Is she lecturing me?” he asked.

Cass just laughed. “Yes, she certainly is.” Cass ran his hand through Kushiel’s hair again. Kushiel closed his eyes, obviously enjoying the sensation. Cass let the smile fall from his face, adding, “She is right, though. You gave us quite a start, and it was obviously painful for you. Promise me you won’t do that again, K.”

Kushiel opened his eyes and saw the serious look on Cass’s face, and he seemed immediately contrite. “I’m sorry, Cass. I did not mean to startle you.” He looked at Aunt Ro too. “I didn’t mean to startle either of you. I probably did push a little too much with that soul, and I do know better. I was just so surprised and angry at what had been done to it. I reacted.”

“Well, be sure to make better judgments next time. We can’t have you harming yourself,” Aunt Ro huffed.

“Yes, Aunt Ro,” Kushiel replied, and she smiled brightly at that. Cass realized that

Kushiel probably didn't even realize that calling her Aunt Ro would only encourage her matchmaking tendencies.

It was fitting, though. If Cass had his way, she was as good as Kushiel's aunt, too, and he didn't object to any matchmaking she might do now that he knew Kushiel would be his.

Kushiel made to get up, and Cass supported him as he did so. He didn't think Kushiel needed the assistance, but the angel didn't complain and seemed to lean in to Cass a bit. It thrilled Cass that Kushiel seemed to be getting more comfortable with his touch.

"How is the ghost?" Kushiel asked, because of course that's what he was worried about.

Aunt Ro huffed, but she stalked off, Cass assumed to bring the ghost out to see them.

"I really am sorry to have frightened you two," Kushiel murmured, looking over at Cass.

Cass reached up and smoothed Kushiel's hair back again; he simply couldn't help himself. And yes, Kushiel definitely leaned into the touch. It took all of Cass's willpower not to lean in and kiss Kushiel, or to at least envelop him in a hug.

"You did, but it's ok. It's who you are. You're a beautiful, giving angel, Kushiel."

Kushiel turned slightly pink, just like he did every time Cass said something about how wonderful he was.

They looked into each other's eyes, and Cass leaned forward the tiniest bit, and Kushiel leaned forward a bit too, and Cass was just about to close the distance

between their lips when he heard Aunt Ro mumbling to the ghost as she traipsed back into the room. Kushiel pulled back and looked down when she entered, smoothing his pants.

“Are we interrupting?” she giggled, and Cass noticed her dress now featured honeysuckle and red roses.

Cass just rolled his eyes. He loved Aunt Ro, really he did, but she was about as subtle as a hammer and had the worst timing ever, and death hadn’t improved those traits.

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Kushiel ran his hands along his pants while he got himself under control. His reaction to Cass was really so over the top. When they were looking at each other, Kushiel almost thought... Well, it was silly what he almost thought. Surely Cass hadn't been about to lean in to kiss him. The man was just offering him comfort and support. Kushiel pushed his feelings down and looked up to see Aunt Ro.

The ghost was trailing behind her, and they looked much different than they had before. They were upright now instead of crawling, and although they didn't quite look like a person, they also didn't look like just a shadow either. They were somewhere in between the two. It felt like if you squinted really hard maybe you'd be able to make out features, but you couldn't quite do it.

The ghost sort of walked and sort of floated over to Kushiel, and they once again curled up next to him. Kushiel felt like the soul was lighter than they had been before, and they were less fractured as well.

"Oh, my poor lost soul. Who did such a thing to you?" Kushiel asked, placing his hand where the ghost's head was. He didn't quite feel an actual head, but it felt like the air was thicker.

The ghost groaned, low and sad, and Cass and Aunt Ro both jerked, staring at them.

"Holy shit," Cass whispered.

"Oh, this would make life so much easier," Aunt Ro murmured.

Kushiel just looked at them, confused. "What would?" he asked.

“If the ghost can communicate, my dear,” Aunt Ro responded. “They haven’t been able to make any noise at all before now. I don’t think they were substantial enough. But if they can groan, then they could, theoretically, speak. They could tell us where they came from, who did this to them, where the others are?”

“If they even know any of that,” Cass interrupted.

“Well, yes, but surely they know something,” Aunt Ro insisted.

Kushiel gently let a little light into the ghost, making sure not to overdo things again. He really hadn’t meant to scare Cass—it was the last thing he wanted.

Cass looked at him, like he knew what Kushiel was doing, but Kushiel gave his best innocent look. Cass gave him a stern glance before focusing on the ghost again and sighing.

“Not to be a downer, but a groan is not exactly a fount of information. We aren’t sure how much they can communicate,” Cass reasoned, and Aunt Ro simply gave a huff in response.

“Well, I can try and communicate with them,” Kushiel offered.

“We can all try and communicate with them, but—and this is a big but—you are not to do anything to damage or risk yourself. Are we clear, K? Because I will have Aunt Ro whisk the ghost away so fast you won’t even know what’s happening if I see you draining yourself again,” Cass declared.

Kushiel had to suppress a shudder. It shouldn’t be so... attractive that Cass was chastising him.

“Got it, K?” Cass asked again, giving him a sharp look.

“Yes, Cassius. I will not risk myself,” Kushiell murmured, and he had to fight off a wildly inappropriate grin. Cass was almost yelling at him and he felt practically giddy.

Kushiell knew he was weird—gray angel with black wings after all—but he’d never enjoyed being yelled at, and he couldn’t understand why he felt so pleased.

Not that Cass had really yelled at him. Maybe it was just that Cass was looking out for him? He hadn’t had anyone worry about his well-being in... Well, ever, he guessed. He was an angel. He could take care of himself. He was fine and always would be.

Nevertheless, it was heady business to have someone else want to take on that role.

The room suddenly got a little darker, like all the lights had dimmed, and Aunt Ro began speaking in a deep voice.

“Angel or lost soul, whoever you may be, hear us now,” Aunt Ro intoned.

“What the hell are you doing?” Cassius asked, flicking his arm up and making the room appear brighter once again. “What have I told you, Aunt Ro, about screwing with the electricity? I am not replacing burst light bulbs again. If you want the brightness turned down I can tell Echo to do it.”

She huffed at him and mumbled something under her breath about “ambiance.”

“Besides,” Cass added, “this isn’t a damn seance. You aren’t a medium. You’re a ghost, for goodness sake.” He turned away from his aunt and looked at the ghost, mumbling, “I swear, I ought to earn some wings for having to put up with you lot. Dead people are so dramatic.”

Aunt Ro gasped. “How could you accuse that poor ghost of being dramatic, Cassius? Where are your manners?”

“I wasn’t accusing them, Aunt, I was accusing you. Now hush before I salt the doorways again,” he said, shifting his focus to the ghost.

Kushiel tilted his head, asking, “Does salting doorways really work?”

“Not really,” Cass admitted. “Aunt Ro is strong enough to deal with salt, plus she can always just pass through the walls. It does annoy her, though, and sometimes she deserves a little annoyance.” He gave her a look at that, but she just rolled her eyes at him, obviously not bothered by his threat.

Cass focused his attention on the ghost then. “Someone did this to you,” Cass stated.

The ghost groaned, low and mournful.

“Well they understand us, at least,” Aunt Ro whispered.

“Was it an angel?” Kushiel asked. He still couldn’t fathom that a demon had done it, although Cass’s logic was sound in that matter. Kushiel didn’t know how an angel would have gotten into Erebus.

The ghost was quiet, and Cass asked, “Was it a demon?”

The ghost groaned again, and Kushiel thought he saw the head nodding.

“There were many of you taken? Were you all taken together?” Cass asked.

The ghost groaned again, and yes, they were definitely nodding.

“Do you know where they are? Can you take us there?” Cass asked, but the ghost was silent.

“Shit,” Cass muttered.

“Uuhhd,” the ghost muttered.

“Yes, dear, we are all frustrated, but rest assured that we shall figure it out and save your fellow lost souls. And we’ll figure out what to do with you, as well,” Aunt Ro promised.

“Uhd,” the ghost said again. “UHD!”

Aunt Ro looked helplessly at Cass, who was staring intently at the ghost.

Kushiel pushed a little more of his light into the ghost, and Cass shot him a warning look.

“I’m being careful,” Kushiel promised, warmed by Cass’s concern and amazed that he even saw what Kushiel was doing.

The ghost seemed to get a little less hazy and a bit more clear to Kushiel.

“W-w-w..” the ghost stuttered out.

“Wood!” Aunt Ro shouted, startling everyone.

The ghost definitely nodded their head then.

“Ok,” Cass reasoned, “you were in woods? Or near woods?”

The ghost nodded again.

Kushiel looked at Cass, but Cass only shrugged. Perhaps this was not as much of a clue as Kushiel had hoped.

“The problem is that we have tons and tons of forested area around here,” Cass explained. “We have little patches of woods throughout the entire town that can’t be developed due to open space laws, and then there’s a large local park in the vicinity, and there’s also a state park not too far in the opposite direction. So unfortunately it doesn’t narrow down our focus all that much. But it is a starting point.”

“Yes, it gives us someplace to look. Although it doesn’t answer who did this either. I cannot fathom why a demon would do such a thing,” Kushiel puzzled.

Aunt Ro added, “You also don’t know if it’s safe. If a demon went to all this trouble, it’s most certainly up to something. Whether it’s attacking the souls, Kushiel, or the ghost realm, we have to think of it like an attack. We don’t know what the end game of this demon is.”

Kushiel nodded. “That makes sense. I feel confident that I can handle almost any demon, but that doesn’t mean I want to. And I cannot even begin to guess at the motives behind such a thing. I don’t have any demon enemies that I’m aware of, and why would anyone attack souls or the ghost realm?”

“And,” Aunt Ro added, “the demon obviously knew about the ghost realm, and they aren’t supposed to remember us or think about ghosts since we are more of the mortal plane than the afterlife. The very fact that this demon thought to make the lost souls into ghosts is somewhat concerning. They aren’t playing by afterlife rules any more, so we really can’t make any predictions.”

“That’s true—ghosts should not have occurred to them. It does make sense about the

woods though,” Cass said. “The ghosts are obviously being blocked or hidden somehow, and you’d need a lot of energy to do that. Drawing on living things, like trees, would accomplish that, especially if wards are involved.” Cass shook his head, adding, “You’re right in that we can’t begin to guess at motives. It doesn’t really make any sense to do this. It doesn’t accomplish anything.”

Cass was lost in thought, and Kushiel reached out and gently touched his hand. Cass immediately flipped his hand over and grasped Kushiel’s hand, and he had to tamp down the fluttery feeling that flowed through his body at the contact.

Kushiel had held the hands of lost souls before, and he’d held hands with those in Limbo who he was working toward redemption with, but he didn’t think he’d ever held someone’s hand without giving a piece of himself over to them.

It was lovely. Cass’s hand was warm and he could feel small calluses on it, probably from the baking he did. Holding hands was such a simple pleasure, and Kushiel couldn’t help staring at their intertwined hands.

“Well, I don’t know that we’ll do anything but go in circles about it now, so perhaps it’s best if we table this for now. I’ll take the ghost with me and we’ll explore a bit, see if anything looks familiar. You two need to eat and rest, and I think we’ll all think a bit more clearly once we’ve had time for things to sink in. Sleep on it, so to speak,” Aunt Ro chimed in, and Kushiel looked up to see her smiling at him fondly.

She gave him a little wink, and Kushiel had no idea how to respond to such a thing.

“Alright, off we go,” she said, taking the ghost by the hand and leading them away, only they just sort of disappeared instead of walking out.

Kushiel murmured in surprise and looked over at Cass.

Cass was still obviously thinking things through, but he gave a shake of his head, as if to clear his thoughts, and then looked at Kushiell.

“They just... disappeared,” Kushiell said.

Cass laughed. “I forget that you aren’t used to ghosts. It’s amazing you still even remember them, but I suppose we have this to thank for that,” Cass said, reaching out with his other hand and running it along the white scarf. “Lilith really did us a favor in the creation of this.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Kushiell said. “I feel rather stupid, but the universe has an order to it, and whatever is going on does not fit into that order. It isn’t the not seeing ghosts thing, either. I suppose if we’ve never seen them, then that’s the way it’s supposed to be, and I can see the logic in that. I can’t help but want to guide Aunt Ro to heaven—it’s clear she’s a beautiful soul who belongs there, and I want to see her happy in her afterlife placement. I suppose all demons and angels would try to influence ghosts to get them into the afterlife, so I do understand why we don’t, or can’t, interact with them.”

“Yes. It’s in an afterlifer’s nature to want things ordered and organized, and ghosts are not either of those things. I’m sometimes amazed Limbo is allowed to exist, because it seems outside the order as well,” Cass threw in.

“Limbo does exist inside the order, though. It is a resting place for travelers who are unsure, and it ensures that no one is placed wrong or is unhappy in heaven. That would defeat the purpose. Only having one option would not be satisfactory. It is why reincarnation is also an option, and why ghosthood would be an option, even if we do forget about it. I suppose we don’t forget about reincarnation because we know those souls are bound for mortality, so we do not worry about them until they die again.” Kushiell paused, then asked, “How do you know so much? Your knowledge is beyond my own in many ways.”

Cass just smiled. “Thousands of years of research passed down through my family. It was like bootcamp. As soon as my family knew I could see ghosts, my path was set. As a kid, my after school activities consisted of studying old journals and diaries from family members, talking to ghosts, and being taught all about this stuff. When I was young and Aunt Ro was still alive she even called in the occasional lesser angel or demon just to let me ask questions. I grew up steeped in this. And if I see more, it’s only because I have the benefit of being an outsider looking in, so I have a unique perspective.”

“You have great wisdom, Cassius,” Kushiell stated.

Cass squeezed his hand, and Kushiell felt a little thrill run through him. He had been wondering if Cass even still realized they were holding hands. The touch was... comforting, but also somehow thrilling.

“You’re right that the universe has an order to it,” Cass added. “But lately, that order has been upended. Take the whole soulmate thing.”

Kushiell could not help his slight flinch, and he knew Cass felt it, but he couldn’t explain that he was jealous of those demons who got to have soulmates. Kushiell wasn’t proud of his envy.

“Yes, I can see your point,” Kushiell admitted. “Soulmates never existed before very, very recently. They would seem to be outside of the order of the universe. They don’t make sense.”

Cass looked at him oddly, and Kushiell rushed to add, “Not that I do not fully support the demon and human pairings that have occurred. It has done wonders for my demon brethren, and they have renewed excitement for their jobs and their eternal existence.”

“Hmm. Maybe that’s why there are soulmates, then. Maybe it somehow serves the order of the universe in some way we cannot understand, like bringing renewed joy to those who have soulmates,” Cass guessed.

Kushiel nodded. That did make sense. It did not, however, help them find the lost souls. Cass squeezed his hand again, almost as if he could sense where Kushiel’s thoughts were going.

“Come on, K. Let’s get some food and some rest. Aunt Ro was right on that,” Cass admitted, and he got up, pulling Kushiel by the hand and leading him toward the kitchen.

Kushiel was only too happy to follow.

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Cass wasn't sure what to make of Kushiel's hesitance over soulmates. Cass had brought it up not only to illustrate that the order of the universe was obviously changing in some fundamental ways, but also because he had hoped to broach the subject with Kushiel of them possibly being soulmates.

Kushiel's reaction had made him rethink that. Kushiel seemed happy enough for the demons he knew with soulmates, and Cass wasn't going to try and guess what Kushiel's flinch was about, but he didn't want to startle his timid angel. As he led Kushiel into the kitchen, he couldn't help but sharpen his sight again, just to check that the gold thread was still there.

It was. It was joined by two more threads now, too. They were wound together in the slimmest braid Cass had ever seen, but he couldn't help the silly grin he gave at seeing it.

Kushiel saw his face and smiled back. His angel was so sweet that merely seeing Cass happy made Kushiel happy.

Cass was so fucking lucky. And he swore to himself, and to Kushiel, that he wouldn't screw this up. He would take it slow, despite the fact that he really wanted to push Kush up against the cabinets and ravage his mouth before stripping them both down and frothing against him until they were panting and coming all over each other.

Huh. He supposed he could think of Kushiel as "Kush" after all. He wasn't sure what Kushiel would think of the nickname, though.

He tried to reign in his thoughts. Food first.

“How about something sweet? Breakfast for dinner?” Cass asked.

“That would be lovely, Cassius. Please let me help,” Kushiell answered.

So Cass put him to work, rolling out dough and gathering ingredients while he got the oven ready and put together some fillings. A little fruit, a little chocolate, and some flaky pastry totally counted as dinner, didn’t it? He’d throw some bacon and eggs in a few pastries for a savory bite, too.

Kushiell certainly seemed to think it was adequate, oohing and aahing over everything Cass had him taste test.

Cass was a baker, but he wasn’t a cook. People often thought the two went hand in hand. Not for Cass. Give him pastries, cakes, quiches, and even the occasional casserole, and he was happy. Breakfast food, or even better—brunch—that was where the fun was.

Dinner was vastly overrated. Having to cook something new every night for the rest of your life—just ewww. And people expected there to be meat and vegetables and a starch and salad and dessert—it was all so exhausting. People were never happy with the idea of sandwiches or something “small” (although they hadn’t seen the kind of sandwiches Cass made at the coffee shop if people thought that was a small meal). No, they wanted multiple courses and something new every time. People would eat the same breakfast all week and loved it, and yet they balked at eating the same dinner every night. And breakfast for dinner was seen as a shortcut or an occasional treat.

Fuck that. Cass was all about breakfast for dinner.

Luckily, Kushiell seemed to agree, because by the time they sat down with their pastries, Kushiell was moaning in happiness with each bite.

It took massive willpower for Cass not to jump over the table and attack the angel with his tongue when he heard those sexy moans.

“Cassius, this is amazing. I have never tasted something so delicious,” Kushiel said, licking his lips.

Cass totally couldn’t be faulted for thinking dirty thoughts when Kushiel’s tongue peeked out of his mouth to catch a bit of chocolate on his lip.

He cleared his throat, saying, “I’m so glad you’re enjoying yourself, K.”

Kushiel blushed again at Cass’s husky tone, which just made Cass even hornier. A cold shower was definitely in his future.

They continued to eat, and Cass managed to rein in his lust enough to have a normal conversation with Kushiel, asking him a bit more about his work and the angels and demons he knew. Kushiel spoke with real affection when he talked about Michael and Ari, and he obviously knew Michael’s brother, Gabe, and his demon mate, Asmodeus, as well. He ended up filling in Cass on all the details of the archangel who had been plotting against soulmates. Cass knew some of the details—he was a bit of a seer himself, and Michael and Ari had hinted at some details, but they didn’t fully know his abilities and so were obviously circumspect in what they told him. He definitely hadn’t known Kushiel’s part in it all.

Cass hmm’d thoughtfully. “It seems clear that the order of things is changing about a bit, and obviously those in power want it to change, or else I doubt you would have been able to warn Michael and Ari.”

“Yes, I suppose so. I cannot fathom why they would be changing the very nature of existence, but it is not my place to question such things,” Kushiel answered.

“I don’t know. I think it’s your place to question whatever you think you need to, K. You have a unique perspective, after all. You’re selfless, and generous, and you have undoubtedly done more for souls in this universe than anyone else. You don’t just place people, you redeem them. Your work is sacred,” Cass preached.

Kushiel blushed again, looking down. “It is not so much as that,” he murmured.

“Of course it is. You sell yourself short, K. You do amazing work. You are amazing, and no one else could do what you do,” Cass defended.

“Well, I’m sure someone else could. No one else does, but I’m sure they could,” Kushiel mumbled.

“Then why don’t they? Surely there’s enough work that more angels could’ve done it. I know enough to know that almost everything has a department and a ton of people working on it. You’re special, Kushiel. You were given a higher purpose, and if there were more angels who could’ve done it, then I’m sure they would’ve,” Cass stated.

He could tell that Kushiel was uncomfortable with the compliments, but Cass would just keep building him up until he believed it. He also knew he was right. For whatever reason, Kushiel was the only one who could do this work, and he did it tirelessly and without asking anything in return.

They finished up the last of their meal in a peaceful silence. Cass knew he’d given Kushiel some things to think over, and the quiet was comfortable. When they were done Kushiel offered to wash dishes, and Cass gladly let him—it was his least favorite chore, but it seemed almost meditative for Kushiel, and when the dishes were all set aside to dry he blinked and looked around like he was hoping for more.

“Thank you, K,” Cass said, letting his hand run along Kushiel’s back as he walked behind him toward the cabinets to put the rest of the ingredients he’d left out away.

He noticed Kushiel's light shiver at the touch.

"Well, I think I'm gonna head up and get ready for bed," Cass said, because otherwise he was definitely going to go too fast for Kushiel. The angel was becoming irresistible.

Who was he kidding—Kushiel had been irresistible from the start, but Cass was having a harder time controlling his impulses. If he stuck around much longer, he'd be taking their relationship in a very physical direction, and he just couldn't tell if Kushiel was comfortable enough for that.

Slow. He could totally go slow. Even if it fucking killed him.

"Ok, Cass." Kushiel dried his hands and smiled.

"Help yourself to anything—food, drink, television, a hot shower. Enjoy some pleasures of the mortal flesh," Cass joked. Yeah, a little suggestive, and his voice was a little raspy on the last line, but Cass couldn't help himself.

As if on cue, Kushiel blushed prettily, and Cass gave him a wink and headed for the stairs before he did something... Well, he didn't think he would regret whatever he would do, but he didn't want to move too fast.

He cursed his own good intentions.

Cass sighed as he reached his bedroom, and he stripped out of his clothes and headed into the bathroom. He was half hard just thinking about Kushiel's pretty blush, his gray skin turning a beautiful mauve color.

Cass debated with himself—cold shower to cool off, or hot shower to take care of himself?

He thought of Kushiel's smile, those dark, glossy wings, and he absent-mindedly gave himself a stroke. He thought of Kushiel's hand on him instead and gave a groan, applying a little more pressure as he grew totally hard.

Well, he guessed it would be a hot shower.

He stopped long enough to start the hot water running, giving it some time to heat up before he stepped in, the room already filling with steam. He couldn't help bringing his hand back to his dick, using a firm grip and squeezing as he reached the head, looking down at his bright red cock peeking out from his fist.

He groaned again and closed his eyes, picturing Kushiel, only in his imagination those floaty white pants his true form wore were tented with an erection, those dark gray nipples tight little peaks that Cass would love to lick and nibble on.

Cass heard a noise behind him and figured Kushiel had gone into his room, and he thought of the angel hearing him jerking off, and it made him harder. How pretty would Kushiel's blush be if he knew that he was the reason Cass was so turned on?

He heard a soft gasp behind him, and his eyes shot open. He stopped stroking but kept his dick fisted in his hand as he looked over.

Kushiel was standing in the doorway that led from his room into the bathroom. Cass had forgotten to lock that door since he wasn't used to company.

Or maybe he hadn't really forgotten to lock that door, because Kushiel was indeed blushing sexily, and his eyes were glued to Cass's dick.

Cass couldn't help it, he gave his cock another stroke, squeezing when he got to the head, and a little bead of precum formed on the tip. Kushiel groaned quietly, his eyes never leaving Cass's dick. His own white pants were tented with arousal, and his

nipples were indeed hard little peaks. Perhaps Cass's imagination was more of a vision. He certainly wasn't complaining though.

Fuck. So much for good intentions.

"K," Cass whispered hoarsely, and Kushie's eyes shot up to Cass's, his hands coming up to cover his own erection.

"Don't cover up, Kush. Let me see that I made you hard. It was thinking about you that got me this way, after all," Cass murmured, and he saw the surprise flash across Kushiel's face, but the angel dropped his hands like Cass had told him to.

"Go ahead and watch," Cass said, giving himself another stroke and groaning, and Kushiel's eyes slid down like he simply couldn't help himself.

"Or do you want to do more than just watch?" Cass asked. Because he really hoped the answer was yes to that.

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It was like every one of Kushiel's inappropriate thoughts had suddenly come to life. Not that he meant to have inappropriate thoughts, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Cass was so beautiful, and when his voice got husky, or when he said certain things, Kushiel's mind went to carnal pleasures.

He wasn't a blushing virgin, although really, by how often he was blushing around Cass, the man probably thought he was. Cass probably didn't even mean anything sexual in nature. At least Kushiel had assumed that.

Right until the moment he barged in on Cass touching himself.

He'd heard Cass groan, and he'd told himself that Cass was fine, probably just enjoying a hot shower. If his mind had gone to thinking about Cassius naked in the shower... Well, could he be blamed? Then the groan had come again, and he'd been jerked out of his lustful thoughts, because what if Cass was hurt?

So he'd opened the shared bathroom door, only Cass was definitely not hurt.

By all of heaven and hell and the afterlife, Cassius was beautiful. He was naked, but he hadn't stepped into the shower yet, and his freckles did indeed spread out across his entire body. Kushiel barely had the thought of kissing each and every one before he was distracted by Cass's dick, which was gripped in his hand, bright red and hard and oh so mouth watering. When Cass had looked over, Kushiel had covered his own erection, mortified at his reaction.

When Cass told him to uncover, calling him "Kush" and saying that he was the one who had made Cass hard, he couldn't help but obey, letting his hands fall away. He

shivered minutely at the nickname and in pleasure at the thought that he had made Cass hard, even if he did find that difficult to believe.

When Cass ordered him to watch, relief and lust both burst through him. It was blissful to not have to think about what was right to do in this situation. If Cass told him to do it, then it was ok.

He would do anything Cass wanted. He would do anything for Cass.

“Or do you want to do more than just watch?” Cass asked.

Kushiel’s eyes sprang up to Cass’s face. He spoke without thinking it through. “I will do anything you want me to do, Cassius. Anything at all,” he whispered, and oh, how he meant it.

Cassius smiled wickedly, stalking over to him. Kushiel had to suppress the urge to back up. It wasn’t that he was afraid; it was just that Cassius was so... everything. He had never wanted anything in his existence as much as he wanted Cass’s touch in that moment, and he was afraid of how strong his longing was. He felt like a string pulled so tightly that it would snap.

“Shhh,” Cassius whispered, reaching his hand out and caressing Kushiel’s face. Kushiel closed his eyes, reveling in the warmth of skin against his cheek. Cass’s hand trailed down to his mouth, outlining his lips, and Kushiel felt short of breath as Cass let his thumb sink into Kushiel’s mouth. He caressed the end of Cass’s thumb with his tongue, and when Cass groaned, he sucked on the skin in his mouth.

Cass tasted better than anything in heaven ever had.

“So beautiful, Kush. So fucking sexy,” Cass whispered. He withdrew his thumb, sliding his hand down Kushiel’s chest until he reached a nipple, then sliding the wet

thumb over the peak and causing Kushiel to gasp.

“Look at me, baby. Open those beautiful eyes and look at me,” Cass demanded, and Kushiel did.

He got lost in the hazel of Cass’s eyes. They were like gemstones, bright and shining and filled with beauty.

Cass’s hand trailed down lower, his eyebrows raising in question, but Kushiel said nothing. He thought if Cass didn’t touch him he might cease to exist, that was how much he wanted it. He wanted Cass pressed up against him, skin to skin, but he was still and silent, afraid to break the moment, afraid to ask for too much.

He would take whatever Cass would give him.

But it was like Cass knew, and maybe he did somehow, because Cass was walking forward, pushing Kushiel back with his body until he bumped gently into the wall. Cass pressed up against him, their bare chests touching, their lips a mere whisper apart.

Cass brought his hips forward into Kushiel’s, and their cocks rubbed together, separated only by the thin material of Kushiel’s pants. Kushiel groaned at the contact, fighting to keep his eyes open. That simple pressure was almost enough to send him over the edge.

“My Kushiel. So gentle and kind and giving. You’d give me anything, wouldn’t you, Kush?” Cass asked, his hips thrusting rhythmically into Kushiel’s. The pleasure was beyond anything Kushiel remembered, and he fought to hold back, overcome with waves of lust.

“Yes,” Kushiel breathed out. “Anything, Cassius.”

Cass's hands reached down, sliding Kushiel's pants down. Cass's cock slid against his own, and then Cass's hand grabbed onto both of them, stroking their dicks together.

"Cassius!" Kushiel gasped out. Cass's hand was touching him, Cass's dick was rubbing up against his, and then Cass was leaning forward and pressing their lips together, sliding his tongue out to lick along the seam of Kushiel's mouth, and it was too much.

Too much sensation. Too much pleasure. So much joy in being touched, and Kushiel couldn't hold back—his hips bucked, and he felt Cass's cock rub along the sensitive underside of the head of his own cock.

Cass groaned in pleasure, murmuring against his mouth, "So good for me. My sexy angel, shining so beautifully for me. My Kush."

The nickname almost made him come, and when Cass's tongue invaded his mouth, touching against his own, his hips jerked again. Cass's hand squeezed tightly around them both, and that time Kushiel couldn't stop the orgasm that crashed into him, lightning sizzling down his spine, his entire body jerking with the sensation.

He had a millisecond of regret, of feeling selfish and foolish for coming so quickly, but Cass groaned, "Yes, baby. Come for me, Kush. Come all over my dick."

Kushiel's cock spurted again with the words, and a feeling of utter bliss at pleasing Cassius rolled through him along with his orgasm, prolonging it.

"Look at us, Kush. So pretty together," Cass panted.

Cassius continued to jerk them, his hand faster, their dicks sliding against each other, and it was almost painful how intense the pleasure was against his sensitive cock.

Kushiel watched their dicks peek up out of Cass's hand as it slid up and down, his cum making everything slick and messy.

"So sexy you came for me, Kush. So beautiful," Cass groaned, and somehow Kushiel was still hard, and Cass's words and the feeling of their cocks together was like an ocean that was drowning Kushiel in sensation.

He would gladly drown for Cassius.

Cass looked at him, and it felt like he was looking inside Kushiel, and his eyes held wonder, and so much more that Kushiel was even afraid to think about.

"Kush!" Cass growled out, and his release spurted out, coating his hand and Kushiel's cock. Kushiel whimpered as he felt his own cock jerk in response, a second orgasm ripping through him, the intensity so bright and sharp that it felt like he might fly apart into a million pieces.

But Cass's mouth was on his, grounding him, their lips pressed together, their tongues sliding against each other, their breaths mingling.

Cass's hand eased and stopped moving, but he still held onto them. Kushiel felt like it was all that was holding him together.

"So beautiful," Cass whispered again, and Kushiel had to blink, because for some reason his eyes felt wet.

Cass's other hand was petting his chest, and Cass searched his face. Kushiel felt like he should say something, or do something, but Cass just whispered, "Shhh," and nuzzled into his neck.

So Kushiel let his eyes fall closed and reveled in their skin touching, in Cass's hand

on their dicks as they grew soft, on his other hand idly rubbing up and down Kushiel's chest.

He would live in this moment for all eternity if he could. He finally knew what perfection felt like, and he didn't know how he would ever give it up.

It was like Cass could again read him, because Kushiel found himself being gently ushered into the shower, his pants and scarf left behind on the floor. Cass soaped up his body gently, sliding it along his skin, and Kushiel stood and let himself just feel. So much pleasure again, although softer and gentler this time.

Cass pulled Kushiel's head down, and he lathered shampoo into Kushiel's hair. His lover's hands gently massaged his scalp, and Kushiel didn't ever think he'd experienced such a sensation.

He felt like he had been in a fog since he had walked into the bathroom, and his head started to clear, his thoughts coming back into order.

"Back with me, Kush?" Cass asked gently, still rubbing Kushiel's scalp, Cass's fingertips sending little frissons of pleasure through his body.

He wondered idly if he could be "Kush" in moments like this. When Cass was caressing him, perhaps he did not have to be Kushiel, the Rigid One of God, the Angel of Punishment. Perhaps he did not have to be the gray angel. The outcast.

Perhaps, as Cass's lover, he could simply be Kush.

It was such a lovely thought that he felt tears spring to his eyes again, and Cass's lips pressed gently against his own.

"You're so beautiful, Kush," Cass declared.

Cass was always telling him that, and yet he could see Kushiell as he actually was. It sent more shivers through him, and he had the urge to give Cassius back some of the pleasure he was receiving. He wanted to touch this perfect human who had made him feel such joy. Such love.

He would not shy away from thinking it, because he had felt loved by Cassius. His human was generous and loving, and Kushiell would not allow himself to hope too much, but he would take what Cass would give him, and he would give everything in return.

Kushiell would not allow himself to hope, but Kush... Kush would love Cassius with every bit of his being, and he would hope for Cass's love in return.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

Cassius finished massaging Kushiel's scalp and directed him under the spray to rinse. He could tell that Kushiel was... processing. He would have been concerned with Kushiel's general spaciness after their encounter, except he could feel Kushiel, and he knew his angel was okay. His sweet angel just needed a little aftercare, and Cass was only too happy to provide.

He hadn't meant to push Kushiel quite so much, but Cass could admit to thinking with his dick instead of his head. But damn, Kushiel standing there all shy and offering Cassius anything was irresistible. The angel had looked like a kid in a candy store; he was full of want and need and desire, so Cass had taken charge, and he'd seen Kushiel's relief when he did.

The fact that he'd turned on Kushiel so much that his angel had come that quickly was so fucking hot. Then Cass had sharpened his sight without even really thinking about it, and he'd seen those gold threads connecting the two of them, with more and more reaching out and surrounding them, and that had pushed Cass into his own orgasm.

The fact that Kushiel had come again?

So. Fucking. Hot.

He knew Kushiel was an angel and all, and surely there were some sexual perks, but Cass still felt vaguely smug about the fact that the experience had been worthy of two orgasms for Kushiel.

"You're so sexy, my sweet angel," Cass murmured, and Kushiel opened his eyes,

staring at Cassius. Cassius smiled at him, running his hands down Kushiel's chest.

Kushiel stepped out of the spray and leaned forward, but he didn't quite kiss Cassius. That was ok, Cass didn't mind bridging the distance until their lips were pressed together. He was all too happy to guide Kushiel. He'd always been the take charge sort, and he enjoyed being that way in the bedroom. Still, he could sense that Kushiel wanted something, and they had to be able to communicate, because he didn't want to push Kushiel out of his comfort zone, and he wanted to give Kushiel everything his angel needed.

"What do you want, Kush?" Cass asked, and he noticed the tiny shiver at the nickname. Good to know that Kushiel liked it. "Tell me, my sweet angel. You have to promise to tell me when you want something, or when you don't like something, do you understand? That's the only way this can happen again."

"Again?" Kushiel asked hoarsely, his face lighting up like he'd been given the best present ever.

"Oh yes, definitely again. I'm not done with you, Kush. I will never be done with you, do you understand?" Cass asked, looking into his angel's eyes.

Kush ducked his head and nodded, but Cass could feel the uncertainty. Kushiel couldn't accept eternity yet, but Cass was confident he would be able to eventually. He could give his sweet angel time. After all, they had all the time in the universe now. Cass knew that soulmates were forever—he could see that with his vision, and suddenly forever seemed like the most beautiful gift.

"So you have to be honest with me, and that means not holding back things, either, ok? So what do you want, my beautiful angel?" Cass questioned.

"I want... Can I touch you, Cassius? Can I take care of you like you've taken care of

me?” Kushiel asked.

Cass groaned at the thought of Kushiel’s hands on his body. “Yes, please, K. I’d love that,” he answered.

Kushiel proceeded to take the soap and leisurely rub him down, and Cass had never felt so worshiped before. K’s hands were gentle and slow, and when he reached Cass’s dick, they clearly hesitated, but Cass only groaned his approval.

Kushiel’s touch was so tentative, his exploring fingers so soft, yet Cass couldn’t help getting hard again. He moaned, and Kushiel simply whispered, “Please.”

“You want to make me come, Kush? Is that what you’re asking?” Cass clarified. Because fuck, he certainly wouldn’t complain.

Kushiel only nodded in response, and Cass said, “Go ahead, baby, you do whatever you want with me.”

He was totally surprised when Kushiel dropped to his knees, placed his hands on Cass’s hips, and swallowed his cock down in one swift move.

“Fuck!” Cass cried out, trying not to punch his hips forward. “K, that feels so fucking good. Your mouth, holy shit.”

That only seemed to spur Kushiel on, and his angel began bobbing up and down on his cock, moaning like he was the one receiving pleasure from the experience. His tongue was somehow wrapping around the head of Cass’s cock while his mouth sucked on the shaft and his lips provided pressure as they moved. It was unlike anything Cass had ever felt.

Cass stared down, putting his hands gently on Kushiel’s head, and the angel moaned.

“So fucking beautiful. Touch yourself, K. I want you to feel the pleasure you’re giving me. Make yourself come while you suck me, Kush. Please,” Cass ordered through panting breaths. Fuck, Kushiel’s mouth felt so good on him.

One of Kushiel’s hands left Cass’s hips and reached down, and the long, low groan could only mean he was following directions.

“Fuck, yes, baby. Make yourself come. You’re making me feel so good. You’re so sexy, so beautiful. Your mouth is going to make me come,” Cass whispered hoarsely.

Kushiel moaned steadily now, and Cass could feel the reverberations in his dick. It was like he was being sucked and jerked and a vibrator was pressed against his flesh as well, and it was too much.

“I’m gonna come, Kush,” he ground out, and Kushiel did something with his tongue—Cass couldn’t even describe what—and stars exploded in his head, making him close his eyes. His dick pulsed out jet after jet of cum, and Kushiel’s moans reached a fevered pitch as Cass felt his angel’s orgasm splatter over his legs.

When he was empty, Kushiel moved his head to rest against Cass’s thigh. Cass slid down to kneel and wrap his arms around his sexy angel, just holding him.

He had the random thought as they were splattered gently by warm water that he was really glad he had a tankless hot water heater, because he didn’t think he could’ve moved at the moment even if the water was ice cold. His brain was also looping on the fact that sucking Cass off had made Kushiel come.

So. Fucking. Hot.

How was it that Cass was so damn lucky? How did he deserve to have an eternity with Kushiel? He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve it, but he was going to take

it.

Kushiel was giving and selfless and generous to a fault, so Cass would be selfish for both of them if he had to be. Kushiel was his, and he wasn't giving his angel up.

Cassius was in a black room with a window looking out onto what appeared to be a red waterfall. There were cracks in the wall, and as Cass watched curiously, a few of them seemed to edge backwards and disappear. There was a man in a dark suit standing and looking out the window.

Cass had no idea how he'd gotten here. He thought back. Sex in the bathroom. Sex in the shower. Then he and Kushiel had dried each other, and Cass had led Kushiel to his bed, where they had wrapped around each other and snuggled in. Cass had been exhausted in the best way after two orgasms, and he didn't remember much before darkness had pulled him into sleep.

"Ah," Cass murmured, and the figure turned around. It was a demon that Cass had never met before, but in order for an angel or demon to call on his oracle powers, they had to be amazingly high up on the food chain. After all, an oracle was a communicator with the "gods," so no lesser afterlifer could have called him. He'd only ever had one angel speak to him as an oracle before, and he'd never had a demon call on him.

"Cassius Priam," the demon smirked. "A pleasure to meet you!"

"I would say the same, but I'm not really sure if it is a pleasure yet," Cass responded drily.

The man laughed, not at all offended. "Oh, you are a pleasure. Just perfect for our Kushiel."

“He isn’t ‘our’ anything,” Cass snapped, losing his patience a bit. Why was he here? Was this the demon who was responsible for the lost souls?

The demon sat down, facing him, and smiled indulgently. It kind of pissed Cass off. If this was the one responsible for all that pain Kushiel felt... Well, he was only human, but he’d figure something out to deal with this demon.

“Oh, such lovely murderous thoughts. So protective, too. Quite lovely. No less than Kushiel deserves, of course. And no, he isn’t technically one of mine, but he’s spent so much time here that I think of myself as having joint custody, so to speak,” the demon commented.

“Who are you?” Cass asked suspiciously. It couldn’t be...

“You may call me Luce. I think we’ll be friends, after all,” the man replied, and Cass tried not to show his surprise. Because yes, apparently it could be.

He was serving as an oracle for the devil, and he wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“I am not involved in afterlife politics. I am of the mortal plane, and the only way I can be called by afterlififers is if I am to serve as an oracle,” Cass said slowly. He didn’t know why he was here, but best to set some clear parameters.

“You are correct,” Luce admitted. “And let me tell you, it took some definite bending of the rules to figure out how to get you here, too. Luckily, bending the rules is a specialty of mine.”

Luce winked at him, but Cass only stared back, making Luce laugh.

“You are a delight! I love that backbone—our Kushiel needs someone with grit, and you’ve certainly got that. You have to in order to deal with ghosts though, don’t

you?” Luce commented.

Cass sat up straighter. Angels and demons were not supposed to know about ghosts.

Luce just waved his hand in a leisurely manner, though. “I am not simply a demon, as I’m sure you’ve gathered,” he responded.

“You removed the souls from Erebus?” Cass asked. If they were up against the devil himself, he kind of thought he and Kushiel were probably fucked.

Luckily, Luce looked more than a little offended at the suggestion.

“I should say not!” Luce protested. “I would certainly not interfere with the grand design in such a way as to make souls who might find reincarnation into ghosts!”

Cass didn’t think he was lying, but there was something off about his response at the same time. He didn’t trust the devil, which was probably wise.

“You know who did,” Cass guessed.

Luce shrugged a bit at that, turning his chair to face the window again. “I generally love my job,” he commented.

“Okay,” Cass answered, more than a little confused at the change in topic.

“Demons are a good sort overall. Better than angels, I think, but perhaps I’m biased. Even so, every so often, a few millennia pass by, and a demon can go... a little off. Usually it’s easy enough to set them straight again, but sometimes they just veer off the path a little too far. If they’re lesser demons, it’s handled easily enough. But when it’s someone with power, with a following, with legions of lesser demons who support them...” Luce trailed off.

“You have a rogue demon?” Cass asked.

Luce shrugged again. “I could, of course, dispose of such demons. It certainly isn’t beyond me to do so. But where one will fall, another will rise up with similar ideas. It is the nature of things. So sometimes they must be... permitted, so to speak, to carry out their nefarious plans. Those plans will, of course, fail, and then everyone will see how foolish it all was, and no one else will try something similar. Like a parent, sometimes I must let my children make mistakes in order to learn from them.” Luce’s voice turned hard then. “And sometimes I must let a child make mistakes to teach all the others an important lesson.”

Cass thought that over, getting a little more pissed with each passing moment.

“So you’re telling me that you let some demon remove all the souls from Erebus to teach him, or others like him, that it can’t be done? But it was done! And it caused Kushiell pain!” Cass seethed.

Luce turned around and looked at him then. “Ah, but is that all it did?”

Cass was pissed. “You played god with Kushiell’s feelings to teach some demon a lesson when you could have stopped it! What the hell did it accomplish?”

Luce only looked at him and smirked, which made Cass want to get up and smack him. And he wasn’t a violent man.

“It brought you two together,” Luce finally answered.

At that, Cass’s anger deflated a bit. Still...

“Surely there were other ways to bring us together?” Cass asked. “Ways that didn’t cause Kushiell such pain?”

Luce grimaced a bit at that, and for the first time Cass saw something resembling regret on the devil's face. "Kushiel does not deserve to suffer. He does a job that no angel or demon could do, and he has suffered for millennia doing it. He deserves peace and happiness, but his job gives him suffering, and he would carry it out no matter what the cost."

Cass pondered that. He knew Luce was talking around the issue, and he wasn't sure what the devil was getting at. "Are you saying that even with a soulmate, Kushiel will have to suffer torment for his job?"

Luce shrugged a bit. "Souls that are far enough along deserve redemption. Kushiel provides that in the only way he has ever known, which is at great personal cost."

"Does that mean there's another way?" Cass asked. Was that what Luce was hinting at?

Unfortunately the devil only shrugged again. So apparently if there was another way, the devil wasn't filling them in. It was enough to make Cass angry again.

"You can't help us anymore than that? You allowed someone to cause Kushiel great pain, and it's not like all those lost souls are suddenly redeemed—they're ghosts, and they're in worse shape than they were when they were here. How is that helpful?" Cass demanded.

"When there is a wound, sometimes it must be purged. Which is better, to cut it open every day, letting a tiny bit drain, only to have it seal up so the process must be repeated the next day? Is it better to do that over and over and over again, small hurts every day, or is it not better to slice it open and drain it completely all at once? An agony, perhaps, but then it is done and over, and the wound can heal properly," Luce commented.

“Yes, but the wound hasn’t been healed. The souls are still lost,” Cass insisted. He understood Luce’s analogy, but it didn’t apply here.

“Are they, though?” Luce asked.

“Of course they are! They aren’t redeemed or whatever. Kushiel would drain himself, filling each one with his light in order to redeem them. What happens when he finds the rest of them? It’ll be reopening the wound over and over and over,” Cass protested.

Luce leaned forward, suddenly very serious. “Are they lost, though, Cassius? Or are they not now ghosts, something that is within your realm to understand? They have left hell; they are not lost souls on Erebus. They are ghosts on the mortal plane. Is that not your department? Is it not your job to help ghosts? And amazingly, you are now mated to an angel who also helps souls become whole.”

Cass leaned back, thinking hard. Finally he muttered, “You’re saying there’s another way to make them whole again. There’s something that I can do, or something that Kushiel and I can do together, to make them whole and redeem them.”

Luce sat back, steepling his fingers together and smiling again. “There is much at stake here,” the devil said, gesturing with one of his hands to the cracks in the wall. “You two shall set this to rights, though. We have faith in you both.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Cass asked, perhaps a little late with that question.

Luce only smiled more broadly. “Now then, since I called you as an oracle, you must serve as a communicator for the gods to another realm. That is, after all, the rule. Since Kushiel is an angel, and I am technically not of his realm, being a communicator to him counts. Any more questions before we commence?” Luce asked.

Cass had plenty of questions, but he knew he wouldn't get answers, so he just shook his head. He really didn't love this part of things.

“Very well then,” Luce replied, and the devil smiled gleefully before diving straight into Cass's body.

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Kushiel was pulled from sleep violently, and it took him only a second to understand why. Cass was wrapped in his arms, just as he had been when they'd dozed off, but Kushiel knew, with absolute certainty, that Cass was no longer there.

He didn't know how he knew that, but he knew it.

"Cass!" he cried out, gently shaking the man, checking to be sure. There was no response. Cass's body was there, but his soul was somehow... gone. Panic was taking hold of him, but then he felt something sort of rush in, and Cass sat straight up, only he wasn't alone.

Kushiel didn't know how else to explain it. It was Cass, but it was more, and it felt somehow familiar.

Cass's eyes turned to Kushiel's, and even with just the dim morning light filtering through cracks in the curtains, Kushiel could see that Cass's eyes were not his own.

They were black.

"Kushiel, Rigid One of God, Angel of Punishment, the gods have a message for you," Cass intoned, and his voice was somehow not quite right either. "Out of jealousy and greed, a demon has taken what was yours to watch over and hidden it from you, but the way is no longer yours alone to navigate. The gods have gifted you with a new way forward. You only have to see the light within what surrounds you. Those that represent strength, wisdom, and justice shall guide the lost ones to a new life."

With that, Kushiel felt something depart the room. Cass blinked and gasped, and his

eyes looked normal again as he pressed his hands to his chest.

“Fuck, I hate that part,” Cass mumbled grumpily.

Kushiel wrapped Cass in his arms, squeezing tightly. “You scared me, Cass. You were just... gone,” Kushiel whispered.

Cass reached up and patted his back. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Kushiel. I didn’t think about that part. We had a little chat before he did the whole oracle thing. You must have been freaking out.”

“A chat? You were only gone for a minute, maybe less,” Kushiel responded, breathing deeply, still holding onto Cassius. If it had been longer, Kushiel didn’t know what he would have done.

Cass just hummed thoughtfully. Finally, he said, “It was definitely longer than a minute, but perhaps he warped time or something because he knew you’d worry. He seemed fond of you.”

“Who was it?” Kushiel asked. The other presence had seemed familiar, but it did not feel like Yah, and he could not think of anyone else capable of using an oracle. Unfortunately, he also didn’t trust any other angels that were strong enough to do such a thing.

“Lucifer,” Cass responded.

Kushiel reared back in shock. “Lucifer? As in the head of hell?”

“Yep,” Cass replied. “He called you ‘our’ Kushiel and said he felt like he had shared custody of you. I’m assuming he meant with Yah, since you’re an angel.” Cass shrugged at that. “I’m still kind of pissed, though, because I think he knows which

demon took the lost souls and didn't stop it from happening.”

Cass recounted his entire conversation with Lucifer, and Kushiell took it all in. Kushiell did, oddly enough, trust Lucifer, yet it stung to know that Lucifer had let the souls be removed from Erebus. Still, the devil was right, it had gained him Cassius.

He wasn't sure how much import that statement had for Cassius, but it gave Kushiell hope beyond all his expectations. If Lucifer had somehow engineered their meeting, and had actively wanted it to happen...

Of course that could be because, as Lucifer had said, together they would find some new way to redeem souls that were not beyond redemption. It also, Kushiell supposed, made sense that a demon would be envious of redeemed souls or greedy enough to not want to let souls leave hell. Kushiell had always thought that Erebus was solely under his purview, but that didn't make sense, did it? There had to be a demon who had control of that area or was supposed to watch over it, and Kushiell had the strong inkling that it was an upper level demon of either greed or envy, or perhaps both. Kushiell didn't know all the Princes of Hell or all the Infernal Kings, but he had connections, and it gave them a starting place to look.

Still, the fact that Lucifer had wanted them to meet... Kushiell couldn't help but think of all the demons who had soulmates. All the meetings that had been somehow arranged. Oh, how he hoped, even though he knew it was probably a foolish hope. What had he done to deserve one such as Cassius?

But he would still hope.

As for the rest of the message... It didn't quite explain what Kushiell and Cassius were supposed to do once they found the souls. Kushiell had the impression it would be something that hurt him. He didn't mention that to Cassius when they talked about Lucifer's comparison to lancing a wound though, since Cassius clearly thought the

great pain that Lucifer spoke of had been the souls being removed from Erebus. Kushiell didn't think that was it, however. He hoped he was wrong, but he didn't think so.

He would do whatever it took to help all those lost souls, no matter the pain. The only thing he couldn't abide was thinking it might hurt Cassius, and he would do all he could to avoid such a thing.

"The part that I don't really get is the whole 'light within what surrounds you' part," Cass commented. "There's light in literally everything."

Kushiell looked at Cass, surprised. "Everything? Surely he means souls, and only people have those."

Cass laughed. "You afterlifers. Sometimes you lot are literally blind to whatever doesn't affect you. It probably made it quite easy to make ghosts something you can't normally see or remember. Yes, everything has light within it. I would say every living thing, but even things that aren't living were usually once living. Of course, something that's been heavily manufactured has very little light. A warehouse isn't on the same level as a forest, but even a warehouse isn't completely devoid of light. It was once made of living things. Although even things that aren't totally living have light. The earth and rocks themselves hold the tiniest bit of light."

Kushiell was shocked. "But... but surely when Lucifer spoke of light, he meant the soul."

"Hmm... I'm not so sure. He obviously knows how the universe works, and he knows about ghosts, so he isn't as narrow in his vision as the rest of the afterlifers. The universe is made up of light, Kushiell. Light and darkness, I suppose. But that's for physicists and gods and devils to think about. All I know is that the guides he spoke of don't necessarily have to be people. Or even ghosts. Although I'm not sure

what else they would be,” Cass pondered.

Kushiel considered that. He didn’t know quite what to think, but he also knew that redeeming the souls was the second problem.

“We must find them first, whatever the rest of his statement means. You would think he would have been more helpful,” Kushiel grumbled.

Cass just laughed. “Nah, it’s part of the deal. He was right on that. Messages from afterlifers, by nature, must be somewhat of a riddle. It’s a whole free will thing. There aren’t many rules that restrict the higher ups, but not interfering in free will is a big one. If you outright tell someone what to do, that’s definitely interfering in free will. Giving hints and setting people on a path... Well, that’s a gray area. I suppose they could just tell you what to do, but I’m mortal, and I’m involved, so they can’t outright tell us what to do. It would upset the order of the universe.”

Cassius got out of bed at that, and Kushiel blushed at seeing his naked body. His own body responded to the sight, and based on the look Cassius shot him, the man obviously realized. He had a look in his eyes that promised something carnal, but Kushiel heard a throat clearing from out in the hallway.

Cassius hung his head, muttering, “Fuck,” under his breath. Then he yelled, “Just a minute, Aunt. We aren’t decent.”

“Yes dear, I kind of figured, but I heard voices so I knew you were up, and I didn’t want you to get sidetracked before we chatted,” Aunt Ro’s voice called out from the hallway.

Kushiel raised an eyebrow. “How did you know it was her?” he whispered.

“Because she does that annoying throat clearing thing when she wants my attention,”

he whispered back. Then Cass raised his voice loud enough for it to be heard in the hallway. “And she knows she isn’t supposed to interrupt me when I’m in bed or barge into my private spaces.”

“Well I didn’t barge in, now did I?” she griped from outside.

“Listening in is just as bad!” Cass yelled back.

“Well it saves time, doesn’t it? I heard the end of your discussion and I’m mostly filled in on the important details,” she called back.

Kushiel had the urge to laugh at the two of them, but he wisely refrained. Instead he got out of bed, his white, flowing pants and his scarf appearing on him with a thought. Cass stared at him grumpily before reaching over to pull on his own pants.

“This was not my plan for the morning,” he muttered, walking into the bathroom. He continued to mutter in there, and Kushiel made out something having to do with angels and ghosts not having to properly get dressed or deal with hygiene issues.

Kushiel decided perhaps it would be best if he went and tried to fix some breakfast while Cass got ready.

When he opened the door, Aunt Ro and the ghost were both hovering in the hall. Actually literally hovering, which is something Kushiel hadn’t seen before.

When she saw him, she floated down and planted her feet on the ground, watching as the ghost did the same. “Lovely, dear!” she enthused. “See, you’re getting the hang of things quite well!” She leaned toward Kushiel then, whispering, “Poor thing doesn’t really know much about what they can do as a ghost. It’s been quite a learning experience.”

Kushiel nodded, not sure what to say. He didn't really know what ghosts could do either, and he wasn't sure it was wise to admit as much to Aunt Ro. He seemed to be in her good graces at the moment, and he really didn't want to spoil that.

"Cass is getting ready, and I thought I'd fix us some breakfast," Kushiel told her.

Aunt Ro smirked at him. "Did you? How sweet. Worked up an appetite, eh?"

Kushiel wisely ignored her, traipsing down the stairs toward the kitchen. Unfortunately she followed. By the time Kushiel reached the kitchen, he realized his problem—he really had no idea how to cook breakfast. He wanted to do something nice for Cass, but he wasn't sure how he would accomplish it without mucking things up. He vaguely recalled cooking over a fire in the 1800s... Or maybe that was the 1700s? At any rate, it had been quite some time ago, and it had been in the service or talking with a soul in Limbo who needed to work through their guilt.

He thought they might've been a cook for an upscale family. He seemed to recall that they might have poisoned some very bad people, and that was why they felt guilty. So perhaps that wasn't the best example to model breakfast after.

He must have looked lost standing there in the kitchen, because Aunt Ro sighed dramatically, then she started barking out orders at him. He wisely did not question her and started getting out her list of ingredients.

Cooking was surprisingly stressful, although maybe that was Aunt Ro's constant stream of directions.

"No dear, go stir the eggs now. Wait, you didn't finish grating the cheese? Well hurry up back to it. These things are time sensitive, you know. What time did you put the bacon in? Never mind, I'll check it," she ordered, and Kushiel barely even blinked when she simply stuck her entire head inside the closed oven to check the bacon.

Ghosts were an odd bunch, that was for sure.

Nevertheless, he never would have accomplished breakfast without her, despite how frazzled he felt and his firm desire to have more than two hands to do all the work. By the time Cass was coming down the stairs, he was plating two lovely looking omelettes, and orange juice and coffee were already on the table for both of them.

Aunt Ro hmph'd, whether in approval or not, Kushiell wasn't sure, but he was rather proud of his efforts. He hoped Cass agreed.

Cass walked into the kitchen still looking grumpy, but when he saw Kushiell holding two plates of food, his face split into a grin. "Aww, you cooked for me?" he said, walking over, grabbing a plate, and kissing Kushiell on the mouth.

Just pecked Kushiell's lips like it wasn't a big deal at all. Like it was something they did every morning. Like it was perfectly normal to kiss the gray angel.

Kushiell stood there, dumbfounded and more than a little pleased. Cass made it to the table before he turned around and smiled softly at Kushiell.

"Come join me, Kush," he smiled.

So Kushiell did, and if he smiled more broadly then he ever remembered smiling before, well, who could blame him?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

Kushiel was adorable, and Cass couldn't help but smile at him through breakfast. They were probably making lovey eyes at one another, and Aunt Ro could only keep her mouth shut for so long.

"He made it all by himself just for you, Cass. Isn't that sweet?" she purred.

Kushiel blushed, adding, "No, I had no idea what to do. Aunt Ro told me. I hope it's still ok, though."

Aunt Ro huffed, stating, "Silly boy. You do not attribute romantic gestures to others."

Kushiel looked embarrassed, letting Cass know that he had indeed meant for it to be something of a romantic gesture, which was too sweet. And of course his Kushiel wouldn't lie about how he'd done it.

Cass reached out and grasped Kushiel's hand across the table. "Thank you, Kushiel. I'm glad Aunt Ro could help direct you, because it all came out perfectly. You did an amazing job."

Kushiel smiled and his light flared so brightly that Cass had to blink. When he did, he looked deeper without meaning to.

He had hoped it was the case last night, but this morning cemented things; they were definitely soul mates. They were twined together by hundreds of golden threads, thick enough now to make it seem like a rope attached the two of them.

Cass knew the process wasn't totally complete, because he'd seen mated pairs, and

there would be more threads as time went on; the rope would get thicker. But Cass felt pretty confident that at this point, there was no breaking the bond. He thought he would be able to follow it anywhere and find Kushiell if he needed to, which was definitely a comfort.

He blinked his sight back to his regular vision, and Kushiell was still his brightly shining soul. Cass was beyond lucky to have found someone with such a pure soul. Kushiell was his, and no one could take him away.

Cass couldn't stop grinning, and it was like his mood was infectious, because Kushiell was grinning right back as they finished eating. Luckily they could cut their omelettes with their forks, because their hands remained intertwined through breakfast.

"Are you two done being disgustingly sweet yet?" Aunt Ro finally grumbled when Cass took his last bite.

Cass just rolled his eyes. "Yes, I suppose we do need to move on to business," he agreed, giving Kushiell's hand a squeeze.

Kushiell squeezed back, then turned to Aunt Ro. "Did you discover anything?" he asked her.

She sighed, plopping down in an empty chair. "I'm afraid to say it remains a bit of a mystery. Deception and concealment are afoot," she stated, gesturing to her dress, which Cass only now noticed had tiny snapdragons scattered across it. He fought the urge to roll his eyes again.

"So you guys didn't get anything accomplished," Cass surmised.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Aunt Ro defended. "I taught our ghost here how to float and how to move small solid objects. We explored how to disappear and reappear as

well. They do seem to have more form, don't they?"

Everyone turned to look at the ghost, who was sort of floating an inch or two off the ground. Cass squinted. He supposed there was a bit more form to them; they weren't just all dark shadows, but he thought any more light was Kushiel's doing and not his aunt's. Not that he would say that, of course.

He wasn't stupid.

"That still doesn't bring us any closer to answers, though," Cass answered instead.

"Well, it seems you have some leads. I overheard?—"

"Eavesdropped," Cass cut in.

"As I was saying," Aunt Ro continued primly, "I overheard that you had a lovely chat with Lucifer and that some upper level demon is responsible. You have contacts in the demon world, Cassius. They're always dropping into the shop. Simply ask them. Surely most upper level demons know each other. That Arioeh fellow would probably have some idea with the clues you have of who might be responsible."

Kushiel looked at Cass, adding, "It isn't a bad idea. I can talk to them if you aren't comfortable doing so."

Cass sighed. "It isn't that. I'm perfectly fine talking to them, and hell knows they owe me for all the assistance I've given them. I'm just not used to explaining myself to demons, and this will definitely require some explanation."

Kushiel squeezed his hand again in support. "You do not need to tell them anything. They know I am looking for lost souls, and they know you are assisting me. They do not need to know where I got my information," Kushiel assured him.

Cass smiled at his angel. He appreciated more than he could admit that Kushiel would protect him. Still, though...

“No, I don’t think we should withhold information from them,” Cass admitted. “Plus, maybe it’s time I let some people into my inner circle. Michael and Ari have been... friends. Maybe it’s time for me to start trusting them.”

Kushiel’s smile was bright and sweet, and if his aunt wasn’t in the room, he would probably drag Kushiel back to bed. He might have done it anyway, despite whatever teasing his aunt would unleash on them, but they did have work to do. Unfortunately.

“Alright,” Cass sighed, letting go of Kushiel’s hand and grabbing dishes to bring to the sink. “I suppose we ought to contact them and see if they can meet up. It would be nice to figure out exactly who’s in our suspect pool.”

Kushiel jumped up and grabbed the rest of the dishes, rushing to the sink to get there before Cass did. “I’ll wash up, Cass, if you want to contact them,” his sweet angel said.

Cass sent off a text to Michael about meeting at the coffee shop, and he saw that it was immediately read, so hopefully the man and the demon were available.

“He does dishes too? He’s definitely a keeper, then,” Aunt Ro whispered in his ear.

He would have jumped if he wasn’t used to his aunt randomly sneaking up on him. Damn ghosts.

“Yes, Aunt, he really is. I expect you to treat him like one of the family,” Cass whispered back. Might as well get it out of the way now. He turned to look at his aunt, shock clearly written on her face. He knew she had been mostly teasing him.

“Cassius...” she said, trailing off.

Cass felt rather proud. Leaving Aunt Ro speechless was an accomplishment.

“I’m keeping him,” Cass said, answering his aunt’s unspoken question. “Forever.”

“Forever, forever?” she whispered.

“Yup,” he replied, and they both looked over at his angel, who was bent over the sink, his glorious black wings folded up behind him, his head bent to the task at hand. “Forever forever. Even if he doesn’t know it yet.”

“Oh, Cass,” she murmured. “Everlasting love. How truly romantic.”

Cass looked over to see tears in her eyes. Her dress also now had sunflowers all over it. He couldn’t suppress the chuckle it gave him. Aunt Ro had always been a bit of a romantic at heart, and she always wanted what was best for him.

“Are you really sure?” she asked him. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up...” she continued.

“I can see it, Aunt Ro. I’m sure,” Cass answered.

She looked a little shocked at that, but Kushiel was wrapping up the dishes, so Cass glanced back at his phone and saw that Michael had replied, asking if thirty minutes worked. Cass sent a thumbs up emoji just as Kushiel was shutting off the water.

“We’re all set to meet up with them in thirty,” Cass told him. Kushiel walked over, and he shimmered the tiniest bit, which made Cass think that he’d put on a human look. He shifted his sight, and sure enough, the wings were gone, and he was dressed in jeans and a sweater. Interestingly, the scarf was also now gone. He went back to

his regular vision, and Kushiel's true form now included not just white, flowing pants, but also his scarf.

Interesting.

"The scarf is part of your angelic form now?" Cass asked. He didn't know that angels could change that.

"Yes, well, it seemed easiest to always have it on," Kushiel admitted. "This way I can see what you see, and I don't disregard the idea of ghosts in general."

Cass nodded along, and then he realized a very important fact—when they had been chatting in bed about Lucifer's message, Kushiel hadn't had the scarf on. He'd been naked, yet he hadn't disregarded ghosts. Cass wondered if it was simply that not enough time had passed; it wasn't like they totally forgot about ghosts, after all. They remembered the ghost department in meetings and in general, but they just tended to not think about them. But Kushiel had still had ghosts in the forefront of his thoughts.

The other possibility was that perhaps the soul bond, which was growing stronger every time Cass checked, would enable Kushiel to see what Cassius saw. It made sense in a lot of ways, and the scarf had felt so much to Cassius like looking in a mirror. He wondered if eventually Kushiel wouldn't need the scarf at all. It was something to think about, that was for sure.

But for now, Kushiel was standing patiently and waiting for him, and Cass realized if they were going to walk to the coffee shop, it was best to head out now. He grabbed Kushiel's hand and he led the way out of the house.

They were just stepping outside when he heard a throat clearing behind them, and they both stopped and looked back at Aunt Ro.

Oops.

She merely raised an eyebrow at them, obviously a bit miffed at being forgotten.

“Umm, well, I suppose you could come along if you’d like,” Cass invited.

“And who will watch your ghost?” she harrumphed.

“I don’t really think they need watching, Aunt, but if you’d rather stay here, feel free to do so. Or go do whatever ghostly things you do when you aren’t with me,” he responded drily, and then he shut the door behind them and led Kushiel down the walkway.

It was a pleasant afternoon for a walk, and Cass enjoyed Kushiel’s hand in his. They walked in a peaceful silence, and Cass tried not to think too much about the upcoming meeting. They both seemed lost in their own thoughts, and before he knew it they were walking into the shop. Michael and Ari were already there, and Ari was waving from a side table.

“Dudes! So good to see you guys!” Ari boomed, standing up to give them both fist bumps. Cass had the thought that Ari probably would have hugged them, except they were still holding each other’s hands, which Ari raised his eyebrows at.

Cass didn’t bother explaining, despite Ari’s clear curiosity, and they got greetings out of the way. Steph brought over coffees and snacks for the table without even being asked.

“Thanks, Steph. All good here?” Cass asked as she set down everyone’s favorite.

“I’m hiring someone to do the books and work front of shop,” she answered. Her tone was one he didn’t dare argue with, so he just nodded.

“I trust your judgment,” he said.

“Good,” she replied, then she was heading back behind the counter, already shouting orders at the college kids who were working that day.

“Bruh, your manager is hardcore. I always hated working with her. She is all order and no chaos,” Ari remarked.

Cass only chuckled. Luckily Ari hadn’t unleashed his chaos on the shop for long before moving on. Cass probably should never have hired him, but Ari was just such a sweet and clueless dude-bro, even though he was an upper level demon.

“So, you needed to see us?” Michael asked, getting to the point. He was definitely the order to Ari’s chaos.

“Yeah,” Cass sighed. “I guess it’s time I told you guys some stuff about me.”

“Dude, you’re totally a mobster with a vast network of underground spies, only you’re working on going clean and are really on the side of justice, so you’ve been feeding information to the police for ages and cleaning up your organization. It’s like some good version of The Godfather,” Ari guessed.

Cass looked at him, momentarily speechless.

“Or you’re like totally the batman type, and you have some underground lair and maybe some hackers who work for you, and that’s how you know so much information and are able to give us all the clues you give us. Or you are the hacker, and you have like this giant wall of screens in some hidden lair and you just find shit out and serve the side of justice,” Ari went on.

Michael sighed. “He’s had quite a bit of time to come up with theories,” he

apologized, “and we’ve been catching up on movies.”

“Bruh! Kushiell is totally like your Alfred, isn’t he!” Ari leaned closer then, looking pointedly at their clasped hands. “You know, I love the batman fanfic, because of course the butler who totally supports the superhero is the one who belongs with him. I bet they get up to some freaky shit in the bedroom, too. Total role reversal,” Ari suggested, winking.

“Ari,” Michael chastised, but he was smiling.

“It’s ghosts,” Cass blurted out before Ari could start on his next rant.

“Ahhhh,” Ari commented, adding, “Dude, that is so cool. You’re like all Sixth Sense. You see dead people. How come we’ve never seen any here then?”

“Angels and demons cannot see ghosts,” Kushiell cut in.

Ari looked pensive at this, but then he just nodded his head. “Yup. Makes sense.”

“Wait, what? Why?” Cass asked. This whole conversation was totally running away from him, which shouldn’t have surprised him when it came to Ari.

“Well, dude, you know what kind of trouble I’d get into with ghosts? I’d have them doing all sorts of crazy shit. Demons and angels would both constantly be all up in their shit. Hey, do you think maybe we could orchestrate a haunting? I bet that would totally freak out Az and Gabe, and it would be such fun!” Ari mused.

“Absolutely not,” Michael said. “They’re still pissed off about the whole lube incident, and I am not dealing with Gabe yelling at me for something you did. Again.”

“Ah, yeah, dudes, the lube thing was epic. See, I—” Ari started, but Michael turned bright red and cleared his throat, and Ari looked over and wisely decided not to finish the story.

“So, ah, yes, Cass can see ghosts,” Kushiel said, attempting to get them back on track. “And my lost souls were turned into ghosts.”

“I see where that would present a problem if angels and demons can’t see ghosts. So Cass found them for you?” Michael asked.

“No, that’s the problem,” Cass answered. “They’ve been hidden from me and other ghosts, and we need help figuring out who did it. It has to be a demon who had access to Erebus, and we thought you guys might have some ideas.”

“Dude, what a foul move, even for a demon. But it’s cool, because you’ll totally go all kickass on them and straighten that shit out. You can go all Godfather on them. Only we’ll call you the Ghostfather!” Ari cried out, excited.

Cass tried not to smile, really he did, because Ari did not need encouragement, but he couldn’t help it.

“Bruh, I might be able to get you a sword to use, too. It totally sucks up the soul of afterlifers. Wicked shit, dude, and it would take care of the demonic dickhead in charge of this clusterfuck,” Ari speculated.

“Yes,” Michael said, “but first they need to figure out who they’re going after, and I think that’s why we’re here.”

“Aww, my little s’more. You’re so smart. Of course we can start a list of who is a giant demonic dickhead. It might be kinda long though,” Ari mused, tugging Michael in closer to him and leaving his arm wrapped around the guy.

“Just because a demon doesn’t find your pranks funny doesn’t mean they want to disrupt the order of the universe,” Michael responded, but he leaned comfortably against Ari’s side, and then Ari was kissing Michael, and Michael was kissing Ari back, and Cass was wondering if it was really a great idea to ask a demon of chaos for assistance.

Cass looked over at Kushiel, who was staring at the two soulmates with a look that Cass couldn’t quite place.

“Hey. You alright? I know they’re chaotic, but we’ll get some answers,” Cass reassured him.

“Of course we will. They are always helpful,” Kushiel agreed, but he was still staring at them with... longing?

Heaven and hell, Cass realized he could be an idiot sometimes. He let go of Kushiel’s hand, and before Kushiel could do more than look over in surprise, he reached over with both hands, dragged Kushiel’s chair closer, and swung his arm around Kushiel’s shoulder. Kushiel looked surprised but pleased, and he turned to stare at Cass, at which point Cass gave him a peck on the lips.

At least he meant it to be a peck, only Kushiel’s mouth was heaven itself, and his angel tasted of cinnamon and chocolate from the coffee, and next thing he knew he was licking at Kushiel’s mouth while his angel melted like butter next to him.

“My god, you guys,” Steph’s voice interrupted, “we aren’t that kind of shop.”

Cass laughed as he drew back from Kushiel, and he saw Mike and Ari break apart as well. Steph was smiling at them all despite her comment, and she put down some more snacks from the kitchen.

“Tone it down you guys. A girl can only take so much while she’s at work,” she winked. She walked off, muttering, “Four hot guys all making out and not a guy or girl in sight for me...”

They all chuckled a little at that, and Michael and Kushiel both looked embarrassed, but Ari just gave him a knowing smile across the table. It was kind of shocking to think that perhaps he and the demon had more in common than he’d thought.

“Anyway,” Cass said, clearing his throat and turning back to the topic. “I don’t just see ghosts. I also... have visions.”

“Dude, me too!” Ari cried out, holding his hand up for a high five.

Ari’s reactions kept surprising Cass, although you couldn’t expect anything predictable when it came to Ari. He high fived the demon, because why not?

“And I also can talk to gods. Or angels and demons, I guess,” Cass added in.

“Dude! Me too!” Ari cried out again. He started to put his hand up for another high five, but Michael grabbed it.

“Of course you can talk to angels and demons. You are one. And maybe we could not call any more attention to ourselves? Now let Cass tell us what’s going on. Hopefully without someone calling the cops thinking we’re all crazy. Because I do not want to run into anyone from the department,” Michael murmured.

“Dude, I totally warded this corner so we can’t be overheard,” Ari defended. “But little dude is right. Spill the tea, bruh,” he said, looking at Cass.

So Cass delved into his story, giving them all the details of his little visit with the devil.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

Kushiel knew he was staring at Cassius as he explained everything to Michael and Ari, and he knew he probably looked like an adoring puppy dog, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He also knew he should be paying attention, despite having heard the story before. But he couldn't stop replaying that kiss in his head. He had been a little sad when Cass had dropped his hand, but then Cass had hauled Kushiel closer and kissed him, and Kushiel certainly wouldn't complain about that.

Right along with the kiss, he also couldn't stop thinking about what Cass had said. Because when he had been doing the dishes, Cass had forgotten one important detail.

Angels and demons had excellent hearing.

Cass had told his aunt that he was keeping Kushiel. He had said forever. Kushiel couldn't get those words out of his head. Of course, humans said things like forever all the time, and they didn't really mean forever when they said it, because they had no concept of such a thing.

Cass had said he could see it, and Kushiel didn't know what that meant, either.

Of course, he could just ask. That would be the intelligent thing to do. The practical thing to do. But Kushiel held some distant hope in his heart that maybe Cass had meant they were soulmates. He didn't know any angels who had soulmates, and he surely wasn't even worthy of getting such a gift, but still... He hoped.

If he asked Cass, and it didn't mean that, then he wouldn't be able to hide his devastation. Cass would be hurt because Kushiel was upset, because Cass was just that nice of a person. Or even worse, Cass would pity him for thinking that, and

Kushiel couldn't abide that. Cass looked at him like he was bright and sexy and wonderful, and he didn't want Cass to feel sorry for him.

It was probably silly, but Kushiel would rather remain with the hope of Cass really being his forever as opposed to finding out the truth of what Cass had meant. Maybe that made him foolish, but he would hold onto his hope and enjoy it while he could.

"...anything to add, Kushiel?" Cass asked.

Everyone was staring at him, but he only shook his head. He'd been daydreaming about soulmates while they had lost souls to find. This was why he didn't deserve a soulmate. He was an outcast amongst angels, and he wasn't a demon, but if he were, he wouldn't be the best of them either. He was just... himself.

"So the message makes me think we're looking for a demon of greed and envy," Michael said, looking at Ari for confirmation.

"Yeah, little dude, except those are different departments. But at least we have it narrowed down to two departments. I'm sure Luce was giving us a hint, but he probably can't make it too easy," Ari responded.

"It's also a high level demon, so that should narrow things down even more," Cass added.

"My guess is they're also topside, or they have been recently, at least. Could you find out who would fit that?" Michael asked Ari, looking at him.

Kushiel squashed his own envy—the two of them really were made for each other, and it was impossible to miss the adoring looks they gave one another.

"My s'more is so smart," Ari bragged. "I can totally check that. I'll be right back," he

said, then he stood up and walked back to the bathrooms.

“Mirrors,” Michael explained. “They let him talk to his minions.”

Kushiel knew that, and he thought that Cass probably did too. His Cass was so smart too, and Kushiel realized he probably hadn’t let Cass know exactly how much he appreciated all the help. He would need to make sure to remedy that.

“So, you two are...” Michael started, staring pointedly at Kushiel, who was still scrunched up next to Cass. Kushiel realized he was leaning into Cass quite a bit. Heavens, he was practically sitting in the man’s lap.

Kushiel started to shift away a bit, but Cass just hauled him in closer with his arm, which was still resting along the back of Kushiel’s chair. The whole thing made Kushiel blush, but Cass just smiled when he looked at Kushiel.

“A ghost whisperer and a fallen angel—” Michael started, but Cass cut him off.

“Don’t call him that,” Cass corrected.

Michael leaned back, looking apologetic. “I’m sorry—” he started, but Kushiel interrupted him this time.

“It’s okay, Cass, Michael didn’t mean anything harmful by it. He has been a friend, and he only states what he knows to be true,” Kushiel said.

Cass turned to Kushiel then, grabbing his hand and staring into his eyes. “You are not a fallen angel. By heaven, Kushiel, you shine brighter than any angel ever, and you are not fallen or less than or anything else, and I will not sit by and listen while anyone, and I mean anyone, even you, says that. You are perfect, and you are exactly the angel you were meant to be. You are a fucking supernova of angelhood,” Cass

finished.

“Damn straight!” Ari chimed in, plopping back down next to Michael and pulling him in close. Michael nodded in agreement.

Kushiel blushed again. He wasn’t used to such compliments, and Cass gave them so freely. He was used to being ignored by angels, if not spoken of in whispers. The demons treated him kindly and like a brother, but he was always conscious of the fact that he wasn’t quite one of them. He really did appreciate them, though. Without Ari and the others... Well, they had gotten him through the last few millennia.

Kushiel cleared his throat and decided to change the subject, because he didn’t know how to reply to Cass’s statement. He asked Ari, “What did you find out?”

“Ah, so we got two high level dudes who are currently topside. Levi, Prince of Envy, who is usually topside, and Mammy, Prince of Greed and Avarice, who does come topside but not as often. I haven’t seen either one in a few centuries at least, so I couldn’t even tell you if they’ve changed or gotten any weird ideas in their noggins. Levi used to be more of a loner dude, but who knows if that could have changed,” Ari shrugged.

”What kind of name is Mammy?” Michael asked. “It sounds like you’re talking about someone’s mother.”

”Bruh, he’s no one’s Momma, but he sure acts like a Momma’s boy, always trying to please the higher ups,” Ari joked. “Mammon’s such a suck up. Dude thinks he’s all that, but I don’t know how he would’ve come up with a plan like this on his own. But he does have a large legion. Some lesser demons have no taste in leadership.”

“So you think he’s more likely to have the following that Lucifer spoke of?” Michael asked. “We should probably start with him, then, if he’s our most likely suspect.”

“Yeah, my s’more, the only problem is no one was exactly sure where he was,” Ari replied.

“Do we know where Levi is?” Cass asked.

“Yup,” Ari answered.

They all waited, including Michael, who was staring at him expectantly. Ari, however, took a bite of the chocolate croissant on the table.

“Dudes, this is delish!” he mumbled around a mouthful.

Kushiel stifled the urge to laugh. You could always count on Ari to be... well, Ari-like.

Michael just smiled. “Ari, are we going to go question Levi?” he asked.

“Ah, no little dude. Definitely not. Levi would not be happy to see me. Best if Kushiel and Cassius go on their own to question him,” Ari responded.

“What did you do?” Michael sighed.

Ari actually blushed at that, which surprised Kushiel. Usually Ari was proud of his pranks.

“Ugh, well, I might possibly be a teeny bit responsible for a little itty bitty reign of terror he may have had a few hundred years ago,” Ari mumbled.

Kushiel’s suspicions on who exactly “Levi” was suddenly grew.

“Ari,” Kushiel asked, “what is Levi’s full name?”

“Leviathan,” Ari answered, then he took another bite of croissant and moaned. “Dudes, this is really awesome. So tasty.”

Cass looked at Kushiell. “Does he mean...” he started, trailing off.

Kushiell sighed. “Yes, I’m afraid so. He means Leviathan, the sea monster who supposedly destroyed countless ships in human folklore. Although perhaps that is not merely folklore.”

“Dudes, it is not my fault,” Ari defended.

Even Michael snorted at that.

“Well, I guess we’re going to go question a sea monster,” Cass replied. “Maybe not the strangest thing I’ve ever had to do, but it ranks up there.”

Ari just snorted, shoving some more croissant into his mouth and mumbling, “He’s a chill demon in reality. I’m sure you’ll be fine, bruh.”

Kushiell couldn’t help thinking that the statement was not very reassuring from a demon of chaos.

So Kushiell found himself on a boat with Cassius that afternoon. Paradise Falls wasn’t all that far from the coast, and of course Ari “knew a guy,” and they’d found themselves “borrowing” a boat, although it was more of a yacht than anything, complete with a stateroom, a galley, a head, and a salon. It even came with a captain to pilot the boat—a grizzled old man who was happy to take them a few hours out to the middle of the ocean. When Ari mentioned that they were looking for Levi, the man had nodded his head and said nothing else, heading off to the bridge while Michael and Ari wished them well.

Kushiel decided it was best if he didn't ask too many questions.

He wasn't too worried, at any rate. If there was trouble, he could always use his wings to transport them to safety easily enough. He would've transported them to speak to Leviathan, except there was really nowhere to transport them to in the middle of the ocean, so they found themselves standing on the deck of the boat and watching the coastline get smaller as they made their way out into the ocean.

The sun was shining, the sea was still and calm, and Cassius was snuggled up next to him; Kushiel couldn't imagine a nicer way to spend an afternoon.

Then Cass leaned up and kissed him. His tongue traced the seam of Kushiel's lips, and he parted them without thought, allowing Cass in. He tasted sweet, like the sugary concoctions his coffee shop created. Kushiel couldn't help the groan that escaped him as Cass's tongue dipped into his mouth. He sucked on it, making Cassius groan. The sound had Kushiel hard in a moment. He liked nothing more than pleasing Cass, and suddenly it was all he wanted to do. He wanted Cass's length in his mouth again, feeling that hard, silky skin against his tongue. It made him think of Cass filling him in other ways, and he felt his erection get impossibly harder.

"Come on, K," Cass whispered as he pulled away, and he grabbed Kushiel's hand and led him down steps and into the stateroom.

The stateroom was dominated by a large bed, or perhaps that was all Kushiel could focus on in his haze of lust for Cassius as they stepped into the room.

Cass's eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment, and he said, "Let your true form out, Kush. It's all I see anyway, and I want to know you're being you when we're together. You're so beautiful."

Kushiel felt his chest stutter with the warmth and love in Cass's eyes. He did as Cass

asked, letting his true form come out. Cass unwound the scarf from his neck, dropping it to the floor, and then he kneeled and pushed Kushiel's pants down, gently lifting each of Kushiel's legs as he took those off as well.

Cass groaned as Kushiel's dick came into view, saying, "So pretty."

Kushiel couldn't help the blush that spread over his body. No one had ever complimented him there before.

Cass just smiled, reaching a hand out to tug on Kushiel's length. He groaned, the pleasure shooting through him. Still, he wanted Cass naked too. He wanted to please his lover.

"Please, Cass," he murmured.

Cass leaned forward, licking the tip of Kushiel's dick and making his hips jerk. "Please what, Kush?"

"Let me make you feel good, Cass. Please," he murmured.

Cass's hand and tongue on his dick felt amazing, but he wanted to feel Cass, too. He wanted to see him. Perhaps that made him greedy, but he couldn't help it. He loved seeing Cass happy and pleased.

Cass's eyes gleamed up at him. "Is that what you want? You want us both to feel good?"

Kushiel nodded his head, and Cass stood, stripping his own clothes off. Kushiel had a moment of uncertainty. Should he be doing that? Cass always took the lead when it came to their intimate encounters—should he be doing more? Before he could get too into his head, Cass cut off his train of thought.

“Crawl onto the bed, Kushiell. Let me see your beautiful body,” Cass ordered.

Kushiell did as he was told, and when he was on all fours on the bed, his back facing Cassius, his human gave a long, low groan. Kushiell turned his head to see Cass stroking himself, his eyes full of lust.

“By heavens, Kushiell, you’re beautiful. So very pretty for me with your ass on display, your wings spread out and looking so magnificent. Will you stay like that for me, Kush? Let me look at you?” Cass asked.

Kushiell’s cock was hard and leaking precum from Cass’s words. “I’ll do anything you want, Cass,” he moaned.

“Mmm, I love it that you do what I ask, Kush. I love it that you let me take charge. Do you like that too?” Cass growled.

Kushiell nodded his head frantically

“Good. You don’t have to worry about anything. You only have to tell me if you don’t like something. You understand, Kush? I won’t abide you not speaking up if you don’t like anything I do. Your only job is to feel good, you understand?” Cass demanded.

Kushiell felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders; he felt lighter, his head almost fuzzy. He didn’t have to think or worry at all; he just had to do what Cassius said.

“I want to please you,” he managed to whisper, letting his head hang down. Even though he wasn’t looking at Cass, it was like he could feel his stare. Kushiell’s body felt like it was melting under Cass’s eyes and words.

“Oh you do, baby. You do,” Cass whispered, and a hand was sliding up along his back until it reached his wings, then it was caressing them.

Kushiel didn't know his wings were erogenous. He had never been intimate in his angelic form, always too self conscious of his appearance, despite the many offers he had (he was friends with a demon of lust, after all). Not that he had many erotic encounters in his existence overall; it just hadn't seemed important.

He had no idea it could be like this, though. It never had been like this, not with anyone other than Cass.

He shivered under the onslaught of pleasure. Cass's hand trailed gently along his feathers, shooting sparks down his spine and into his dick.

“So beautiful,” Cass whispered again, and then a hand was reaching underneath to give his cock a tug, and Kushiel moaned as his head fell to the mattress, his hips up in the air.

“So pretty for me,” Cass murmured. “That ass up in the air for me, your sexy wings spread out. Do you want me inside you, Kush? Would you like that?”

“Please,” Kushiel moaned. He could suddenly think of nothing else but Cass inside of him, a part of him. He wanted it more than anything in his life. He had never, in all his existence, let anyone into him that way, but he wanted it now more than he wanted to breathe.

He felt Cass's hands move away from him, and he groaned in disappointment, but Cass only chuckled.

“Patience, baby,” Cass murmured, and Kushiel heard drawers opening. “Aha! I figured Ari wouldn't leave us unprepared,” Cass chuckled.

Kushiel had only a moment to wonder at the comment before Cass's hands were back on his ass, both of them spreading his cheeks. He felt a puff of air on his hole, and he groaned again, knowing that Cass was so close to such an intimate part of him.

Something wet touched his hole, and he had only a moment to wonder before he realized that Cass was licking him there.

"Cassius!" Kushiel cried out, surprise and pleasure coursing through him as Cass's tongue poked and prodded at his entrance.

A chuckle reverberated against his skin, adding to the pleasure. Cass's mouth was then sucking, and by Yah, Kushiel had never felt anything like it. He couldn't help the sounds that escaped him, even as he tried to stifle them and still his hips from thrusting back into Cassius.

"Let me hear all your noises, Kush. Let me hear how I'm making you feel," Cass whispered before licking along Kush's hole again.

Kush couldn't help the whimper that escaped him, and he didn't try to. Cass wanted to hear him. He groaned loudly when something entered him, slowly but steadily. It must have been Cass's finger, and it was slick and wet and slid in.

Kush felt... He didn't quite know. There was a slight tingle, not even a burn, and there was pressure. It felt good, but also unfamiliar. Cass kissed his ass cheek, then he felt a slight bite, and he groaned.

"Do you like that?" Cass asked, but Kushiel could only pant and hum as Cass bit his ass cheek again, that finger sliding deeper.

Cass touched something inside of him, and sparks flew through his body. Kushiel whimpered as Cass's finger seemed to flutter inside of him, hitting that spot over and

over again.

“Mmmhmmm. Do you like that, Kush?” Cass murmured.

“Yes!” he cried out, but then Cass was withdrawing his finger, and Kushiel groaned in disappointment.

Cass chuckled throatily, and then two fingers must have been entering Kushiel, because the stretch was more intense, but Cass worked them in slowly, whispering, “So beautiful. So pretty. You look so sexy spreading open for my fingers. You’re going to look even sexier when my cock is plunging into you.”

Cass’s fingers were then both hitting that spot inside of him, one and then the other, rubbing against it and sending shocks through his whole body. Kushiel’s dick was steadily leaking precum—he could feel it dripping down his shaft—and he couldn’t help thrusting his hips back into Cass’s fingers.

“Please!” Kushiel begged as those fingers worked him over from the inside. It felt amazing, but he wanted Cass inside of him.

“Tell me, K. Tell me what you want,” Cass demanded.

“You inside of me,” Kushiel panted. “I want you to be part of me. Please.”

“Always, baby. I’ll always be part of you,” Cass promised.

He withdrew his fingers from Kushiel despite his moan of protest. Then Cass’s hands were urging his hips over, and Kushiel felt himself being gently flipped onto his back, Cass being mindful of his wings. He spread them out beneath him and gazed up at Cass. The lust and want and love he saw in those eyes—it brought tears to his own eyes.

“I love you,” Kushiel blurted out, unable to stop the words from falling from his lips.

He was afraid for just a moment, but Cass smiled radiantly at him, whispering, “I love you too, Kush.”

Cass leaned down to kiss him. Their tongues tangled together, their lips slanting over each other again and again before their mouths sealed together. It was like they were breathing each other’s air, and Kushiel wrapped his arms around Cass, and Cass’s hands felt like they were everywhere, touching his chest, his side, then sliding across his wings again.

Cass pulled back, his eyes shining down at Kushiel. “God, you are so fucking sexy,” he murmured.

Cass grabbed a pillow and put it underneath Kushiel’s ass, then he grabbed a bottle Kushiel hadn’t noticed and coated his dick in the liquid within. Within seconds his cock was pressing up against Kushiel’s hole, and they both groaned as the tip slipped inside.

It burned and stretched, but Cass went so slow, and Kushiel reveled in the slight burn because it was also pleasure.

Cass’s hands grabbed onto Kushiel’s hands, pressing them into the bed beside his head, and he stared into Kushiel’s eyes as he pressed deeper.

“I love you, Kush,” Cass murmured again, and then he slid the rest of the way in, and his cock was pressing into that spot inside Kush, and he couldn’t help the mewl that came out of his mouth.

“So beautiful,” Cass said yet again, and Kush was starting to believe him. Maybe he was beautiful, at least to Cass.

Cass's hips started thrusting then, and Kush lost himself to the pleasure, all thoughts floating away.

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Being inside Kushiel was like touching the sun. Kushiel's light surrounded them, golden threads tied them together, and Kushiel was hot and tight around his dick. The look in Kush's eyes was mesmerizing, and the little mewls of pleasure and groans coming out of his angel's mouth only spurred him on, causing him to thrust faster into Kushiel's body.

Their hands were clasped, their fingers twined together, and Cass had never felt so close to anyone in all his life.

Kushiel's hips were splayed impossibly wide, and he let go of Kushiel's hand to lift one of his legs up. The motion let him sink deeper into Kushiel, and the angel's shout of pleasure let him know he had hit his prostate.

Kushiel apparently really liked having his prostate played with. His dick was leaking a stream of precum onto his stomach as it bounced against his skin with each of Cass's thrusts.

"Cass," Kushiel mewled out, his eyes closing and his one hand squeezing tightly around Cass's.

Cass thrust faster and harder, making sure to hit that spot over and over. Kushiel canted his hips up, and then he was crying out as white cum painted his abs, his ass squeezing Cass even more tightly.

Fuck. His angel had come untouched, and it sent Cass spiraling into his own orgasm.

"So beautiful. So good for me, Kush," Cass moaned out, his orgasm rolling over him,

his hips thrusting frantically into Kushiel.

Kushiel mewled, more cum spurting from his dick as Cass filled him up.

Cass collapsed onto him with one final pump of his hips, careful not to fall too heavily, catching his angel's mouth in a kiss. They were both panting and sticky, but Cass didn't care. They kissed ravenously at first, and then more gently, until Cass's slowly softening dick slipped from Kushiel's body. Cass rolled to the side, resting his head on Kushiel's chest.

"My beautiful angel," Cass murmured, sliding his hand along Kushiel's chest. He encountered the sticky mess on Kush's stomach, but he only smiled at the evidence of how undone his angel had come.

Kushiel blushed as he gazed at Cass. "You are the beautiful one, Cassius. You are everything," he whispered.

"You are my everything," Cass said, kissing one of Kushiel's nipples just because it was there.

They basked in the silence for a moment before Kushiel asked, "Would you like me to clean us up?"

Cass hummed in agreement, and then his hand was clean, as was Kush's stomach. "The perks of angelhood," he chuckled. "Bet you didn't think you'd be performing that kind of miracle today."

Kushiel laughed with him, and Cass was overjoyed at the sound. His angel didn't laugh nearly enough. They settled into each other, snuggled up and content, and Cass felt himself drifting to sleep.

Yes, they were on their way to see a demon sea monster, and they still had a mystery to solve and lost souls to find, but he would steal perfect moments wherever he could. With that thought, he let sleep overtake him.

Cass awakened to Kushiel staring at him, gently petting his head and smiling softly at him.

“How long was I out?” Cass asked, giving a yawn.

“Maybe twenty minutes? I think we’re slowing down,” Kushiel answered.

Cass realized it did seem like the engines were quieter, which is probably what woke him. He got out of bed and stretched, and he smiled to see Kush’s lusty gaze sweep over his naked form.

“Sea monster first, then sexy looks,” Cass joked.

Kushiel blushed and got out of bed to get his pants and scarf back on. When Cass got a look at his perfect naked body, he almost rethought the whole demon first thing, but he supposed being interrupted by a sea monster might prove to be a real mood killer.

Cass couldn’t help shifting his sight a bit to look closer though. What he saw took his breath away.

They were bound by a thick golden ray of light, and the bond glowed so brightly that Cass had to resist the urge to shield his eyes. It was beautiful, just like his angel.

He was going to say something to Kushiel, but he heard the engines cut off completely as he pulled on his clothes. He thought Kushiel must know they were soulmates—the angel had declared his love, after all. Still, they hadn’t talked about it, and he wanted Kushiel to know how happy he was about it. Now didn’t seem to be

the time, however, since he didn't think a sea monster interrupting that would be a good idea either. He knew his Kushiel was shy and doubted himself, and he wanted time to reassure him about how happy he was that they were permanently tied together.

"Let's get this over with," Cass sighed. "Although I'm still not sure how exactly we're supposed to get Leviathan's attention."

They climbed up the steps and made their way toward the bridge, the yacht rocking gently on the water. The captain met them on the deck, waving a hand at them.

"Looking for Levi, yeah?" he asked as he came over to them.

Kushiel and Cass both nodded, and to Cass's surprise, the captain then pulled out a chest and started throwing stuff into the ocean. It looked like coins, jewelry, fancy clothes, and even some paper money.

"Ummm," Cass began, "what are you... uh..."

The captain smiled and winked at them. "How else do you think to lure a sea monster, eh boy?"

"I don't get it, though. What is treasure gonna do? Leviathan is a demon of envy, not greed," Cass responded.

The captain nodded, still chucking stuff overboard. "Of course. Envy is desiring what others have that you do not. Do you think this lovely yacht is mine? Or this money? Or this fine jewelry?" he asked, holding up a handful of necklaces, which he then promptly threw in the water. "Nope! None of it is mine, but I want it all, and so I stole it!" he cried out.

It was as if his statement caused a reaction, because suddenly the water was churning and bubbling, and Cass could almost make out a massive body beneath the water.

“Umm, maybe this wasn’t the best idea...” he started, but the captain just cackled gleefully again.

A long, octopus-like tentacle reached out of the water, grabbing onto the side of the boat and tipping it precariously. Cass tumbled toward the side, but Kushiel grabbed him and held on, his footing firm on the deck.

Cass was about to scream, and Kushiel had his wings out, so he looked like he was about to fly them off to safety, when the captain took matters into his own hands.

Literally into his own hands. He walked over and gently caressed the tentacle, then reached down and took the tip of it to gently caress his face with the side that had suckers.

It was strangely sexual in a way that Cass couldn’t even comprehend. He didn’t know if it was the gentle way the captain held the tentacle, which grew to be bigger than his legs as it went down into the sea, or the fact that the tentacle seemed to be caressing the captain’s face in return.

“Levi! I’m warning ya now—if you destroy this ship, you’re bringing us back to land!” the captain called out.

With that, the tentacle swiftly retreated, and it was like the water spat a man out onto the deck. He looked like a guy in his early 20s, and his hair was so black it looked blue. Cass noticed the tips of it actually were a lighter blue. His eyes were a striking violet color, and his body was chiseled and firm. He had horns and a tail, but instead of wings, he had tentacles.

Cass looked at Kushiel, but Kushiel only looked vaguely confused. He supposed the two had never met before. He looked back at Leviathan, who had a bored look on his face.

“You got old, Bob,” the demon complained.

The sea captain, who was apparently named Bob, only laughed like that was the funniest thing he had heard in ages.

“And you did not, young Levi. It’s lovely to see you again, and Patrick will be right sorry he missed you. He’s home with the grandkids, and I didn’t know I’d be out looking for you, or he’d have surely come along for old time’s sake,” Bob said.

Levi’s face seemed to soften a bit. “Ah, yes, you two were lovely morsels. You kept in contact with him?” Levi asked.

“I married him,” Bob responded. “No one else would ever quite understand what we’d been through. And, well, after we spent a bit of time with you, we never did look at each other in the same way. Hard to be just friends after you had an orgy with a sea monster.”

“I think it needs to be more than three people for an orgy, but that isn’t really my department,” Levi shrugged. “I am glad you two found what you truly envied in others. I would say it’s nice to see you, but it seems you’re back to envying what others have, and you know how I feel about pirates.”

Cass was trying to make sense of all this, but he was having a hard time following. “Um, excuse me, can you guys fill us in?” he asked.

Levi noticed them for the first time then, tilting his head and staring. He seemed halfway feral, more beast than anything else, despite his human-like form.

“You don’t have envy,” he said, looking at Cass. He turned to Kushiel and smiled, and Cass noticed his teeth looked sharp. “You, however... you have some envy going on. Interesting trait for an angel.”

“Leave him alone,” Cass demanded, grabbing Kushiel’s hand and squeezing it.

Leviathan looked at Cass again, then shrugged. He sort of reminded Cass of the emo college kids who came into the shop, and his attitude matched.

“Yeah, no real meal there anyway—what he envies is easily within his reach, after all,” Levi muttered. He looked at Bob again, frowning. “You don’t actually have any real envy either. You’re happy with your life and your husband. What in nine hells are you doing trying to catch my attention?”

“Ah, you’re just as beautiful, sexy, and weird as I remember. Patrick is gonna be so sad he missed it,” Bob sighed. He then looked at Kushiel and Cass and explained, “When my buddy and I were younger we were regular spitfires. Mad at the world and not sure why. We ended up stealing a boat and a bunch of money from Patrick’s job. We were pretty far out to sea when we ran into Levi, here. Turns out he doesn’t like pirates much, and that’s apparently what we were.”

“Pirates crave what belongs to others, and they take it by force and violence. I’ve never cared for them. The ocean is the one place I shouldn’t have to deal with envy—there’s enough of that in the souls in hell,” Levi sneered.

“Wait a minute,” Cass interrupted. “You’re a demon of envy. Aren’t you supposed to encourage people to be envious?”

Levi laughed. “People don’t need any encouragement to be envious. It is the natural state of humanity to want that which others have. I come to the ocean for a vacation and some peace, but humans always muck things up,” he grumbled.

Bob laughed, adding, “Yes, Patrick and I definitely mucked things up, including our lives. Levi here taught us a lesson. He sunk the ship and the treasure, but apparently we weren’t bad enough to warrant him letting us drown along with our spoils. Levi saved us, and he gave us quite the weekend to remember him.” He winked at that last part.

Cass cleared his throat and tried very hard not to picture two young men and a tentacled demon.

“So you, what, had sex with modern day pirates?” Cass asked Levi, and he had to try not to giggle after he said it.

“They didn’t really envy what they stole. They thought they envied each other, but that wasn’t right either. They envied the freedom to do what they wanted, yet they were both too afraid to do it. I simply gave them a nudge in that direction,” Levi grumbled.

“A nudge,” Bob chortled. “He fucked our brains out, is what he did, and Patrick and I were finally able to admit what we wanted. Each other. Anyway, it is lovely to see you, and I’ll give Patrick your regards, but lest I be tempted, I’m heading to the galley while you ‘chat’ with these two.”

With that he winked and walked off.

“Does he think...” Kushiel started, speaking for the first time.

“I’m not having sex with you two,” Levi said, sounding bored. “That’ll just create envy, and I’m on vacation, for fuck’s sake.”

“We don’t want to have sex with you! We have questions for you,” Kushiel responded, a spark of anger flowing through their bond.

Cass was actually flattered that it pissed Kushiel off to think of Levi having sex with either of them. They did need answers, though. Although Cass somehow didn't picture this emo-looking demon who seemed to have perfected the art of sneering and looking bored to be responsible for all the lost souls.

Levi sighed dramatically, then made a go-ahead gesture with his hands and his tentacles.

It was kind of freaky.

"Erebus," Kushiel stated.

Levi waited, still looking bored. Cass sharpened his vision, looking closer. Levi was a bright light, and he didn't sense a shroud of darkness around him that such an act would probably have created. Demons weren't really evil, after all—they were still souls filled with light. Most of the ones he saw were pretty bright, including Leviathan.

"Souls who were on their way to redemption," Kushiel added.

"I still don't hear an actual question," Levi huffed.

"What has happened to them?" Kushiel asked.

Leviathan sighed dramatically. "I have no clue what you're going on about. Nothing has happened to them. They're on Erebus, where they always are. They're totally not my department, and I am not taking responsibility for one more thing. I'm on vacation. I just want to float in the ocean, maybe destroy a few pirate ships, and possibly play with some humans."

"They were stolen by someone who was full of greed and envy," Kushiel declared.

Levi actually looked surprised at that. “Why the fuck would someone steal souls from Erebus? All that work, and for what purpose? It wouldn’t accomplish anything,” he reasoned.

Cass didn’t think Levi was their guy. First, he seemed like a loner who was more content to hang about topside than someone who had any followers in the underworld. Second, Cass really didn’t sense evil or malice from him.

“I don’t think he’s our guy,” Cass murmured to Kushiel.

“Of course I’m not the demon you’re looking for,” Levi snapped out. “I can sense envy, but it’s so prevalent I spend more time punishing it than causing it. Humans are envious creatures. But then angels and demons are as well, I suppose,” he added.

“So do you know who our guy would be? Someone who has been topside recently, has followers in the underworld, and is full of greed and envy?” Cass asked.

Levi actually seemed to think about this for a minute before speaking. “I suppose it could be him. He has been more envious lately, and he’s always been full of greed. He really takes himself way too seriously, too.”

“Who?” Kushiel asked.

“Mammon. I sensed him by the marina a few weeks ago. He was taking a whole lot of sea water for some reason. I didn’t ask. He’s such a know-it-all, and he grates on me,” Levi stated.

With that, Levi turned and vaulted over the deck into the water. Cass rushed over, and yep, there was a giant sea monster next to the boat now. Leviathan looked sort of like an octopus, yet his facial features seemed human.

“Do you know where we can find him?” Kushiel called down.

Cass was a little surprised to see the mouth—beak?—form words just like a human mouth would.

“Nope. No clue. And not my job. I have ships to sink and sailors to ravish,” Levi called out, and then he looked at Bob, who was coming out of the galley, calling out, “Unless you’d like a repeat?”

Bob chuckled. “Oh, I am tempted, but Patrick would want to be here. Perhaps we’ll come back and call on you again.”

A tentacle waved from the ocean, and then Leviathan sank below the surface, eventually fading from sight. When he was gone, Bob headed back to the bridge, mumbling about heading back to land to get home to his husband.

“Well, I think we can rule him out, and he seems to think it’s Mammon as well. I think we know which demon we’re looking for. Do you know anything about him?” Cass asked.

“No, I don’t. Unfortunately, no one seems to know where to find him, either,” Kushiel admitted.

“We’ll figure it out together,” Cass reassured him, leaning over and pulling Kushiel into his side.

Kushiel snuggled close. Yes, they had a suspect, but somehow Cass didn’t feel like they were much closer to an answer on finding the lost souls. For now, however, they were looking out across the ocean, the afternoon was beautiful, and Cass was happy to enjoy a few more stolen moments with soulmate.

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Kushiel could have transported them back to land rather easily, but he hadn't. He felt a bit guilty about it, but he'd been enjoying the afternoon too much with Cassius. Plus, it wasn't like they could accomplish anything on land that they couldn't accomplish on the yacht.

They'd chatted about possible places Mammon might have hidden the souls, pondering how exactly Mammon had even turned them into ghosts. It seemed beyond a demon's power, and they had no answers as to how he'd done it.

Cass had used the galley to cook them something for a late lunch, or perhaps an early dinner by the time they ate. They'd also done plenty of snuggling, and Kushiel had just enjoyed being with Cassius.

Kushiel hadn't had a lot of moments where he was comfortable just being himself, but Cass was constantly telling him how beautiful he was or how brightly he shone, despite the fact that he was literally gray. Kushiel thought it had probably been centuries since he had been comfortable in his original form, yet Cass gave that back to him.

They were sitting in the saloon on the couch, the sea breeze blowing in through the open doors, comfortably stuffed from dinner. Kushiel knew they probably had another half hour before they ended up back at the dock and were back to lost soul hunting. Cass was snuggled up next to him, and they were sitting in easy silence, content to be together. Kushiel couldn't help feeling a little guilty, though. Cassius was always saying nice things to him, yet he didn't really reciprocate. He realized he had been doing a poor job of appreciating his human.

Kushiel cleared his throat, then said, “I want you to know how much I appreciate you, Cass. I probably haven’t said it enough, but I’m so thankful for your help and for you just being you. You say nice things to me all the time, and I realized I probably don’t tell you often enough how much I like that. And I probably don’t tell you nice things in return enough either.”

Cass looked at him, smiling. “Thank you, K. I know you appreciate me, even if you don’t say it all the time. I know you appreciate how I make you feel from your responses. I love seeing that sexy blush on you.”

Kushiel couldn’t help blushing at being called sexy.

Cass laughed. “See? I know you like it when I say nice things to you. And I’ll keep on saying nice things to you, because I mean every single one of them. You are too good, K, and I know you would literally give me anything I asked for and do anything for me.”

Kushiel nodded his head. “I would. Without question.”

“But that’s just the thing. I love you, K. I don’t want to be just another person who takes from you. I want to be the person who gives back to you. It makes me happy to make you feel good. I feel appreciated every time you blush or smile or give yourself over to pleasure,” Cass explained.

Kushiel didn’t know how to respond to that statement. It was his purpose in life to give of himself. Cass grabbed both his hands, turning to face him on the couch and looking into his eyes.

“You are worth so much, Kushiel. You are all the things I’ve said—bright, beautiful, shining, and giving. You are more than I deserve,” Cass declared.

“No, Cass,” Kushiel cut in. “That’s not true. You’re perfect in every way, and it’s me who doesn’t deserve you.”

Cass laughed. “We could argue about this all day, and maybe that’s why we deserve each other.”

Cass leaned forward to kiss him, and Kushiel lost himself in the warmth and softness of Cass’s lips. When Cass pulled back, he reached up and put a hand on Kushiel’s cheek.

“You know, don’t you?” Cass asked.

Kushiel wasn’t sure what he meant. “That you love me?” he guessed. “I love you, too, Cass, with all that I am. I mean that.”

Cass smoothed his hair back, letting it fall through his fingers and then reaching up to do it again. Kushiel closed his eyes, loving the feel of Cass’s hand running over his head.

“I know you do, K. I know that because I can feel it. Can you feel the ties between us?” Cass murmured.

Kushiel’s eyes shot open. “Ties between us?” he asked.

“Yes, K. I can see ties that bind, like the ones between Mike and Ari,” Cass said.

Kushiel’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. Was Cass saying what Kushiel thought he was saying? He couldn’t help it; tears came to his eyes. He didn’t even know why he was suddenly crying. He was just so completely overwhelmed. He felt like his chest was about to burst open, and he was afraid that he was dreaming.

Cass put his hands on Kushiel's face, gently wiping away the tears that had fallen.

"I love you, and you love me, and we have an eternity together, K. It's ok," Cass reassured him.

Kushiel felt like a fool. Cass was trying to tell him wonderful news and his human probably thought he was sad. He just couldn't process what Cass was saying.

"Cass, I can't... Are you sure? Are you really sure? Because I'm just an angel, and only demons have gotten—" Kushiel cut himself off, like speaking the word might jinx it.

Maybe that wasn't even what Cass meant. Maybe he was misunderstanding this whole conversation. His heart plummeted for a moment, and he felt like he might be physically ill, something he had never before experienced.

"Soulmates," Cass stated, saying the word before Kushiel could spiral anymore.

"We can't be," Kushiel whispered. Then he felt horrible, because he didn't want Cass to think he didn't want him. "Not that I don't want to be, Cass, that isn't what I mean at all?—"

"Shhh," Cass whispered, placing a finger over his mouth. "I know, K. I know you're overwhelmed. I know because I can feel it, here," Cass said, taking his hand and pressing it against his own chest.

He then closed his eyes, scrunching up his forehead like he was in thought, his hand still pressed to his chest.

Kushiel felt it then. He laughed wetly, tears coming more freely now, because he felt Cassius. He felt love, warmth, caring, and gentle amusement. He put his hand over

Cass's, and Cass opened his eyes. The feeling faded a tiny bit, but if he concentrated he could still feel it.

"How..." Kushiel said, unsure what he even wanted to ask about.

"It isn't only demons that have gotten soulmates, although I have seen more of them," Cass admitted. "I can see the ties between the souls. They were faint for us when they first appeared, and I was afraid to say anything, but they're strong now, K. Unbreakable. You are my soulmate. Nothing will ever take you away from me. Nothing," Cass promised.

"I was afraid to hope for such a thing," Kushiel admitted. He let go of Cass and reached up to wipe his eyes. "I didn't think I was worthy."

Cass leaned forward, kissing him lightly. "Of course you are. I mean all the things I say, K. Maybe you don't trust how you feel about yourself, but trust what I tell you. Trust what I see. You are the brightest soul I've ever seen."

Kushiel didn't know what to say. He didn't even know what he felt. It was too good to be true. He was overjoyed, yet he was also sort of waiting for something terrible to happen. He was waiting for the pain and misery that seemed to follow him everywhere. This seemed like it was too perfect to be real.

Cass put his hands on Kushiel's head and gently eased it down so that Kushiel was laying in his lap. Cass ran his hands through Kushiel's hair, just letting him process it all.

Cass was his soulmate. Cass was tied to him, and he could see those ties. Cass thought he shone more brightly than any other angel or demon.

Kushiel closed his eyes, and yes, he could feel Cassius. He could feel the love and

acceptance. He didn't know how he could have gray skin and black wings and shine brighter than any other angel, but Kushiell knew that Cassius would never lie to him.

Cass was right. Maybe he had been through too much to trust his own vision of himself. He thought of the fire of hell and the ice of heaven. He thought of the angels who had slowly stopped speaking to him, then turned away whenever he was near. He had known their brotherhood once, long ago, and that had made it so much harder. He thought of the pain he took on himself when he redeemed souls. It had always seemed a small price to pay, but it had still been a price. He had paid for every visit to hell, every act of redemption on some soul's behalf. Eventually his entire existence had seemed like payment.

Maybe it had been, but if it had given him a soulmate... If it had given him Cassius, who was perfect in every way... Any payment was worth that. He would pay any price to have Cassius be his soulmate.

It was probably selfish, but Kushiell didn't care for once. He would be selfish, and he would keep Cassius.

He was pulled from his reverie as the engines quieted, and he realized with a start that they must have made it back to the marina.

"You alright, K?" Cass asked gently.

"Yes," Kushiell replied, sitting up. He leaned his forehead against Cass's. "I love you, Cassius. I cannot imagine how I could be so blessed as to possibly have you for a soulmate."

Cass rolled his head against Kushiell's, laughing a bit. "You still aren't totally convinced, are you? That's ok. I understand why it's hard for you. I know what you've been through. But I have faith in these ties. I have enough faith for both of us.

And in a few decades, you'll get it. But don't begrudge me an I-told-you-so after a century or two has passed," Cass joked.

Kushiel hadn't even realized he had said "possibly," but yes, he supposed he did have a hard time thinking it was real. "Nothing would make me happier, Cassius. You have to know that," Kushiel insisted, afraid that Cass was hurt by his response.

"Oh, I know, baby. I know. I can feel you, remember? It'll take some time for you to understand that I'm not going anywhere. That's ok. We have all the time in the universe, and I'll use every moment of it to prove to you that I'm here to stay. I will never abandon you, K. I will never turn my back on you. I will be by your side for all eternity," Cass swore.

Kushiel blinked the wetness from his eyes again. It was like Cass understood him better than he even understood himself. "I love you, Cass," he whispered. It wasn't adequate, but it was all Kushiel could use to express the love that consumed him for this perfect human.

"I love you, Kushiel," Cass said, kissing him gently. "Now let's go so Bob can get home to Patrick. I have a feeling they'll have a frisky night of reminiscing."

A laugh burst out of Kushiel. He didn't doubt that Cass was wrong, and when Bob came out, clapped his hands, and said he couldn't wait to get home, they both looked at one another and giggled.

Kushiel had never felt so light.

They ended up arriving at Cass's apartment after dark, and when Cass had insisted they shower off the boat trip, Kushiel had agreed. When Cass had joined him in the shower, Kushiel had definitely agreed, and he hadn't been able to help himself—he'd needed to taste his human again. The noises Cass made and the beautiful things he

said about Kushiel and how good it felt had made Kushiel feel floaty and wonderful.

When Cass had ordered him to touch himself as he sucked on Cass, it had almost been too much pleasure. When Cass groaned and came, the taste of Cass on his tongue and Cass murmuring for him to come too had set Kushiel over the edge. It had been perfect.

They had finished washing each other and then tumbled into bed, and Kushiel had slept wrapped around his human. Wrapped around his soulmate.

He had woken before Cass, and when he had stumbled out of the bedroom dressed and ready to try making breakfast again, Aunt Ro had thankfully been there to direct him. Cass had woken up, come to the kitchen, kissed him, and jumped right in to help.

It had been so easy and peaceful. The boat ride home, the evening, and then breakfast had felt like a reprieve from reality, but Kushiel also knew it couldn't last. He and Cass couldn't stay in their bubble of happiness forever. There were still lost souls to find.

When they were done eating, Cass had sighed.

"I know. It's probably time to try and figure this out," Kushiel agreed.

Aunt Ro, who had been surprisingly quiet throughout breakfast, disappeared and then reappeared a moment later with the lost soul. They definitely had more form as a ghost. In fact, it almost looked like they had features now. They were clearly human in form, although they were still androgynous and hard to see clearly.

"Aunt Ro! The ghost looks great!" Cass declared, staring at it. "They have even more light than before. How did you manage that?"

“While you two were off galavanting, I was giving our ghost an intense tutorial on kindness, family, and being generally good. I felt quite like the Ghost of Christmas Present. Only it isn’t Christmas. And it wasn’t really the ghost’s life in review, but it was mine. Anyway, it seemed to do some good,” Aunt Ro replied. “Although I don’t think I could’ve done any good if Kushiel hadn’t already given so much of his light to the ghost, so I don’t think this would be a viable solution for all the other lost souls out there,” she added.

Cass nodded his agreement, but Kushiel wasn’t so sure. He didn’t mind giving of himself if he needed to, especially if it redeemed lost souls. He didn’t think Cass would like him putting himself through that, though, and he didn’t want to make Cass upset.

“Well, we found out it isn’t Levi, so we’re left with Mammon as our main suspect. Any more clues?” Cass asked.

Aunt Ro sadly shook her head. The lost soul had gravitated over toward Kushiel, and they sat on the floor beside him, leaning against him. He felt a light draw on him, and Cass looked over at him sharply, but he only smiled in reassurance. The ghost was taking so little of his light that Kushiel could barely even sense it.

“Mammm...” the ghost uttered, and they all looked at them in shock. The ghost was nodding their head, as if agreeing that it was indeed Mammon responsible.

“I’ll text Michael and see if Ari has gotten any more information. Maybe they can help us track down this demon as well,” Cass said, picking up his phone. “I also know of a hellhound in the area, and they might be able to help...” Cass said, trailing off as he typed into his phone.

Kushiel was surprised that Cass knew a hellhound, although he probably shouldn’t be. His Cassius was full of information and seemed to know everyone.

He thought hellhounds kept to their own kind, though, and didn't interact much with humans, aside from killing the ones that deserved it. They could track down evil quite easily, but as far as Kushiell knew, that was only mortal evil. He didn't think it extended to afterlifers, or he would have tried to find a hellhound to help earlier. Since they had emigrated to the mortal plane centuries ago, hellhounds really weren't something that most afterlifers thought about, sort of like ghosts, so it was no wonder it hadn't occurred to him.

"Mammon... circle... trees..." the ghost uttered. Each word was clearly difficult for them, but the ghost seemed to be getting clearer in their ability to communicate.

"Well, this will certainly be helpful—" Aunt Ro began, but then the ghost screamed in a wail of agony, and as Kushiell watched, they started to fade away.

Without thought, he grabbed onto the ghost's hand, surprised when he felt it within his own. He heard Aunt Ro and Cassius yelling, but the sounds were fading, as were his surroundings.

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“Fuck!” Cassius cried out. Kushiell and the ghost had literally faded away right in front of his eyes. He tried not to panic, and instead he focused his sight.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The golden ropes—because that’s what they were now, as opposed to simple threads—were strong and led off through the wall in the direction that Cass thought might be west. Cass could find Kushiell.

“Oh my, oh my,” Aunt Ro whimpered, wringing her hands. “What happened to them?”

“My guess is Mammon,” Cass replied, anger flowing through him. “I don’t think it was a coincidence that the ghost started to disappear just as it was able to communicate.”

Cass reached out and placed his hand through the golden ropes linking him to Kushiell. He felt... reassurance and composure. Kushiell was obviously ok, and he seemed to be sending that message to Cass.

Cass took a deep breath, looking over at Aunt Ro. She was wearing a dress with purple hyacinths. Cass couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “He’s fine, Aunt Ro, and I can find him, so let’s go.”

She stopped wringing her hands and breathed her own sigh of relief. “You’re sure he’s fine?” she questioned.

“Yes. I’m getting reassurance from him. No anger or fear or anything. No pain. He couldn’t hide those things from me,” Cass reassured her.

“Well then, what’s the plan?” she asked.

“Get Kushiell back,” he answered, walking toward the door, pulling on shoes, and grabbing his keys. Luckily he had gotten dressed before coming down to breakfast.

“And what are you going to do about Mammon?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Cass said, walking out the door and turning to pull it shut behind him. When he turned back around, Aunt Ro was blocking his path, her hands out.

“Well I think you need a plan. Slow down a minute and breathe. You said that Kushiell is fine, right? How far away is he?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Cassius bit out, trying to hold onto his frustration. He just wanted to get to his soulmate. Yes, he could sense that Kushiell was fine, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes, and what if Kushiell didn’t stay fine?

“Well sense it, Cassius. See how far he is. You can sense everything else, and you ought to be able to sense that,” she commented.

Cass took a deep breath, and he opened his vision again. He could sense Kushiell off in the distance, and he could pinpoint the general direction. Aunt Ro was right, because when he really concentrated, he could feel distance as well. Kushiell wasn’t far. Based on the direction, the distance, and the clues from the ghost, Cass guessed they were somewhere in the nearby state park.

“Not far. I think maybe the state park,” Cass replied.

“Ok, so you can get there in ten minutes. Did Michael or the hellhound answer you?” she asked.

Cass had to move, so he started walking toward his car, pulling out his cell phone at the same time. He needed to start driving; he needed to be doing something. He needed to be closer to Kushiell.

“I’ll call them from the car,” he answered, getting in. Aunt Ro appeared in the passenger seat beside him, and he was surprised but pleased. She hated taking transportation anywhere; she complained about how much she needed to concentrate to stay with the moving object.

He started the car, pulled out of the driveway, and used the speaker to call Michael first.

“Good, you got my text. Are you on your way?” Michael asked when he picked up the phone.

“What?” Cass asked. “Do you know something about Kushiell going missing?”

He heard a squawk of surprise and some rustling, then he must’ve been put on speaker, because he heard Michael tell Ari that Kushiell was missing.

“Dude! What the fuck! Who messed with my bruh?” Ari called out. “We’ll figure out a way to find him, Cass. No worries, dude. We’ll figure this shit out.”

“I know how to find him,” Cass replied, thankful to have their support nevertheless. “We’re mated, and I can feel where he is. I’m heading toward the state park now. We think it’s Mammon, and when the ghost tried to tell us, it disappeared, and Kushiell grabbed onto them and disappeared too.”

“Perfect. Our place is on the way. Stop here,” Michael answered.

“But—” Cass started.

“Dude, trust us. I’ll transport us to the state park once you’re here,” Ari reassured him. “I know you’re probably freaking the fuck out, because I would be if my s’more went all poof, but we have something you need.”

“Fine. I’m already in the car and will be there in like two minutes. Meet me outside,” he grumbled, then he hit end on the call.

His phone rang before he could think what to do next, and he saw it was the hellhound calling.

“How did you get my number?” was the gruff response as soon as Cass said “Hello.”

“Hmph. Do people not even say hello anymore?” Aunt Ro grumbled.

Cass ignored her, answering the hellhound instead. “I knew it when you came into the shop a couple weeks ago, and I saved it in my phone.”

“You just knew it?” the hellhound asked suspiciously. “And why are you texting me about finding some guy named Mammon?”

Cass realized his text was probably confusing to a hellhound who was pretending to be human, but he didn’t have time to play games. Kushiell was missing.

“Look, I know you’re a hellhound, and I’m sorry about the vague text. I know you don’t know me, but I’m a seer and an oracle, and I’m unfortunately dealing with afterlife bullshit right now. A demon has gone rogue and taken a whole bunch of souls from hell and turned them into ghosts and hidden them, and now he stole my angel, too,” Cass explained.

The hellhound was quiet on the other end of the line.

Cass let out an exasperated sound as he pulled into Michael's driveway.

"Look, I know this is all shocking and weird, and I know hellhounds generally only deal with the mortal plane of existence, but a demon has kidnapped my soulmate and taken him to the state park, and he's holding who knows how many souls there captive so they can't be redeemed. I was going to see if you could find him, but I can find him now because he took my soulmate," Cass explained.

"A rogue demon. That explains the undefined evil floating through town," the hellhound muttered.

"I'm going to deal with it. Somehow. And I'm going to get my soulmate back," Cass declared.

The hellhound made a hmph sound, and then the line went dead.

"Well, that was rather rude," Aunt Ro complained.

Cass saw Michael and Ari coming out of the house, and he opened his door to get out and meet them.

"He's a hellhound. They're not exactly civilized. They're basically serial killers with a moral code," Cass explained.

Ari must have heard the last part, because he chimed in, "Dude, hellhounds? Those fuckers are bad ass. They left hell centuries ago, but you're right that they have a pretty strict code. Is one helping out Mammon? Because that will definitely make things tricky as fuck."

"No, not at all. I know one, and I was going to ask for help locating Mammon before Kushiel disappeared. But now that my soulmate is gone, I can find him and

Mammon. I'm just not sure what we'll do about Mammon once we find him," Cass answered.

"We've got that covered," Michael replied. "Come on over and huddle in. The state park? Any clue where?"

"Maybe two miles west inside the park area. I'll know once we're closer," Cass answered, walking over and standing close to Michael and Ari.

Ari grabbed Michael in a hug, and he threw his other arm around Cass's shoulders, folded his wings around him, and then... Cass didn't even know how to describe what happened next. It was a weird displacement feeling, like riding an express elevator. It lasted only a second or two before Ari was unfolding his wings, and Cass looked out and saw forrest.

He realized, a bit belatedly, that he'd left Aunt Ro behind. Oops. Hopefully she would find him; she seemed to be able to hone in on where he was most of the time.

Cass sharpened his sight again, and he still felt calm reassurance flowing through the bond. Kushiell was close now, probably less than a half a mile away, and Cass started off in the direction of the bond, heedless of the weeds and underbrush he had to trample.

Before he'd gone ten feet, however, Ari grabbed his shoulder. Cass turned around, and he saw Ari's eyes lose focus and sort of swirl. Michael grabbed Cass's other shoulder, as if to keep him still, but Cass knew what was happening.

Ari was having a vision. Cass hoped it would tell them how to deal with Mammon.

No one spoke, and after a moment, Ari's eyes cleared.

“Whoa, dude. That was wicked,” Ari announced.

“Did you see how we can defeat Mammon?” Cass asked anxiously. He had this urge to move, but he knew this was important. Aunt Ro had been right earlier—charging in without a plan wouldn’t help things.

“Dude, we can’t do anything. I saw that quite clearly. Mike and I have gotta leave you to it, bruh. But”—Ari then reached behind him, and he pulled a large, gleaming spear out, almost like it had been resting on his back—“the reason we sent the text is because we had this for you. This will help you.”

“What is it?” Cass asked, gently taking the spear from Ari.

“No clue, dude. If it works like the sword we got once, it sucks up the soul of whoever you stab with it, so be careful with that shit. Don’t go all stabby on just anything, yeah?” Ari pronounced.

“I don’t think Cassius is the type to go all randomly stabby on things,” Michael muttered, rolling his eyes at Ari.

Ari just chuckled before stating, “Wish we could help, bruh, but I clearly saw that our place is not here. So we’re out, but good luck, dude!”

With that, he grabbed Michael in a hug, despite Michael’s sputtering, and he heard the human cry out a “Good luck!” as Ari wrapped his wings around them and they disappeared.

Cass was on his own, then. That was ok. He had a magic spear, he had ties to follow, and he would do whatever was necessary to make sure Kushiell was safe. He sharpened his sight, and when he saw the bond, he sent reassurance and love through it to Kushiell.

“I’m coming, Kushiel. Just hold on,” he muttered aloud, setting off through the forest, following the golden ties that would lead him to his soulmate.

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One minute Kushiell was sitting with the ghost, Cassius, and Aunt Ro, and the next he was in the middle of a small clearing surrounded by trees. He had grabbed onto the ghost without thought, and it had never occurred to him that he would fade with it and be transported.

But here he was, wherever here actually was.

He was in a large clearing with dirt beneath his feet facing a forest. There was something very wrong with the trees surrounding him, however. It looked like they were all decaying. His first thought was of Cassius—surely his human was frantic at his disappearance, and he concentrated on sending reassurance and calm out toward Cass. Kushiell didn't know if it worked, but it was the best he could do in the moment. He had to investigate things here before he transported himself back to Cassius.

He looked next to him, and the ghostly lost soul was still gripping his hand, but it was very still and clearly afraid. He turned around and gasped at what he saw, for there, in the middle of the clearing, huddled up in a mass, were all the many lost souls from Erebus. They were barely moving, barely even formed. Kushiell could sense them as well; their grief and pain made his entire being ache with sadness. Who would do such a thing to souls?

This was where all the lost souls were, and they were not even functioning beings. The difference between the ghost next to him and the ghosts huddled in a mass in front of him was extreme; Kushiell had forgotten how bad the ghost had first been when he had seen it. He wasn't even sure that the ghosts in the clearing were capable of movement. He had no idea how he would redeem them all or what he would do with them, but perhaps Cass would have some ideas. After all, the message had stated

that they could do something together.

He looked carefully at his surroundings, struck again by how the trees looked... wrong. Nevertheless, he knew he could find this spot again to transport here. With that thought, he opened his wings, ready to fold space and time and go back to Cassius...

Only nothing happened.

He looked at the ghost next to him, whose hand he was still holding.

"I'm sorry, my lost soul, but I do not think I can take you with me. I will bring back help," Kushiell reassured the ghost.

They nodded their head, letting his hand go, and they backed up almost to the trees, but they did not leave the clearing. Kushiell opened his wings again, enfolding himself, and...

Nothing.

What in heaven?

He tried walking toward the trees that were closest to him at the edge of the clearing, and as he reached the treeline, it was like he hit a wall.

He was trapped.

He didn't let himself panic. Cass would feel that, and he didn't want to worry him. There was nothing here but the lost souls who had been turned into ghosts, anyway. He closed his eyes and pictured Cassius; he let all his love for the man come crashing through him, and it was like he could sense him. It seemed Cass wasn't far away, and

Kushiel thought he was getting closer. That made sense, though, because Cass had said something about being able to see the ties that bound them together, and if that was the case, then surely Cass could find him. He just had to sit tight and wait for his mate.

“Well, I didn’t expect to see you here,” a voice said from behind Kushiel.

He spun around. On the other side of the clearing, behind the row of trees that looked to be dying, stood a demon. He had skin the color of tarnished gold, and his wings and horns were... wrong. His horns looked dull and brittle, and his wings looked like he was missing feathers. Kushiel vaguely recognized the demon, but he didn’t remember him looking like this.

“Mammon?” he guessed.

The demon smiled widely. “Of course you’ve heard of me. Mammon, Prince of Hell, Lord of Greed and Avarice at your service,” he said, giving a slight incline of his head. “What on earth is the gray angel doing inside my ward? Although I suppose that is rather fitting.”

“I was with the ghost,” Kushiel answered, motioning toward the lost soul, who was partly huddled behind him.

Mammon looked momentarily confused, his forehead wrinkling before it smoothed out. “Ah, yes, that’s right. They’re ghosts. I seem to keep forgetting that part,” he chuckled.

Kushiel didn’t know what to make of Mammon, but he didn’t think showing any weakness was the best move. He thought about what Cass would do in this situation.

“Why exactly am I inside your ward?” Kushiel demanded, channeling Cass’s

confidence.

Mammon looked puzzled at that. “Well, yes, that is the question, isn’t it? I have no idea. I did lose a lost soul when this all began, and I triggered a spell to try and find it, but I had no luck until it uttered my name, and then I was able to hone in and transport it here. You must have somehow been sucked up too.” Mammon shrugged.

“Well, I demand that you break the ward and let me get back to my work,” Kushiel stated, and as he was finishing, Aunt Ro popped up next to Mammon outside of the clearing. Kushiel looked at her and blinked. She appeared to be wearing a dress with thistles on it.

“That’s right, Kushiel, you tell him!” she cheered.

Mammon, who couldn’t see her, answered Kushiel. “Ahh, well, that I can’t do. Not yet at least. You’ll have to wait... oh, maybe a month? I can’t see them, because did you know we can’t see ghosts? Which is rather absurd, and we really ought to rectify that. I can feel their essence though, and it shouldn’t be long now, and then I’ll take the ward down. You don’t need to eat or drink, so you’ll be fine, but I’m afraid it will be rather boring.” Mammon shrugged apologetically.

“Are you stuck in there?” Aunt Ro gasped.

“Why am I stuck here for a month?” Kushiel asked, trying to answer Aunt Ro without being obvious. He didn’t know if she’d be able to help, but he didn’t want to give her presence away to Mammon.

“Oh, that’s how long these ghosts will take to dematerialize. We can’t see them, but they’re already fragments of ghosts. The process will continue until there’s nothing solid left, and then they won’t need to be contained anymore. Once their ghostly forms disintegrate, their blackened souls will be transported to hell, and there won’t

be enough light left in them for any chance of redemption. You also won't be needed in hell anymore, but I don't expect you'll mind," Mammon answered easily. He mumbled, "The absurdity of making an angel come to hell. I expect you'll be quite relieved to focus your attention back on Limbo."

Aunt Ro gasped. "What he's describing is an abomination! Sucking the essence out of ghosts until there's barely even a soul left! Then forcing those souls into hell because he took away their chance at redemption! Why would he do such a thing? You ask him, Kushiel," she demanded.

Kushiel wondered about that, but he also had a more pressing question. "But more souls will be brought to Erebus, and although it will take decades or even centuries, the numbers will build back up again."

Mammon cackled gleefully. "They won't, though! I took care of that. When I had the idea to turn all the souls into ghosts, I made the entirety of Erebus into a portal. Any souls who are put there will automatically be turned into ghosts and will end up here," he said smugly.

"Why would you do such a thing?" Kushiel asked, dumbfounded. "Why would you interrupt the order of the universe?"

"The fact that hell loses a number of souls is nonsense. Our numbers should only be increasing! My domain is one of the most populated circles of hell, my legion number above most other areas, and yet every single year, I lose souls to redemption. It is absurd. To think that I would not know what was best for the souls in my care!" Mammon complained.

"He's insane," Aunt Ro muttered.

"They'll go back to hell with no hope of redemption, and they'll add to my quota. I'll

claim them all, and my ring of hell will be the most populated! Lesser demons will be begging to join my legion! I will be the most popular Prince in the underworld with the most souls!" Mammon ranted, gesturing wildly with his arms.

"He really is full of greed," Aunt Ro said, staring angrily at the demon.

Kushiel felt Cass closer now, and he knew it wouldn't be long. He also sensed something else in the woods, coming toward them. He wondered how Mammon didn't sense it as well. He only had one question left for the demon. "How did you accomplish this? It couldn't have been on your own, because we don't think about ghosts," Kushiel mentioned. He needed to know if Mammon had an accomplice.

Mammon smiled slyly then. "I'm proud to admit that it was my idea to stop redeeming souls to increase our quota. I've brought this to the leadership team for quite some time, but when they refused to listen, I went to the top. Of course my ideas and all the support I had were impressive to the most important people," Mammon bragged.

"He's insufferable," Aunt Ro muttered. She looked behind her then and seemed a bit shocked, but Kushiel couldn't make out what had caught her attention.

"The more souls we have, the more impressive, of course, and the more lesser demons under my control. What do I care about the souls? They did what they did and deserve to be in hell. They certainly shouldn't get second chances. And why shouldn't I have more? I deserve it! I was going to make this work no matter what, and I told the leadership team and the head of hell that. Of course, figuring out how to get the souls out of Erebus was a difficulty, but I figured that out too," Mammon bragged.

"Since we can't see ghosts, how did you figure that out?" Kushiel asked. Aunt Ro disappeared then, but Kushiel could feel that Cass was almost there. He heard, as if

Cass was whispering in his ear, I'm coming Kushiel. Just hold on.

Mammon continued, "When I told Lucifer my plan, he told me that it was not in the order of the universe, and the only way souls would be outside the realm of the gray angel would be if they were ghosts. He told me we can't see ghosts, which I can't believe has been kept from us. He commented that ghosts would be hard to hold anyway and would require great power and warding to accomplish, but I knew I could do it. And I have," Mammon stated, gesturing at the clearing.

Kushiel felt Cass so close, coming toward his side of the clearing. He also saw a dark figure behind Mammon, but the demon seemed completely unaware of anything going on around him.

"Of course, finding the proper spells, creating the portal at Erebus, and then warding this clearing have sapped my energy quite a bit, but I used the earth, the sea, and the strength of the trees to help me. It has taken its toll," Mammon stated, gesturing at his horns and wings, "yet soon these souls will be brought into my ring of hell, and I will be all that much stronger."

Mammon looked slyly at Kushiel then. "I might even become the strongest demon in all of hell. The leadership has been the same for eternity, and maybe it's time to change that."

Two things happened at once then; Kushiel felt Cassius step out of the forest behind him, and at the same time, a figure stepped out from the forest behind Mammon.

It was a hellhound, and Kushiel had no idea if he was here to help them or Mammon.

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It felt like hours had passed since Kushiell had disappeared from sight, but it had probably only been a half hour at most. Cass had been trekking through the woods, and he could tell he was getting closer with each step. He was busy looking down and trying not to stumble on branches and undergrowth, and when he saw someone's feet suddenly in front of him, he couldn't help giving a yelp of surprise.

He looked up, and then he just kept on walking straight through Aunt Ro.

"I don't have time for ghostly issues right now, Aunt," he mumbled, continuing to make his way through the woods.

He could see her floating along next to him, and as he almost tripped on another branch underfoot, he had a moment to wish he had the ability to transport himself or float along above the ground.

"Hmph. Don't have time for ghostly issues. You know, I never get any appreciation. Why do you think you've been bothered by so few ghosts since Kushiell showed up? Hmm? Because I was the one who kept them at bay while you dealt with all this," Aunt Ro huffed. "And I went and found Kushiell, because apparently I can find him almost as easily as I can find you, and I show up to give you information so you don't walk in blind. But do I get a thank you? Of course not," she muttered.

Shit. It had been amazingly quiet on the ghost front, and he hadn't thought to question why. And if his aunt had seen Kushiell and had information...

Cass stopped and looked at her, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Aunt Ro. I appreciate all you've done, but my soulmate is gone, and I'm fighting off panic. If

you can fill me in, I'd appreciate it, but I can't stop. I have to get to him."

With that, he turned and continued walking.

"He's alright," Aunt Ro reassured him. "Perfectly fine, and he found Mammon and the missing lost souls who are ghosts. They're in pretty bad shape, and I can't imagine how he'll help them all without draining himself dry."

"What is Mammon doing?" Cass asked.

"Oh, he's monologuing," Aunt Ro answered.

Cass looked over at her questioningly.

"You know, going over his evil plot and how great he is, insert evil laughter here, blah blah blah," Aunt Ro said.

Cass just shook his head. "He isn't upset with Kushiel being there? There's no fighting?" he questioned.

"Oh, well, did I forget to mention that Kushiel might be a little bit trapped inside a ward with all the ghosts?" she muttered.

"Fuck. Yes, Aunt Ro, you did neglect to mention that. Tell me everything," Cass demanded.

So Aunt Ro did, and although she seemed to be able to explain why Mammon had done what he did (greed and jealousy of those more powerful, just as Lucifer had said), she still didn't know how he was keeping Kushiel and the ghosts trapped. Her description of the area made Cass sure that the natural surroundings were being used in the ward, but that didn't answer how to break the ward.

Nor did it answer how to help the ghosts.

But Cass had a magic spear, and he could only hope that would solve things. With that thought, he could hear Mammon's voice as he got closer, and Aunt Ro was right—he was indeed monologuing.

Cass didn't think subtlety mattered, so when he made it to the clearing, he stepped forward out of the treeline.

Thank heaven, his angel looked just fine. The ghosts in the clearing, however, were another story. There were hundreds of them, and they were torn, fragmented messes, but Cass couldn't feel them. He was thankful that the ward hadn't somehow interrupted his ability to sense Kushiel as well, but he supposed a soulmate bond trumped any ward.

He noticed that Kushiel was staring across the clearing, and Cass looked at Mammon, who, as Aunt Ro had explained, did not look... healthy. He looked old and worn, and obviously whatever he had been doing had taken something out of him.

What surprised Cass, though, was the hellhound standing behind Mammon. It was the same one Cass had called earlier, and obviously he had hunted out the evil. Cass just had no idea what he was planning on doing, and he didn't like the unknown.

"Oh, what do we have here!" Mammon cried out. "A wee little human interrupting our lovely chat!"

"He's my soulmate," Kushiel stated, and pleasure and joy flooded Cass at those words. Maybe Kushiel was finally beginning to understand his worth and accept that he did deserve a soulmate. It felt amazing to be claimed so openly.

Kushiel looked over at him and smiled, probably sensing Cass's joy.

“Another abomination,” Mammon mumbled. “Whoever heard of demons and humans bonding? When I’m in charge you can rest assured that such things will no longer take place.”

Cass merely sputtered at him. Did the demon think soulmates didn’t want to be mated?

“I told you. Total villain. Delusional, too,” Aunt Ro whispered from next to him.

Kushiel turned his back on Mammon then, looking at Cass. “I’m stuck here, but perhaps if I give some of my light to the ghosts?—”

“Absolutely not,” Cass whispered. “I have a plan to take care of Mammon. We just need to figure out how to get you out of there.”

“Isn’t this an interesting gathering,” the hellhound called out.

Mammon turned around then, looking shocked and then pleased. “Ah! A hellhound! I haven’t seen one of your kind in... Well, it’s been centuries at least. You deal with sending evil to hell, so perhaps you can speed along this whole ghost dematerialization process so these souls can be transported to hell. At the very least, you can help with the warding. I seem to recall that your kind can do that sort of thing, and this is sapping my strength quite a bit,” Mammon complained.

The hellhound, whose name Cass still didn’t even know, tilted his head while staring at Mammon. The look in his eyes gave Cass chills, even though it was focused on Mammon. The demon didn’t seem to notice, though, turning his back on the hellhound like he just expected his orders to be followed.

The hellhound stepped over to one of the sick trees, placing his hands on it. Cass thought he saw fire in the hellhound’s eyes, and he seriously hoped they weren’t

about to be caught in the middle of a forest fire. He thought about trying to step into the clearing with Kushiell, but Mammon was outside the clearing, and he had the spear, and if they were both trapped, that wouldn't do them much good.

The hellhound's eyes closed, his hands were encased in a blue flame, yet the tree didn't catch fire. There was a rumbling sound, like thunder in the distance, and the hellhound lifted his hands and stared at Mammon. He looked murderous.

Kushiell must have sensed it too, because he backed up toward the edge of the clearing... and kept right on backing up until he bumped into Cassius. He turned around, and Cass grabbed him in a hug, so glad to have his angel back in his arms.

"I'm ok," Kushiell reassured him.

"Well isn't that sweet," Mammon muttered snidely.

Cassius and Kushiell broke apart as Mammon walked forward into the clearing. He then shot an accusatory glance at the hellhound.

"You broke the ward. Do you know how much it took to put that up?" he complained. "Well, I guess you needed to in order to send the souls along to hell. I can't see the ghosts, but I'm assuming hellhounds can. Or perhaps that's why the human is here? Human, can you see the ghosts?" he asked Cass.

Cass stared at him, utterly bewildered. The idiot thought they were going to help him? Cass looked over at Kushiell disbelievingly, and Kushiell just gave him a shrug.

The hellhound spoke. "We are of the mortal realm, and yes, we can see ghosts. Our kind is also no longer under the purview of your kind. I do not take commands from you, demon."

Mammon turned around and sputtered. “Absurd! Yet another thing I will fix when I am in charge! But really, that doesn’t matter, does it, because your job is to send those to hell that belong there. These ghosts belong there,” Mammon argued.

“They don’t!” Kushiel argued. “They are redeemable! They have light in them still! It is not for you to decide that souls cannot be redeemed!”

Kushiel walked into the mass of ghosts then, and they began to swirl around him. He opened his arms wide, and Cassius could feel him giving his light to them. It was too much, too fast.

“No, Kushiel!” Cass cried out, running toward his angel.

He reached Kushiel and pulled him back. The light ebbed, giving Cass a moment.

“You can’t give them all your light, Kushiel,” Cass pleaded. “It will drain you.”

“I cannot let them all be sent back to hell. I cannot let Mammon take them,” Kushiel argued.

“As much as I hate to interrupt this touching moment,” the hellhound commented drily, “perhaps it is time to use what you have, human.”

With that reminder, Cassius let go of Kushiel and walked forward to Mammon. The demon barely paid him any attention, looking at Kushiel instead, obviously trying to puzzle out what the angel was doing since he couldn’t see ghosts.

When he was within striking distance, he drew the spear from behind his back. Mammon looked at him then, but he didn’t hesitate. With one swift thrust, he pushed it through the center of Mammon’s chest.

There was a bright explosion of light, the spear glowed white, and Mammon stumbled. He looked down in confusion at the spear glowing in his chest, then he used one hand to pull it out. He dropped it to the ground and stared at it, then he placed his hands on his chest, as if feeling for a wound.

There was none, and Mammon cackled in glee.

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When Cassius struck Mammon with a spear, Kushiel could only look on in shock. He had no idea Cassius even had a magical spear, but that must have been his plan to take care of Mammon.

Only it didn't appear to work, because Mammon pulled out the spear and laughed, apparently unhurt.

Kushiel would protect his soulmate above all else. He moved forward, leaving the ghosts behind for now, and stepped in front of Cassius.

Mammon was still laughing, and for some reason he appeared to have taken his human form, because suddenly his horns and wings were no longer visible.

The hellhound stepped toward Mammon, as if he had been waiting for that to happen, and with one swift punch, Mammon's cackle was cut off and the demon fell to the ground. He seemed to be unconscious, which should not have been possible.

"What in hell?" Cass cried out.

"He was annoying me," the hellhound said, shrugging. He looked up then, focusing on the two of them and giving a grunt. He kicked the spear back over toward Cassius. "This is yours, I believe."

Cass looked shocked, staring at the glowing spear. The hellhound picked up Mammon, slung the demon over his shoulder, and turned around.

"Wait! What are you doing with him?" Cass asked.

The hellhound sighed and turned back to them. “You made him mortal with the spear,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“But that isn’t possible,” Kushiel argued. They could not be made mortal. Such a thing wasn’t an option.

The hellhound just shrugged, the body of the demon—apparently now a human—shifting with the movement. “Obviously it is. The spear sucked up his immortal essence, so you’ll need to do something with that. What’s left is a mortal form and a bit of soul. He’s evil and hell-bound, though, and thus he falls under my domain. I’ll take care of him.”

“How—” Kushiel started to ask, but Cass cut him off.

“Best not to ask,” his soulmate muttered, giving a bit of a shudder.

The hellhound smiled grimly. “Yes, best not to ask. Not to worry though, he’ll find his way to hell sooner rather than later,” he stated, then he turned and started walking back the way he came.

“You won’t take the ghosts?” Cass called out.

“They’re not hell-bound,” the hellhound called over his shoulder as he walked, and then he was gone.

“Huh,” Cass muttered, looking after the hellhound.

“Yes,” Kushiel said. He turned and looked back at the ghosts. “I’m glad he won’t be taking them, but it still doesn’t answer what we need to do with them.”

“Yes. Luce said that ‘strength, wisdom, and justice shall guide the lost ones to a new

life,' but I have no idea what that's supposed to mean," Cass said, also turning to look at the ghosts.

"Well, you really ought to," Aunt Ro grumbled.

Cass and Kushiell both looked at her, and she rolled her eyes at them. She then pointed to her dress, which suddenly had trees on it. They looked to Kushiell like the same trees surrounding the clearing.

"Oak trees," Cass mumbled. "Of course."

"Strength, wisdom, and justice. Endurance and protection, too," Aunt Ro explained. "Although these ones were so sorely misused for the ward. I'm not sure how they'll help our ghosts out."

Kushiell looked at Cass, whose eyes had gone slightly unfocused. "Yes, their light is still strong, but they were being slowly killed by the ward as it sucked their life away."

Aunt Ro then walked directly into one of the nearest trees, much to Kushiell's shock. He heard her voice call out, "Yes, poor thing. I can feel what that awful demon did to it. They're strong, though, and enduring." She then popped back out of the tree, patting it. "You'll be ok, dearling," she said to the tree. "I'd give it a couple months and you'll be back to normal."

Kushiell had an idea. It seemed insane, but...

"Cass? Aunt Ro just... What did she just do?" Kushiell asked.

"Oh, she merged her ghostly essence..." Cass started, then he turned and looked at Kushiell with wonder on his face.

“Do you think...?” Kushiel asked, trailing off. He was afraid to hope, but it made a sort of sense.

Cass repeated the message from Luce, saying, “‘The gods have gifted you with a new way forward. You only have to see the light within what surrounds you. Those that represent strength, wisdom, and justice shall guide the lost ones to a new life.’ The oak trees. He meant the oak trees will guide the new ones to a new life.”

“How on earth will that work?” Aunt Ro questioned. “These are mortal souls, and those are oak trees. They’ll live hundreds of years.”

“Yes,” Cass said wonderingly. “Hundreds of years merged with something that is pure light, something whose very essence is one of protection and wisdom and justice. And after a few hundred years, when the trees pass on, the soul within will pass on as well, and they’ll be strong enough and bright enough to reincarnate.”

“The trees will teach them?” Kushiel asked.

“Not only that, the trees will give their essence and light to the ghosts, just like you did. Trees are naturally giving. It will be slower than your way, but it will redeem the ghosts,” Cass said. “It’s a new way forward, just as Luce promised. All the souls from Erebus will be sent here. We can merge them with the trees as they arrive.”

“Hmmm,” Aunt Ro cut in. “That does present a question, though. How will we merge them with the trees? Whatever Mammon was doing to them made them shells, and I don’t think they’re capable of doing it on their own.” She motioned towards the ghosts, who were still huddled, mostly formless, in the same place in the clearing.

“Hurt... us...” came a whispered voice, and they all turned to look at the ghost that had been staying with them.

“Were you like that when you became a ghost, dear?” asked Aunt Ro.

“No. Was... better.” The ghost motioned to Kushiell. “Helped... me...” they said.

They floated over toward a nearby oak tree, then they looked back at Kushiell. “Help... them...” they whispered, and then they went into the oak tree.

Kushiell could hardly believe what he saw. The oak was darkened and sickly, yet when the ghost walked into it, the tree seemed to glow for a moment, then it faded, but it looked healthier. He thought the leaves looked brighter, and the branches gently swayed, although there was no breeze that Kushiell could feel.

“I’ll be damned,” Aunt Ro muttered. “Well, not literally, of course, because it looks like none of the lost souls who become ghosts will be damned. We can just direct any new ghosts into the trees. Cass, you can attune to this place and you’ll know when new ghosts appear, and you and Kushiell can handle them!”

She seemed excited, but Kushiell looked over at Cass. He was staring at Kushiell, shaking his head. He must have come to the same conclusion that Kushiell had. Yes, new ghosts could probably be directed into the trees, but the ones in the clearing were too far gone. They needed an infusion of light. They needed help before they could do what Luce had said.

“No,” Cass whispered, gripping onto Kushiell’s hand.

“Cassius—” Kushiell said.

“No! You can’t! It will hurt you. It will be agony,” Cass protested.

“Is it not better to slice it open and drain it completely... an agony, perhaps, but then it is done and over?” Kushiell asked, quoting what Cass had told him Luce said.

“How do you know you’ll come out the other side of this whole? I can’t lose you, K. I can’t,” Cass insisted.

“You won’t. I can’t leave them like this, though. I will not deplete myself entirely. I would never do anything to hurt you, and I know that would. I love you, Cass. You are my soulmate, and I have faith that we will be together forever. I believe in us,” Kushiell said, staring into his soulmate’s eyes.

Kushiell did believe, too. Cassius wouldn’t let anything happen to him, and he wouldn’t end his existence, not even for this. If he had to come back a hundred times and be in pain to help the ghosts, he would, because that was part of his job. But he wouldn’t spend himself entirely for his job.

He had Cass to exist for.

“You’ll need to direct them and tell them what to do,” Kushiell whispered.

Cass searched his face, and then his lover nodded reluctantly.

Kushiell wasn’t sure who leaned forward first, but the two of them were kissing frantically, tongues tangling, lips slanting over each other again and again. It was frenzied and sexy and Kushiell was hard and wanting from the kiss, but Cass pulled back first.

“No, this is not some goodbye kiss. You will not overextend yourself. You will not hurt yourself. Do you understand me?” Cass demanded.

“I love it when you give me orders,” Kushiell murmured, leaning their heads together. “I will be careful, my love. I promise.”

“Well then,” Aunt Ro interrupted. They both looked over, and she was wearing red

roses again on her dress. “As lovely and romantic as this is, I think I best leave. I wouldn’t want to be caught up in whatever magic you two work and end up tied to an oak tree for a few decades or centuries. I’ll see you both later, and I expect all the details. Well, maybe not all the details, because some things can remain private, but all the details regarding this. And don’t forget that spear, Cassius. It shouldn’t be lying about.”

With that, she vanished. Cassius walked over and collected the spear, and then he came back and grabbed onto Kushiel’s hand.

He breathed out, then he looked at Kushiel. “I love you, and I know you can do this. Whenever you’re ready, K.”

“I love you, too, Cassius,” Kushiel answered.

He looked at the ghosts, and he let a little of his light leak out. They swarmed him, like moths advancing on a lightbulb in the darkness of night, and he gave to each of them, letting his light pour out. Cassius must have been doing something as well, because as the ones closest to him took shape and developed features, they were pulled away to make room for ghosts that were formless and tattered.

Kushiel didn’t know how long it went on. It seemed both an eternity and the blink of an eye. What started as a slow burn became an agony, and yet he worked through the pain, pouring himself into the ghosts. His vision went gray around the edges, and still he poured himself out. He felt like he had given more light than ever before, and yet he knew he was not yet depleted. Eventually he could barely see, barely even process his surroundings, and yet he still knew he would survive. He would see this through, and Cass’s hand in his kept him tethered to reality.

It was only when he felt that hand squeeze his tightly and heard Cass’s voice, as if from a distance, say, “You did it, my love. You can stop now,” that he stopped

pouring his light out.

After that, he felt himself sliding into darkness.

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Cass didn't know how long it had taken, but he could feel Kushiel's pain through their bond. His heart hurt for his angel, and tears slipped from his eyes even as he directed the ghosts into the trees when they became whole.

He watched Kushiel closely, too, yet it seemed like his angel was an unending well of light. When the last ghost had merged with an oak tree and he had told Kushiel to stop, his angel collapsed onto the ground in a heap.

"Kushiel!" he cried out, leaning down and grabbing onto his soulmate.

He was suddenly so angry. He shook the spear in the air, crying out, "Help him!"

He didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't to suddenly find himself in a white room. He was still gripping the spear, and Kushiel was still laying on the ground beneath him, but they were definitely not in the forest anymore.

He looked up to see the all white room layered with the same cracks he had seen when he had visited Luce. They were also slowly inching backwards, just like in the black room.

There was suddenly a table and two chairs in the room then, one a blinding white and one a black so deep it seemed to suck light into it. In the next blink, there was an angel sitting in the chair that he recognized. They were androgynous and glowing brightly, and Cass remembered being visited by them when he was young and training as an oracle. With the next breath, the other chair was filled with the figure of Luce.

Cass turned on him in anger. “This is your fault! Fix him!” Cass demanded, standing and banging the end of the spear against the ground.

“Spunky, isn’t he?” Luce commented, looking over at the angel.

“He always has been,” the angel smiled. “I knew he would be perfect for Kushiell from our first meeting.”

“Yah! You’ve been keeping things from me if you’ve called on this cute little morsel before and didn’t even tell me!” Luce drawled.

Yah? Cass suddenly had an idea that the “angel” he’d been visited by as a child wasn’t merely an angel. He had always glowed so blindingly bright, and Cass was amazed he hadn’t realized things sooner.

“You... you’re...” Cass sputtered.

Yah smiled. “Yes. I am still an angel, so you were never wrong in your assumption of me,” Yah said to Cass. He then turned to Luce, explaining, “I usually visit all oracles when they’re young to get them used to my presence. Cassius was a pleasure to work with, and I admit to chatting with him far more than most oracles. But then, he is the soulmate of Kushiell, so it really does make sense. What I have to wonder is why he doesn’t seem surprised by your presence,” Yah asked, raising an eyebrow.

Luce merely chuckled. “Caught red handed, my love. I might have paid Cassius a little visit of my own.”

“Well, the two of you can do something for Kushiell then,” Cass demanded, ignoring for now the fact that the devil had just called god “my love.” He’d unpack that later when Kushiell was okay.

“He’ll be fine,” Luce reassured Cass, waving his hand. “He’s exhausted, and he’s undergone a lot, but he’ll recover fully. You can sense it through your bond, I’m sure, and you can see his light is still strong as well.”

Cass could, but it helped to hear reassurance. Still, he wasn’t quite sure he trusted Luce.

“Mammon got the idea from you,” Cass accused, pointing the spear at Lucifer.

“Perhaps I should take that,” Yah murmured, and suddenly the spear was gone from Cass’s hands and sitting on the table in front of Yah. “Best not to be brandishing divine weapons about when we’re angry,” Yah added.

Cass huffed, then looked accusingly at Luce again.

The devil had the gall to chuckle. “So feisty! I do love it! Our Kushiell really did need someone just like you!”

Cass stamped his foot, even though he felt immediately stupid after doing it. Banging a spear on the ground had been much more satisfying. “Don’t call him ‘our Kushiell’ when you’re the one who gave Mammon the idea to steal all his souls in the first place!”

Yah looked over at Luce, raising an eyebrow at him.

Luce tilted his head and moved his hands out in a ‘Who, me?’ gesture that only made Cass even angrier.

“Mammon told us all about his plans, and how he’d gone to you and you gave him knowledge of ghosts and holding them on the mortal plane,” Cass declared.

Luce sighed. “Yes. Mammon was getting above himself, which has been an ongoing problem for him in the last few decades. He does have a large legion, and when they see what has become of him... Well, I think the next leader won’t be coming up with any grandiose plans of disrupting the order of the universe. It was a lesson that needed to be learned.”

“I don’t really care about your internal politics,” Cass snapped. “You hurt Kushiel.”

“I did,” Luce affirmed, looking sad at the notion. “But as I said, it was a great hurt, and now Kushiel need not hurt anymore. Redeeming souls from hell was taking a toll on him, and now that has been solved. He need never enter hell again if he chooses not to, although of course he will always be welcome there. He will also find things have improved for him now that he has a soulmate.”

Kushiel moaned lightly, and Cass fell to his knees beside his angel.

“Kushiel?” Cass murmured.

Kushiel blinked up at him and smiled. “We did it?” he asked.

“We did,” Cass agreed, and he couldn’t help the quick peck he gave his angel.

Kushiel kissed him back, and then Cass sat back and helped him into a sitting position on the floor. Kushiel seemed to realize where they were, then, because he gasped when he saw god and the devil, immediately bowing his head.

“Where are we?” he murmured to Cass, his head still bowed.

“Heaven, I think,” Cass answered.

Kushiel lifted his head and stared at Cass. “That can’t be right. We aren’t in heaven.”

“You are,” Luce corrected.

Kushiel looked up at him then. “But... You can’t be here. And I... I feel... I’m fine,” he sputtered.

“Yes, the discomfort should be gone now,” Yah affirmed, smiling softly at Kushiel.

Kushiel finally looked up at Yah, and tears sprang to his eyes.

“Yes, Kushiel. It has been so long since we have seen one another. I have missed you, my child,” Yah said, and Cass thought Yah’s eyes looked a little watery too.

“I don’t... I don’t understand,” Kushiel whispered.

“I know, and I’m so sorry for that,” Yah said, coming around the table and reaching a hand out to Kushiel.

Kushiel stared at it blankly for a moment, and then his hand hesitantly reached out. Yah clasped it in their own, pulling Kushiel up and into a hug. They hugged for a long moment, and Cass could feel his angel’s many emotions—love, confusion, relief, joy, and the tinge of grief that came with a long separation. Cass looked over at Luce, who even looked a little wet-eyed at the apparent reunion.

Eventually Yah and Kushiel separated, and Kushiel stepped back, reaching out to grab onto Cass’s hand, as if to reassure him. Cass sent his love and approval through their bond, and Kushiel looked over at him, smiling with shining eyes.

Yah walked back around and sat, and suddenly two chairs appeared on their side of the table. Cass led Kushiel to them and sat in one while his angel sat in the other, their hands never separating.

“I don’t understand,” Kushiel said again. “I don’t feel pain, and yet...” he motioned to his gray skin and black wings.

“Well, you’ve got a soulmate,” Luce stated, as if that made everything obvious.

Cass huffed at Luce. “I’m really not sure I like you.”

Kushiel looked over at Cass aghast.

“What? He’s the one who orchestrated this whole thing by giving Mammon the idea,” Cass responded. He looked over at Luce, adding, “And I get that this saves Kushiel from the constant pain of giving pieces of himself to others for redemption, but you could have told us your plan. You could have been more helpful about the whole thing from the beginning, instead of letting Kushiel grieve and all those souls suffer. You could have done things differently.”

“I’m afraid not,” Luce stated. “Free will is very much in play, and with your involvement, there was only so much help I could offer. You may be an oracle and a seer, but you still have choice. So much was dependent on you, Cassius. We could not do more than we did. Is the end result not worth the sacrifice, though?”

“It is,” Kushiel answered, looking over at Cass.

Cass sighed. “Of course it is, but I just wish the end result could have been achieved without hurting Kushiel.”

“As do I,” Yah added. “Kushiel, when I chose you to be the Angel of Punishment, and thus the one who could redeem souls, I did not foresee the toll it would take on you, although of course I should have. I did not foresee the universe lasting as long as it has, though, and my sight was short because of that.”

“We are fixing that, though, my love,” Luce cut in. “We are repairing the cracks in the universe and fixing the things that are breaking down.”

“I still don’t understand why it doesn’t hurt to be here,” Kushiell admitted.

“Your soulmate can visit heaven and hell as an oracle, and thus so can you. You can visit Limbo, and thus so can he. You give each other free passage. You cannot be separated,” Luce explained. “As for your appearance—that was always your choice, Kushiell.”

Kushiell looked shocked at that. “I chose this?” he asked.

Luce shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. You spent so much time with us, and I think you slowly assimilated more to hell, and your outward appearance matched that. The demons accepted you more, and you came to identify more with us. It was not a conscious choice so much as a reflection of what you felt. We always welcomed you with open arms. Of course, you could revert to your original angelic form, but I hope you keep the pieces of yourself that you got from us. I really do think of you as partly mine. I hope you will not leave that behind.”

Kushiell looked over at Cass.

“I love you just the way you are,” Cass said, answering the unspoken question. “You are perfect.”

“He is,” Yah agreed.

Kushiell smiled then, looking teary all over again.

“What will happen to Mammon?” Cass asked.

“His immortal essence will be redistributed,” Yah answered, gently touching the spear.

“He’s mortal now,” Luce chuckled. “We had to pull out all the stops for that miracle. But it will be so worth it to have him on the other side of things in hell. The hellhound will be sending his mortal soul along shortly, I’m sure. They don’t usually keep their victims for too long.”

“What—” Kushiell started to ask, but Luce cut him off.

“Best not to know details, Kushiell. Suffice it to say that hellhounds make mortal souls who are beyond redemption pay for their sins a bit before sending them on to us.”

“Is that it, then?” Cass asked. “Mammon is dealt with, Kushiell doesn’t need to redeem souls anymore, and we’re soulmates who get to spend eternity together?”

“Kushiell will still have work in Limbo with souls,” Yah told them, “but that does not take such a toll on him. I’m also sure as his soulmate that you’ll make sure he doesn’t give too much of himself to his work.”

“But otherwise, yes, that’s it,” Luce added.

Cass stood up, ready to get Kushiell home to make sure he was okay. This was a lot to process, and his angel looked overwhelmed. Kushiell stood too, their hands still intertwined, and they walked toward the back of the room, where there was suddenly now a door.

Cass wasn’t sure where it went, but he was ready to find out. He was done with gods and devils and afterlife politics.

When they reached it, Cass opened the door, but before they could step through, Kushiel turned around, asking one final question.

“Why me? Why was I chosen for this work?” he asked Yah.

“Oh, my child. Don’t you know? You were the only one who could do it. You were the brightest of us all.”

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Kushiel was still in shock as he passed through the doorway, and then they were in Cass's bedroom.

His soulmate pulled him through and shut the door firmly behind them, where it disappeared into the wall like it had never been there. Cass then looked at Kushiel and ran his hands along Kushiel's body, as if feeling for injury. He circled around Kushiel's back, and he ended back along his front, bringing his hands up to cup Kushiel's face.

"You're ok," Cass breathed out.

The relief and love that came through their bond was so strong, so overwhelming, and Kushiel couldn't help leaning forward to kiss his soulmate. It started off as a gentle pressing of lips, the warmth and softness of Cass against him a balm to his soul. Then Cass licked along his lips, and he opened his mouth to Cass's tongue.

The kiss quickly became passionate, their arms wrapping around each other. Cass slid his tongue into Kushiel's mouth, and Kushiel groaned at the taste of his lover. It was like coming home. Cass then drew Kushiel's lower lip into his mouth, gently biting down, and Kushiel almost came at the sting of pain. There was such fierce ownership and love in Cass, and Kushiel could feel it. How had he ever doubted that this human was meant for him?

"Bed. Naked," Cass ordered between kisses.

Kushiel was only too happy to obey, quickly stripping his clothes and laying back onto the bed, his wings spread out behind him and his dick already hard and aching.

He could sense that Cass thought he was sexy, and he marveled again at how lucky he was.

Cass towered over him, slowly stripping out of his own clothes. By heaven, his human was beautiful. All that perfect freckled skin coming into view made Kushiel leak a drop of precum. He reached down to hold onto himself, but Cass simply shook his head no, and Kushiel moved his hand back, reaching both hands over his head and grabbing onto the headboard.

“I need to be inside you. I need to feel you. Is that ok?” Cass asked.

“Yes. Please,” Kushiel gasped out. He wanted that, but he also wanted...

“What? What do you want, my love?” Cass asked.

“I want to taste you,” Kushiel rasped out.

Cass crawled onto the bed, straddled Kushiel’s chest, and slid up until his cock was almost even with Kushiel’s face.

“Please,” Kushiel gasped out, then Cass slid forward a bit more and Kushiel swallowed him down.

Kushiel moaned around the taste of his soulmate. His mouth was full of Cassius, the hard length of his cock resting on Kushiel’s tongue. He licked around the head, making Cass moan, and then licked his tongue into the slit, tasting the sweet precum of his human. He used his hands to grab onto Cass’s ass, pulling him deeper until his mouth and throat were full of Cassius.

“Yes, Kush. So good for me, baby,” Cass moaned out.

His hands were full of Cass's beautiful ass, and his mouth and throat were full of his cock, and Kushiel felt totally surrounded by Cass. It was intoxicating.

Then his lover was pulling away, and Kushiel groaned in disappointment, only Cass flipped over and around, and Kushiel greedily sucked Cass's dick back into his mouth as soon as it was in reach.

Kushiel realized why Cass had moved when he felt the wet heat of Cass's mouth close over his own cock. He groaned, overcome with sensation. Cass's body was laying on top of his, their flesh pressed together, and he was full of Cass's dick while Cass was sucking on him in turn. Kushiel tried hard not to buck his hips up, because he was totally overcome with pleasure. He closed his eyes in bliss, moaning and licking and sucking on Cass.

Then one of Cass's wet fingers reached down between his legs, gently caressing down his balls, pressing against his skin underneath until he eventually reached Kushiel's hole. Kushiel lifted his head and swallowed Cass into his throat in the same moment that Cass's finger penetrated him, and Cass's finger slid in deep and hard as Cass groaned in appreciation.

"Heavens, baby, you're killing me," Cass rasped out, then he was back to licking Kushiel's cock as he slid a second finger in next to the first.

The stretch and burn was delicious, and when Cass found that spot inside of him that brought Kushiel pleasure, he could barely focus on sucking Cass. Fireworks shot through his whole body, and Cass sucked him down, licking and bobbing on him.

His mouth was full of Cass's cock, his ass was full of Cass's fingers, and he could feel Cass's body laying against him, writhing and moaning. Cass's fingers were relentless, one and then the other pressing against his prostate. It was like he was an instrument and Cass was playing him, one finger pressing in and then the next doing

the same, until the relentless pleasure overwhelmed him and he was floating.

It was too much.

Kushiel came in a shout, and he felt Cass greedily suck him down, groaning at the taste. Cass's fingers slowed but didn't stop, and he simply held Kushiel in his mouth. Kushiel circled his tongue around the sensitive underside of the head of Cass's cock, but then it was being pulled from his mouth despite his groaning protests.

"Shhh, baby. We aren't done yet," Cass murmured, and he slid off Kushiel and reached over to the bedside before sliding back. He crawled back onto Kushiel and kissed him long and deep, and Kushiel could taste himself on Cass's tongue. He didn't know why, but he found it insanely sexy. His lover had swallowed him down and now they were sharing that taste.

Then Cass grabbed a pillow and put it under Kushiel's ass, tilting it up. Kushiel stared adoringly, letting himself be positioned. Yes, this was what he wanted. He wanted Cass inside of him, filling him up, getting pleasure from his body.

Cass smiled wickedly at him. "Don't worry, baby. You'll be getting plenty of pleasure too."

Kushiel shivered in anticipation and in pleasure that his soulmate could already read him so well.

"Yes, Cass. Anything for you," Kushiel whispered.

Cass smirked, then he gently placed a hand around Kushiel's dick, which hadn't gone fully soft but wasn't fully hard either. He gently, oh so gently, stroked it. Kushiel's hips came off the bed. He didn't know if it was pleasure or pain he felt, but it didn't even matter. Cass was in charge. Cass would only make him feel good.

“That’s right, K. Gonna make you feel so good,” Cass murmured, staring down at his hand circling Kushiel’s dick. “So pretty for me. Such a pretty cock.”

Kushiel blushed, but it was also like Cass’s words guided his very sensations, because suddenly he knew it was pleasure, all pleasure, even though it was almost too much on his overstimulated nerves.

“You’re going to come again for me, aren’t you, K? Gonna come on my cock this time,” Cass murmured, and then he let go of Kushiel’s dick and pushed two fingers back into his hole.

“Yes,” Kushiel hissed out. Yes, anything for Cass.

A third finger joined the first two, and Cassius slowly worked him open, pushing his fingers in and out, and yet he avoided that spot that made Kushiel light up like the sun.

“Patience, baby,” Cass murmured before withdrawing his fingers.

Kushiel looked up to see Cass leaning over him, a gentle smile on his face.

“I love you, K,” he whispered.

“I love you too, Cass. You are my everything,” Kushiel answered.

Then, while staring into Kushiel’s eyes, Cass reached down and guided himself into Kushiel. He was so well prepped that there was no burn or sting, only the pleasure of being filled up by Cassius. He leaned over Kushiel, his arms bracketing Kushiel’s head, his face leaning down for a kiss.

Kushiel was so full. Cass was everywhere. Above him, inside him, in his very soul.

He was surrounded by Cassius, and he had never felt so loved, so perfect, in all of creation.

“You ready, baby?” Cass asked.

Kushiel turned his head to the side and licked Cass’s arm, then he immediately blushed, which made Cass chuckle.

“You can lick me anywhere, K. I love the feel of your tongue. Love the feel of you,” he murmured, then he began moving, gently thrusting his hips.

It was like they were riding gentle waves of pleasure together, the tide pulling them deeper and deeper into bliss. Cass leaned down to kiss Kushiel again, and they pressed their heads together, moaning in tandem at the pleasure.

After an eternity and too short of a time, Cass reached down, pulling Kushiel’s leg up. With the next thrust, Kushiel saw fireworks again. He groaned out at the intensity.

“Is that it, K? Is that your spot?” Cass asked.

Kushiel could only moan, nodding his head.

Cass drove into Kushiel over and over again, hitting that spot, sending sparks up his spine and throughout his whole body. Everything tingled and his stomach swooped at the intensity.

“You gonna come for me, K? You gonna come on my cock?” Cass asked.

Kushiel gasped, the words sending even more pleasure through him. His own cock was hard and leaking, slapping gently against his stomach.

Cass hiked his leg up a bit higher, and somehow he was going even deeper and even faster, and Kushiel grabbed onto his arms, his hands digging in.

“Cassius!” he cried out.

“Yes, K. So beautiful. So perfect. I wanna see that pretty cock come while your ass squeezes me tight and makes me feel so good,” Cass whispered.

Kushiel couldn’t hold back. He was crying out, his cum painting both their stomachs, and then he could feel Cassius coming inside him at the same moment, and it was like their pleasure looped back to each other, their orgasms an eternity of bliss.

Eventually, they were lying together, arms wrapped around one another, and somehow Cass was next to him and not on top of him. Kushiel wasn’t even sure when or how that had happened.

He waved a finger, because that felt like about all he could move, and he cleaned up the cum spattered across their chests. He heard Cass chuckle, and then his human reached down and gently pressed a finger into Kushiel’s hole, making him blush.

“Didn’t want to clean that up?” Cass asked.

“I like feeling your cum inside me,” Kushiel admitted.

He would clean it up eventually, but for now he liked the lingering feeling of being filled up by Cass. He felt self-conscious for a moment, but then Cass whispered, “So sexy,” and Kushiel relaxed, not even realizing he had tensed his muscles.

They lay together like that, wrapped in each other’s arms, relaxing and dozing a little, until eventually they heard sounds coming from the kitchen. Cass groaned, except it wasn’t the sexy kind of groan this time.

“Go away!” he hollered, making sure to turn away so Kushiel didn’t get an earful.

“I’ve been waiting for ages, for goodness sake. I will not go away. You two get dressed and get out here,” Aunt Ro hollered back.

Cass groaned again, but Kushiel chuckled.

“She’s going to want all the details. She’s going to be insufferable until she has them. And apparently she’s been keeping the ghosts off my back, so before long I’ll probably have my hands full with helping out random spirits,” Cass complained.

“And running a coffee shop,” Kushiel added, leaning over to kiss Cass before climbing out of bed. “But that’s what I’m here for, soulmate. To help with random ghosts and coffee and anything else.”

“Let’s go, lovebirds!” Aunt Ro yelled out again.

Kushiel smiled. “Even to help with nosy family members,” he joked, pulling pants on.

“I heard that, young man!” Aunt Ro called out.

“She does realize I’m not young, and I’m not technically a man,” Kushiel murmured to Cass.

“You explain that to her. See how that goes,” Cass joked, climbing out of bed and throwing on some clothes. “Hey! You don’t have your scarf on! And you still hear Aunt Ro!”

“It must be the soulmate bond,” Kushiel mused, looking at his scarf, which was laying discarded on the floor where he’d left it.

“Are you ready for this?” Cass asked, motioning towards the door.

Kushiel knew he meant far more than just meeting Aunt Ro. Kushiel had lost a part of his purpose in hell, but he had gained a new purpose, a new family, and a soulmate in the bargain.

“With you by my side, I’m ready for anything,” Kushiel answered, taking Cass’s hand in his as they left the bedroom.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

Yah looked over at Luce, who was staring patiently back at him. Yah merely raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, my love, I know. It was a rather unconventional method of getting those two soulmates together,” Luce admitted. “But it did accomplish quite a few of our goals all at once.”

Yah continued to stare at Luce, but the cheeky devil only chuckled in response. He slid his chair closer, so close that they were almost touching.

Almost, but not quite.

Yad to admit, at least to themselves, that Luce’s method had accomplished quite a bit. It had thrown the soulmates together, it had cleaned up a bit of universal disorder in the underworld, and it had effectively dealt with the souls who might be redeemable.

Still...

“Was Mammon beyond redemption, then?” Yah questioned.

“I could find no soulmate for him. He had only love for himself left, and I think he disdained the very thought of humans and demons joining. Sometimes, my love, there are those that cannot be helped,” Luce gently responded.

Yah sighed. Yes, there were those that were beyond redemption. It had always been that way for mortal souls, but it had not used to be so for the immortal.

“Do you think we do more harm than good?” Yah asked. “Do you think we are selfish?”

Luce leaned back in his chair, staring intensely at Yah.

“Would you have all of this disappear?” Luce asked, waving his arm so that the wall behind them became a view of the universe. “Yes, there is pain. There is torment. There is grief and sadness, and there are those who are lost. But there is also love, there is also hope, and joy, and happiness. Would you see all that disappear?”

Yah stared at the stars and planets, the great creation that had begun so very long ago.

“Sometimes, those that are lost manage to find their way home,” Luce added. “Is that not what we are doing? Allowing souls to find their way home, to find their other half?”

Yah looked over at Luce and chuckled. “You are truly the devil on my shoulder, Luce.”

Luce laughed with them, and eventually they both turned to stare back at the wonder of the universe.

“You just had to go and create free will,” Luce muttered. “It really does make everything quite a bit more complicated.”

Yah smiled softly at that. “It was free will that brought you to my office, Luce.”

Luce looked surprised at that, and Yah took some pride in still having a few surprises for the old devil.

“Did you think I brought you here?” Yah asked.

“I did,” Luce muttered, looking a little put out. “I thought my urge to return again and again was your doing. I must admit to being a little grumpy that it wasn’t. I liked the idea of you wanting my presence here with you so much that you ordained it.”

“I did want your presence here. I still do. But I would never have forced you, Luce,” Yah answered. “I wanted it so much that sometimes I wondered if I had forced it without even meaning to,” Yah confessed.

“Oh Yah,” Luce murmured, reaching out but stopping just short of touching their face.

Yah closed their eyes, and they imagined that hand upon their face, gently touching their skin. It was a beautiful dream.

“You hugged Kushiel,” Luce stated.

Yah opened their eyes and looked over. They did not sense jealousy from Luce, but then they didn’t know everything about their devil, either, just as Luce didn’t know everything about them.

“Kushiel has forgotten the old taboos. His soulmate has grounded him in the flesh, as well,” Yah admitted.

The hug had been an indulgence. Yah didn’t think they’d felt touch since this universe had been created. They hadn’t known what would happen when they’d reached a hand out to Kushiel, but they could not help but do it. The urge had been too strong, and the joy at being touched... it had been too great to resist. Yah frowned, hoping that they had not offended their devil.

“I am glad you got to have that touch, my love,” Luce assured them. “I would wish that all your children would forget the old taboos. You have been too long without

affection.”

“I have you,” Yah whispered.

“You do. And I am not one of your children, either,” the devil smirked, winking at Yah.

To be touched in the way that Luce spoke of... Yah could not let themselves imagine such a thing. They turned back to the wall where the view of the universe resided, gesturing to it.

“In order for the universe to continue, some free will had to be given even to immortal souls. It has made things... trickier,” Yah admitted.

“Yes, I should have realized,” Luce agreed. “I trust you, though, Yah. I trust whatever you have had to do. Just as you have trusted in me.”

Yah waved their hand, then, and the scene changed. It was now a boardroom, and identical looking angels and demons sat at a long table across from one another in identical chairs.

“Something will need to be done about them,” Yah admitted. “Minos and Adam have made progress, but the leadership team disrupts our plans without even realizing it.”

“Yes, I have an idea for that,” Luce admitted.

Yah looked over, raising an eyebrow again. “A plan like you had for Kushiell?” they asked.

Luce merely chuckled. “It got the job done, even if it was a bit unconventional. I’ll get the job done here, as well. Trust me, my love.”

With that, Luce blew a kiss across the room and disappeared.

Yah sat back, staring at the boardroom. Yes, they did trust Luce to handle the leadership team. They waved their hand again, and flashes of demons and humans flew across the wall, all presumably soulmates. Things were moving quickly now. Quicker than they had anticipated.

A picture of a small, cramped office scattered with papers flashed by, and Yah immediately stopped on that scene.

They couldn't make out the features of the angel in the office, which was odd indeed. Could this be the "cute little angel dude" who was also working on bringing soulmates together? The one that Arioeh had a vision of? If it was, why were they hidden from Yah? No angels should have been hidden from their sight. Yah also knew they were hidden from Luce, and no demons could hide from his sight. It made no sense.

Yah leaned forward, squinting, and they waved their hand again, attempting to bring the image into sharper focus.

Instead, the wall cracked, and the image disappeared. Yah watched, intrigued, as the crack then ran backwards and vanished, just like it had never been there.

Interesting.

It seemed that while Luce dealt with the leadership team, Yah had a certain angel who they needed to track down.

What's the deal with the hellhound? Keep reading for a preview from the newest series, *Hellhounds of Paradise Falls*, by Shannon Mae.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:31 am

“I think my neighbor is a serial killer,” I whispered, peeking out from behind the drapes to the house next door.

“Toby, are you writing dark romances again?” Josh sighed.

“And,” I added, ignoring his long-suffering tone, “I think his eyes glowed red the other night.”

“So it’s paranormal dark romances, then,” he grumbled.

“I’m serious, Josh!” I defended, walking away from the window and heading into the kitchen to ruffle around in the pantry. There had to be... ah, there they were. Potato chips. Who needed a full meal when there were potato chips?

“You know, when I was in the yard the other day talking to my PA, I asked how long it took someone to bleed out from being stabbed in the stomach, and my neighbor was walking by, and he said, ‘It depends on the depth of the wound and the size of the blade, so anywhere from a few short minutes to days.’ And then he just kept on walking, like it was a totally normal conversation. Josh, who knows that sort of information and treats that as an everyday topic of conversation?” I asked, crunching on some chips.

“Are you eating potato chips? Toby, that isn’t dinner,” Josh grouched. “And do you remember when we had an hour long conversation on ways to be electrocuted?”

“Yeah, so?” I asked, ruffling through the bag for the chips that were curled. They totally tasted better when they were curled in half

“So you, Toby. Someone like you knows that kind of information. He’s probably a writer. Or maybe a doctor,” Josh reassured me.

“Or a serial killer,” I added, giving an “Aha!” as I found another curly chip.

Josh sighed again. “He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“Omg yes, he’s totally hot. All big and strong and scary looking. He’s tall, and I think he’s got a couple tattoos, although sadly I haven’t seen him with his shirt off. I can’t wait for lawn mowing season,” I admitted, still crunching away on my chips. “Not that I’ll be mowing my lawn. Ohhh, do you think maybe I could get him to mow my lawn? That would be so hot.”

“You want a serial killer mowing your lawn?” Josh asked.

“Hah!” I shouted into the phone. “You admit he’s a serial killer!”

Josh sighed again. He had no appreciation for my mental prowess.

“Why don’t they make bags of potato chips that are just curls. I bet people would buy them by the droves. The curly chips always taste better,” I commented, shaking the bag around to look for more curly chips.

“They’re called ruffles, Toby. Focus, please—we’re talking about your non-serial killer neighbor,” Josh reminded me.

“Nope. Ruffle chips are... well, they’re ruffled. Those aren’t curls. These are like fully curled in half but they’re straight chips,” I said, crunching loudly.

Josh sighed again before asking, “Why do you think he’s a serial killer? Aside from the tattoos, the hotness factor, and your current writing project?” Josh asked.

“I don’t think he works. He’s always coming and going at odd hours, and he wears a lot of black, because you know that hides the blood stains better...” I began.

“Or it’s just his aesthetic,” Josh cut in.

“And you know the house next door has a basement,” I went on, totally ignoring him. “He blacked out the basement windows, but I see lights on down there at odd hours of the night. Plus, when I was up at like 2 am the other night, he was carrying a rolled up carpet or something into the house over his shoulder,” I finished triumphantly.

“First of all, if his windows are blacked out, how can you tell the lights are on?” Josh asked.

“Duh, because a little light escapes,” I said around a mouthful of chips.

“At this rate you won’t have room for dinner,” Josh warned me, but I ignored him, still crunching away. “And I’ll give you that redecorating at 2 am is weird, but peeping on your neighbor at 2 am is also weird. One might even say stalkerish,” Josh added.

“I am not a stalker!” I defended. “Being curious about one’s neighbor is normal behavior!”

Josh laughed at that. “Toby, you know I love you, but you are definitely not normal.”

I grunted around the chips in my mouth, rolling up the bag and going in search of a clip. I probably wouldn’t have room for dinner, but I hated cooking for one anyway, so I wasn’t too worried about it.

“My point is that sometimes people do odd things. That doesn’t mean they’re serial killers. Or stalkers. I’m sure your neighbor is very nice, and if you had an actual conversation with him I’m sure you’d see that. And no, him commenting on stomach

wounds does not qualify as a conversation,” Josh said.

He was always so reasonable. Sometimes it was annoying.

“I ought to call Seb. He’ll totally agree with me,” I grumped.

“Yeah, maybe don’t call him about your serial killer neighbor,” Josh warned.

I immediately stopped what I was doing and leaned against the counter, focusing on the conversation. “Uh oh. What happened now?” I asked.

“Apparently he was out on a date and the guy at the next table had a heart attack and died,” Josh sighed.

“Aww, man. He hasn’t been on a date in ages. I’m guessing it didn’t go well after that?” I asked. Poor Seb. He did not have good luck.

“Nope. He performed CPR until the paramedics got there, even though he said the guy was gone. And you know Seb—nothing phases him. I think there could be a zombie apocalypse and he’d be asking if we felt like going out for ice cream in that cheery tone of his,” Josh said.

I snorted. It was true. Seb was probably the happiest person I knew, despite the fact that people were always dying around him. And yes, he worked in a hospital, so it was kind of expected that he’d see some death, but people seemed to die around him outside of work all the time too. It was amazing the guy didn’t get a complex.

“So he went back to his table and started eating dinner again,” Josh went on, “and his date was all shocked and asked him how he could eat after that. I think the guy said something about him being heartless, which is crazy. Seb is the sweetest guy I know. Anyway, I told Seb obviously a guy who was that blind didn’t deserve him, but Seb was pretty bummed.”

“Yeah.” It was my turn to sigh. “I wish we could find someone for him. I know he’s lonely.”

It was a shame that Seb and I wouldn’t work out, but we just weren’t each other’s type. We were far too similar, and the only chemistry between us was the course we’d taken together in college. Where someone had died, by the way. Lab accident, although their death hadn’t been immediate. I’d looked it up later, and I hadn’t told Seb. I didn’t want my friend to actually get a complex.

“Maybe your serial killer neighbor?” Josh joked. “I mean, people dropping dead around Seb wouldn’t scare him off if he really is a serial killer.”

“Nope. I get first dibs on serial killer hottie,” I announced.

Josh laughed, and we said our goodbyes. Josh was supposed to go meet his boyfriend, who I didn’t much like, for dinner. The guy just gave me creep vibes, but I knew Josh wouldn’t listen. I might have an overactive imagination, but that didn’t mean I was totally wrong about people.

With that I walked out of the kitchen and back into the living room to look out the side window at my serial killer’s house. There was no fence until the backyards, and I had a pretty clear view of next door. His car was there, so I knew he was home. I pushed the curtain aside, and then I nearly screamed when I saw my neighbor staring out his window at my house.

“Shit!” I yelped, dropping onto the floor and out of sight.

And oh my god, if that wasn’t the stupidest reaction ever. I peeked up over the window, and yup, he was still there, staring at my window with a slight smirk on his face. I sat up a bit more and gave a wave, pointing down and trying to make some vague motion that I had fallen.

Not sure he bought it. He just looked amused, and I gave a random shrug and waved again before sliding over to the side of the window and bumping my head against the wall a few times.

“Nice job, Toby. Now the hot serial killer neighbor will totally think you’re a stalker,” I mumbled to myself.